

Position Plays: Toward a Unifying Theory of Strategy

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Dedications

I dedicate this paper to my son Jack Wood, to my friend Andrew Francis, and to my Supervisor Professor Alexandre (Sacha) Sévigny, without each of whom this modest work would not have come to fruition.

In light of our current contemporary moment especially, a statement by Lawrence Freedman at the end of his immense work Strategy: A History has prima facie validity. He notes, “[t]he reason this book has turned so often to questions of language and communication is because strategy is meaningless without them. Not only does strategy need to be put into words so that others can follow, but it works through affecting the behaviour of others. Thus it is always about persuasion, whether convincing others to work with you or explaining to adversaries the consequences if they do not.” (Freedman, 2013, p. 614). Regardless of Freedman’s assertion, communication has been largely absent from the discourse on strategy, particularly in a business context where by-and-large it has been relegated to a supporting function. Interestingly, the parallel discourse on communications and public relations has been preoccupied with strategy and being strategic, and has likewise for some time gone beyond the theory of communications’ purpose being simply to persuade.

Through the “Excellence Study,” (Grunig 1992, 2009, 2013) James Grunig became the ‘founder of discursivity’ in the field of public relations where the entire modern academic discourse on public relations began with Grunig’s groundbreaking work. From the beginning, the discourse has concerned itself with *strategy*. In fact, what was most groundbreaking about Grunig’s work was positioning public relations as a strategic function. That is, a function in an organization that functioned in a strategic way, and also supported organizational, capital-S Strategy in a meaningful way. I have previously written that Grunig was perhaps limited, in terms of continued relevance, by an outdated notion of ‘strategy’ that was nevertheless the definition with currency at the time of his writing of the Excellence Study (Wood, 2015). In that previous paper,

I argued that looking to modern writing on strategy, we could advance the discourse by reanimating the entanglement of public relations and strategy in the modern organization, and trace out the implications of a modern definition of strategy for public relations as a strategic function (Wood, 2015). As will be illustrated below, my initial review in this field was limited. Secondly there have been very important publications on strategy (for example Freedman, 2015 and Simpson, 2018) that a) advance through their analysis more complete theories of strategy, and b), perhaps most importantly, lead us to the conclusion that in the modern organization, public relations and strategy are deeply entwined. This is especially true today with the advent of new technologies and mediation of information through our personal devices, perhaps for the first time we will, in some arenas, have quantifiable data about narrative uptake, relationships, and real-time reputation evaluation. As well, semioticians have shown that narrative can be defined and possibly modeled or quantified. We can invoke important work by Greimas here, who coined the idea of ‘actants’, or narrative positions; in any system of narrative, an actant ‘recurs from one text to another’ (Greimas, 1990, p. 113), and also new and emerging work on listening and measuring narrative and dialogue which we will discuss in detail.

What we are here positing is a new theory of strategy that has ongoing communication and measuring relationships and recalibrating at its core. Whereas the discourse has been preoccupied with securing for public relations the ‘desired position as senior management function’ (Dottori, Seguin, and O’Reilly, 2018, p. 66), a renewed understanding of ‘strategy’ per the above leaves no doubt of the absolutely essential role of public relations to strategy, and therefore to management and leadership. Further, though perhaps inconceivable just two

decades ago, it may be said today that successful strategy is unthinkable without communications. Strategy may in fact *be* strategic communications.

Defining Strategy

A challenge to the analysis we propose is that there is no agreed upon definition of strategy to take as our starting point. Strategy is the ultimate business buzzword. But what is strategy in 2019? The seminal strategy book would contain a concise and applicable definition.

Counter-intuitively, a modern volume that fits this criteria is, at best, elusive. As the analysis below will demonstrate, the current and historic discourse on strategy is fragmented at its foundation. Lawrence Freedman notes “...*strategy* remains the best word we have for expressing attempts to think about actions in advance, in the light of our goals and capacities. It captures a process for which there are no obvious alternative words, although the meaning has become diluted through promiscuous and often inappropriate use.” (Freedman, 2013, p. x). We do seem to be in a ‘golden age’ of mass market, university-based writing about strategy that only seems to gain momentum each year, but as we shall see, strategy writing itself has not traced a straight line in terms of an evolving definition. We might go so far as to note that *strategy* in management literature to-date has been over-discussed and under-defined, requiring further study and theorizing.

Objectives

The objectives of this paper are threefold. For one, we seek to problematize the current state of discourse on strategy in the context of a lack of agreed-upon definition, a theme taken up above that will re-occur and be further refined. This task will include reviewing the discourse as to review different schools of thought and criticism in recent publications. That review, by theme or development, takes place in a section below, leading to our second objective.

The second objective, perhaps the most difficult, will be to achieve a synthesis of the groundbreaking assertions about the nature of strategy from current leading literature, and suggesting a new or renewed and unequivocal definition of strategy. The difficulty arises where strategy is amorphous and ill-defined in the literature and can be taken to mean several things. Ideally a definition will achieve simplicity and be grounded in the ‘real world’ as well as be pertinent to all three realms of business, politics, and war with which strategy has been affiliated. It must go beyond broad strokes like ‘strategy is a process to_____.’ What we are aiming for is a ‘bringing together’ of *strategy* of the moment. Not necessarily through as exhaustive or comprehensive survey of all literature, but rather a curated review of historical and recent important publications advancing the discourse. Specifically we are looking for an answer to what are the high-level areas of agreement or clearly emergent advancements in thinking that are germane to a modern definition. In reviewing these volumes, our aim as well is not to flesh out their entirety, the complete theories and practices advocated by the tomes, but instead to bring to the fore their most central findings or pronouncements. The overall aim of this approach is to

bring together a synthetic, analytic, well-rounded definition of *strategy* drawing on contemporary sources.

The third objective is to identify, based on the renewed definition of *strategy* areas for further discovery, discussion, and research. This discussion will occur in the conclusion of the paper.

Limitations

As a theoretical undertaking, limitations abound here, and we are taking some risks and making some leaps. That said, perhaps the ‘ring of truth’ in the case of theoretical treatises has great value where empirical research is not possible. In other words, the right evaluative criteria for theory might best be thought of as a pragmatic evaluative framework. Specifically the pragmatist’s ‘slogan,’ the ‘truth is what works’ (Grover, p. 10) is germane to this discussion. The obvious limitation above may be overcome, for example, if the theory put forward in this paper is of value to the researchers and/or to the practitioner. If this leads to new models or frameworks of strategy based on the renewed definition, or if the work dilates either the practice of public relations, or enhances the status of the profession further within institutions, then we might consider the limitations overcome.

That said, thinking of the worst case, and in the spirit of transparency regarding limitations, this treatise may only offer an incomplete review, and suggest a potentially flawed definition of strategy, as well as misconstrued implications.

The Way Forward: Hypothesis and a Theory

It would be incorrect to say no definitions exist in the contemporary literature on *strategy*. To the contrary, various definitions have been recently, though tentatively, ventured answers to our problem. Rumelt (2011), for example, an author clearly in the camp of ‘strategy as process’, has a view that strategy is defined as a diagnosis about the world, a policy to address said diagnosis, and a coherent action, presumably consistent with the diagnosis (Rumelt, p. 7). There is also what we’ve identified as the ‘Harvard’ definition, which we will explain in more detail below. In short, this definition, incubated by Michael Porter and other authors, says *strategy* is ‘the way to achieve sustainable competitive advantage.’ This definition evolves a bit in Porter to contain the notion of ‘positioning,’ explored further in Blue Ocean Strategy and Playing to Win - which we discuss below in detail - and can perhaps be tightened up as ‘the positioning to achieve sustainable competitive advantage.’ Freedman, and earlier Foucault not incidentally, land on a definition of strategy that speaks to power, mainly the power to change viewpoints or drive action. Freedman notes ‘strategy is the central political art. It is about getting more out of a situation than the starting balance of power would suggest. It is the art of creating power.’ (Freedman, xii). Emile Simpson (2018) introduces dialogue and dialectic where ‘essentially strategy is the dialectical relationship, or the dialogue, between desire and possibility’ (116) - the desire of the strategist, or actor, and whether that desire is achievable. He notes, ‘[t]he two should ideally be in perpetual dialogue, not just before but also during a conflict. Desire must be

grounded in possibility; possibility clearly requires an idea in the first place which informs any analysis of possibility.’ (Simpson, 2018, p. 116).

All of these definitions have some merit. In examining how their authors came to deploy them, it will be clear they are not necessarily wrong, and their central tenets may not be incompatible. Through our attempt at synthesis, we shall seek to preserve these central tenets in a modern definition, which we propose below.

Drawing on recent theory and critique, we propose a renewed or ameliorated definition as follows:

Strategy is a process of visioning, design, positioning and repositioning to establish and maintain competitive advantage through adjusting dialogic narrative and related actions.

Our conclusion below shall make clear the meaning of the elements of this definition, and their provenance. Per the objectives above, we shall also flesh out to some degree the elements or further attributes that characterize doing *strategy* in this renewed and modern sense, including arenas, position plays, scripts, etc. as well as chart a course or courses for future inquiry, both in public relations research, and beyond to general strategy and business inquiry and writing. Beyond this definition, we shall also make clear the opportunity, based on advances in the literature, to link the foundations of public relations practice and strategy practice, where both are optimally practiced via two-way, iterative dialogue.

Schools of Thought and Implications

Overview

There is a continuing trend of publications about strategy in the last decade, with each attempting to position itself as grounding, foundational, or seminal. Of course, Lawrence Freedman Strategy: A History (Freedman, 2013) stands out where its sheer heft and ambition make it an important (though meandering) entry, however there are others, many with titles that seek also to be disruptive. We are thinking here of Harvard Business Review's anthology of top strategy writing HBR's 10 Must Reads on Strategy (2011), Rumelt's Good Strategy Bad Strategy: The Difference and Why It Matters (2011), McGrath and Gourlay's The End of Competitive Advantage: How to Keep Your Strategy Moving as Fast as Your Business (2013), Kim and Mauborgne's Blue Ocean Strategy, Expanded Edition: How to Create Uncontested Market Space and Make the Competition Irrelevant (2005, 2015), Reeves et al.'s Your Strategy Needs a Strategy: How to Choose and Execute the Right Approach (2015), to name a few. This also does not acknowledge the multi-decade careers of strategy writers like Henry Mintzberg, Michael Porter, and Roger Martin among others.

The prevalence of reference to strategy in mainstream publication, as well as frequent use in business and other professional literature, may make this a 'golden age' of strategy writing. Though sometimes at odds, the selections from this period that we will discuss below can be

shown to build on one another through a dialectical approach. The notion of ‘dialectic’ we use here is the commonly understood one of thesis, antithesis, synthesis in succession (one which Kojeve and many others have called an ‘incomplete’ (Kojeve, 1980, p. 193) understanding of what Hegel meant by dialectic, but useful to our purposes here). What we intend to do below is review the primary tenets of each of the schools of strategy thought we identify below, and where applicable and clearly valid attempt to carry forward essential elements toward a new definition and understanding of *strategy*.

There is a bit of phenomenology to this project as well. ‘The method of phenomenology is to go back to the things themselves.’ (Husserl 1900/2001 p. 168). As an approach at knowledge, phenomenology ask us to reconsider things, phenomena and beings of which there appears to be a general understanding that may be questioned. *Strategy* may be something we have taken for granted. We seek here to answer the questions of ‘what do we talk about when we talk about *strategy*? What are we doing when we do *strategy*?’ We also take for granted that each of the authors discussed below have grappled with *strategy* as phenomenon, and yielded partial truths about its nature through their work.

Strategy as Process

The three phases we have identified in the literature on corporate or business strategy are as follows: a) strategy seen as a process to achieve corporate objectives, b) strategy as a method of achieving competitive advantage, often through positioning, and c) a critical view on strategy

which emphasizes that it must be iterative as competitive advantage is fleeting. These three threads are not mutually exclusive, and we seek to summarize them and find a common thread toward a unifying definition, one which also takes into consideration more recent literature emphasizing the role of narrative and dialogue in strategy.

The business literature very early - at least as early as the 1980s - has framed strategy as a process; something methodological and replicable. This literature led to the trend within companies of organized 'strategic planning' initiatives that were often cross-departmental. Strategic planning proper actually began in the 1950s, and was thought of as 'long-range planning' in larger scale companies of the time (Steiner, 1979, vii). Effectively, up until the 80s strategic planning was a way of bringing structure to the intuitions and ad hoc strategies of top management (Steiner, 1979, p. 11). Though the approach at the time varied depending on the company (Steiner, 1979, p. 31), as did the level of formality given to the process depending on company size (p. 33) the core attributes of taking stock of the company internally and externally, setting sights on desired outcomes, and making plans to achieve those outcomes with existing or new resources are clear in our reading of Steiner here.

By the late 1980s Henry Mintzberg had begun a fifty year contribution to the discourse on strategy and strategic planning. Even at that time, pinpointing the definition of strategy in a business context was elusive, and in 1987 he proposed a broad view of the concept. Specifically, he noted strategy could be a 'plan, ploy, pattern, position or perspective' (Mintzberg, p. 11,

1987), and could be either ‘deliberate’ (decided upon and enacted), or ‘emergent’ in response to the situation (p. 14).

Mintzberg’s contributions to the discourse on strategy and planning far exceed our ability to summarize here, but some highlights of his further thinking are worth noting. By 1998, Mintzberg and colleagues expanded the taxonomy of strategy to include strategy as conception and design; as a formal planning process; as an analytical positioning process; as a visioning process; as emergent learning; as a negotiation; as a collective process; and as a reactive process of reconfiguring (Mintzberg, Ahlstrand, Lampel, 1998). These ‘schools’ of strategy thought are meant to congeal into a synthetic understanding of what the authors term the ‘beast’ of strategy; something ultimately difficult to pin down, where the authors compromised on the hypothesis that ‘every strategy process has to combine various aspects of the different schools’ (p. 367).

Richard Rumelt’s Good Strategy / Bad Strategy: The Difference and Why It Matters (2011) is as good a place as any to begin a renewed, contemporary discussion of the school of thought that *strategy* is a *process*, specifically a way of evaluating and planning. He defines *strategy* as follows: ‘strategy is about *how* an organization will move forward. Doing strategy is figuring out *how* to advance the organization’s interests.’ (Rumelt, 2011, p. 6-7), and expands this definition to paint strategy as a linear process. Strategy starts as an observation of the world (diagnosis), the development of an approach (a guiding policy), and a coherent action (p. 7). This is the most basic definition of strategy - it is a process of determining a way forward for an organization, following specific steps or phases. For example, one could say that Apple’s decade-long foray into television (Gartenberg, 2019) or Google’s launch into cloud-based gaming (Loveridge,

2019), could be examples that give credence to Rumelt's version of strategy, where the firms have identified new territory and charted a course to the implementation of an idea. So for example, we could say the thinking goes that good strategy, per Rumelt and per a fairly broad and general understanding, something like this: 'we see an opportunity in a market, we devise a plan of entry, and we enact the plan.'

Rumelt fleshes out his notion of 'good strategy' further, contrasting good strategy to bad strategy in a fairly straightforward and predictable way. Bad strategy is familiar to most who have worked in a large organization in the last 20 years - it is 'long on goals and short on policy or action' (36); 'a flurry of fluff masking an absence of substance' (40); and includes 'too many objectives' (53). He also notes that 'defining strategy as just a broad guiding policy is a mistake' (85), presumably referring to large, catch-all strategy statements like 'quality' in healthcare and production, or 'best employer', without a succinct and achievable plan. He is specific in noting that marketing-style approaches to strategy are also not good strategy where good strategy is not charisma-driven inspiration pushing employees to achieve (65).

Rumelt does attempt to flesh out his notion of 'good strategy' further, looking for coherent, coordinated, and realistic approaches. 'Coherent actions are feasible coordinated policies, resource commitments, and actions designed to carry out the guiding policy.' (7) Good strategy can also be defined by its realism - 'the objectives a good strategy sets should stand a good chance of being accomplished, given existing resources and competence' (54), and 'in very general terms, a good strategy works by harnessing power and applying it where it will have

the greatest effect.’ (95) He also notes that good strategy must involve trade offs: ‘strategy involves focus and, therefore, choice. And choice means setting aside some goals in favour of others. When this hard work is not done, weak amorphous strategy is the result.’ (59) Still his description also involves some sense of the alchemy of it all. ‘Successful strategies often owe a great deal to the inertia and inefficiency of rivals’ (202).

Ultimately, Rumelt leaves us with a vague definition of strategy, adding to his notion of the ‘kernel’ of worldview, plan, and action, as well as realistic per the above, that strategy is ‘a way through a difficulty, an approach to overcoming an obstacle, a response to a challenge’ (41) However, there is something familiar about Rumelt’s assertions and ‘definition.’ We see clear parallels to his thinking in many strategy frameworks, for example the Diamond-E framework which aggregates many other strategy processes.

Roger Martin criticizes the uptake of Mintzberg’s thinking, especially where ‘emergent strategy has simply become a handy excuse for avoiding difficult strategic choices, for replicating as a “fast follower” the choices that appear to be succeeding for others, and for deflecting any criticism for not setting out in a bold direction’ (Roger Martin, 2014). This criticism of Mintzberg and others, despite his broad influence and careful plodding analysis, is well founded. So to evolve from Mintzberg to Rumelt, what we might preserve and carry forward is that strategy is a process, one of taking into account internal and external factors, developing a vision and plan to achieve a specific outcome, and implementing the plan through focused means involving trade-offs on resources and other matters.

Where we invoke Roger Martin here, he has been a forceful modern proponent of the school of thought that has been dominant in the discourse on strategy for the last few decades, one which sees strategy as positioning in the context of a very competitive environment, or more specifically strategy as positioning for competitive advantage (a viewpoint that Mintzberg anticipated or was aware of in terms of both positioning and competition in the context of games for dominance (Mintzberg, 1987, p. 15)). We delve more into Roger Martin's contributions in the following section.

Strategy as Positioning

The school of thought that sees *strategy as positioning for competitive advantage*, what we here will call 'the Harvard school of thought' for reasons that will be apparent, was, as noted, born of thinking about *strategy* in the context of *competition*. This is a significant streamlining of the myriad approaches charted by Mintzberg and colleagues, making for a notion of strategy that includes many of the types of thinking that characterize the various schools of thought Mintzberg reviewed, but which takes *strategy* as positioning to win at competition, or to achieve and maintain competitive advantage, as the overarching or guiding principle. (It should also be noted that the thinkers herein do not preclude, and often seek to refine strategy as process. For example, the 'first mover' so to speak in this school, Michael Porter, gives us 'Porter's 5 forces', which is a part of most strategy processes or frameworks including 'Diamond-E.')

Specifically

as we shall see, strategy receives a refined definition here as explicit as ‘strategy is how to get to a position for sustainable competitive advantage.’

This author reviewed the tenets of this school of thought in a previous attempt to yield a renewed understanding of strategy and public relations in *Journal of Professional Communication* at McMaster (Wood, 2015). Where ‘strategic communications’ was brought into parlance and discourse by researcher James Grunig as the founder of discursivity on public relations on communications (Wood, 2015, p. 207), forever linking the field to strategy via ‘strategic communications management (208), he had done so using a definition of strategy from outdated management literature. That project sought to tether the communications and public relations’ discourse’s use of ‘strategy’ to a contemporary definition (208), and attempted to do so by identifying a ‘rigorous strain of thinking on strategy’ (208) in contemporary literature that the author promoted to assist in grounding and enhancing an understanding of strategic communications management.

The thread this author previously took up in that publication can be thought of as part of what we might call ‘the Harvard thread’ of strategy literature. Specifically the author reviewed three books on strategy thinking: *Understanding Michael Porter* by Magretta (2012), *Playing to Win* by Lafley and Martin (2013), and *Design of Business* by Martin (2009). We might now characterize the effort in this publication as an *aspirational* search for a grounding definition or understanding of strategy for a contemporary audience. By exploring the arguments made therein briefly, we will observe clearly that the author did not go far enough in terms of a) examining the

field of literature on strategy, and b) in terms of proposing a definition and grounding of ‘strategy’ that meets our criteria above.

Michael Porter, one of the great business practitioners and researchers of the past century (and mentor to the other author explored in this past analysis Roger Martin) is the starting point for my previous analysis of strategy. In reviewing the summary of his work by Magretta (another Porter mentee and collaborator), we claimed that Porter (by way of Magretta) expands Grunig’s thinking on strategy - a function of calculating how to reach specific audiences and achieve a two-way dialogue - and pivots toward a notion that what is central to strategy is ‘positioning’ (211) - i.e. in calculating, planning, and executing an approach for a firm to achieve sustainable competitive advantage (211).

In another book reviewed in the same article, *Playing to Win* (Lafley and Martin, 2013), finds support and expansion of Porter’s approach to strategy, where the authors add a series of questions important to determining where and how to position a firm to achieve the above goal of advantage, or ‘how to develop and execute on the concept’ (212) of strategy that Porter provides. Building on this, this author also took up an earlier publication by Roger Martin (*Design of Business*, 2009) and suggested adding his observations about business design - including ‘abductive reasoning, where those knowledgeable about a field can make leaps fueled by this knowledge and intuition (213) - to the general, emerging picture of strategy.

Being critical here, or perhaps attempting to advance the discussion further beyond this earlier publication, it is clear in retrospect that we made rather large abductive leaps in suggesting ‘public relations can or should attempt to adopt strategy as a core responsibility; appropriating the function from other disciplines, and demonstrating that this specific form of positioning and repositioning is one of our professional competencies’ (Wood, 2015, p. 214). In the previous paper I was clearly attempting to piece together a renewed definition of strategy, based on a very curtailed and curated selection from the literature - a bricolage, so to speak. The ‘bricolage’ approach to understanding and defining strategy is to some degree helpful here, but does not go far enough in terms of casting a net across recent strategy publications, nor in truly refining or delivering on a new definition and/or framework for strategy (perhaps a lot to ask of a book review, admittedly). Further, there is a great deal to strategy beyond positioning, as this paper will demonstrate. Recent authors including Gunther and Freedman have demonstrated how the old paradigm of positioning for ongoing advantage might be outdated. Freedman, as well as Emile Simpson, and even Foucault, have shown how narrative, dialogue and story-telling are as much a part of *strategy’s* DNA as positioning. Ultimately we are seeking a synthesis of these emergent and powerful analyses below, but to begin we should review how and to what degree this paper can go beyond the previous publication toward a new understanding or theory of strategy.

To flesh out a bit more of the strategy-as-positioning school of thought, a somewhat recent publication from Harvard, HBR’s 10 Must Reads: On Strategy leads with two important articles by Porter - ‘What is Strategy’ and ‘The Five Competitive Forces That Shape Strategy.’ Both lay

the groundwork for a focus on strategy that is grounded in finding the right positioning. The definition Porter provides is 'strategy is the creation of a unique and valuable position, involving a different set of activities' (p. 16) He goes on to say 'the essence of strategic positioning is to choose activities that are different from rivals' (16). This positioning means one also must make trade-offs (17), in other words being extremely focused on the uniqueness of the position, not doing some things and putting tremendous energy into doing others. Porter goes on to say strategy involves a whole system of activities, not a collection of parts' (21) and the whole thing must 'fit' together - an ecosystem that makes it difficult to copy. He notes, strategy is to leverage a new system of complementary activities into sustainable advantage' (36).

In 'The Five Competitive Forces That Shape Strategy,' Porter goes on to further situate business strategy as directly facing up to and contending with competition, by noting 'in essence, the job of the strategist is to understand and cope with competition.' (39) In this paper he further articulates the points of consideration when making calculations about competing, namely rivals, customers, suppliers, potential entrants, and substitute products, which have come to be known as Porter's 5 Forces.

Porter's thinking here is taken up within Harvard and further refined and developed in the intervening years. Blue Ocean Strategy by W. Chan Kim and Renee Mauborgne (2004, 2015), could be seen as a direct sequel to Porter's work, and is the prototypical 'strategy as positioning' strategy book, focusing on how businesses create new competitive parameters by design, effectively sidestepping the competition though claiming new

and distinct territory through reconceived value proposition. To recap, the authors make the distinction between two types of positioning: red ocean and blue ocean. Red ocean positioning is where a firm is situated opposite other firms with similar business models or value propositions. ‘Red oceans represent all the industries in existence today. This is the known market space.’ (p. 4) They denote that being in a red ocean means companies are in a race to the bottom on price, and are ultimately in a situation of fierce battle and decline: ‘companies try to outperform their rivals to grab a greater share of existing demand. As the market space gets crowded, prospects for profits and growth are reduced. Products become commodities, and cut-throat competition turns the red ocean bloody.’ (p.4)

In contrast, the author’s offer what they pitch as an achievable alternative: the ‘blue ocean.’ They are ‘defined by untapped market space, demand creation, and the opportunity for highly profitable growth.’ (p. 4) Where the outdated and common approach to strategy ‘is about confronting an opponent and fighting over a given piece (of the existing market)’ (p.6), the authors here claim that the ultimate business strategy seeks to reconceive the existing market to escape the competition death spiral: ‘to create new market space that is uncontested.’ (p. 7) Like Porter, the authors provide guideposts to build a ‘blue ocean’ strategy throughout the remainder of the volume and most of its follow-up Blue Ocean Shift: Beyond Competing.

In a book that can be interpreted to act as further refinement of the Blue Ocean model, Lafley and Martin delve further into the notion of strategy in Playing to Win (2013), which, as this author has previously covered they purport to deliver ‘a do-it-yourself guide to strategy’ (Lafley

and Martin, 2013, p. 6). Here they further refine ‘positioning’ to be about how to reposition or optimally position specific areas of focus or products within a larger firm, in this case Procter & Gamble. This subtle shift breaks with simply about about the overall positioning of the firm being transformative (take the example from Blue Ocean Strategy about Cirque de Soleil reconceiving the circus without narrative and about performance over tricks) to one about the individual product line’s positioning, though also capable of being deployed for strategy more broadly. Positioning to win here is a five step process of identifying the aspiration or what winning looks like; deciding where to ‘play,’ in which realm and which customer/demographic; determining how to act and be resourced to win against the competition; ensuring the capabilities on the team support the above; and having the right systems for management including an ability to measure the efficacy of the strategy and the uptake of a product in the desired market. Martin (2017) calls this the ‘Strategy Choice Cascade’, framing the five step process with questions like ‘What is our winning aspiration?’ (Martin, 2017). Martin further clarifies the interrelatedness of the method here to achieving and maintaining positioning: ‘the challenge here is that both are linked, and *together* they are the heart of strategy; without a great Where to Play and How to Win combination, you can’t possibly have a worthwhile strategy. Of course, Where to Play and How to Win has to link with and reinforce an inspiring Winning Aspiration. And Capabilities and Management Systems act as a reality check on the Where to Play and How to Win choice. If you can’t identify a set of Capabilities and Management Systems that you currently have, or can reasonably build, to make the Where to Play and How to Win choice come to fruition, it is a fantasy, not a strategy.’ (Martin, 2017). Martin here is further clarifying the degree to which the cascade is a tight, interrelated and focused approach to strategy. He goes further and notes that

strategy is founded in the imaginative twofold choice of where to make plays, and how to win in those environments. ‘The only productive, intelligent way to generate possibilities for strategy choice is to consider *matched pairs* of Where to Play and How to Win choices.’

We should not take this process to be a simple one, though Martin and Lafley have simplified the high-level view of their version of strategy. Their work here typifies a version of strategy that is about envisioning, achieving, and maintaining competitive advantage, with a strong emphasis on choice and tradeoffs. Their approach here is also inclusive of Blue Ocean, as ‘where to play’ can include new environs or business models, escaping competition. For our analysis, the addition of positioning dilates the notion of strategy and is not exclusive of process. Instead the Harvard school here builds on process schools to be more specific. Strategy is a process, but not any process goes.

The notion of ‘making plays,’ ‘playing to win,’ and recalibrating where necessary anticipates to some degree the criticism lodged against the Harvard school which emphasized competitive advantage. As we move through the next phase of our analysis we carry forward here that strategy may be understood as a methodical process that includes envisioning winning scenarios, making ‘plays’ to achieve a competitive advantage, and retooling the organization to support those ‘plays.’

Rumelt finds an error in the calculus of enduring advantage without adaptability, describing, ‘the aging businessperson’s quixotic search for *sustained* competitive advantage’ (137) where the ‘cycle of life’ of business nullifies such advantages. The most forceful emerging criticism of the Harvard school is that competitive advantage is at best fleeting, and at worst an unachievable ideal. This questioning of the accepted wisdom about what we might call the “overarching goal of business” is to some degree anticipated in the above models. But some authors will argue, as we shall see below, that without emphasis on iteration and adaptation, our theories of strategy are paper tigers.

Freedman is on to this point. There is a theme through Freedman’s book about this necessity of flexibility in strategy. He notes, ‘the picture of strategy that should emerge from this book is one that is fluid and flexible, governed by the starting point and not the end point’ (Freedman, 201X, p. xi). At several junctures he provides examples illustrating this point. Remarking on the success of the Bolshevik revolution, for example, he notes ‘Lenin’s success was not the result of painstaking organization or ideological purity but of his unique grasp of the dynamics of the situation’ (296), and it was his fluidness and responsiveness to event (297). He also praises this attribute and its necessity when speaking of the valuable contribution of the OODA loop (observe–orient–decide–act) to strategy discussed, noting it came to be ‘because human beings must cope with a constantly changing reality, it was therefore necessary to challenge rigidities in thought’ (197). Freedman paints a picture of strategy requiring vigilance and constant adaptability. ‘The longer the sequence of planned moves, the greater the number of human agents

who must act in particular ways, the more extensive the ambition of the project, the more likely that something would go wrong.’ (Freedman 609) He notes, ‘situations would become more complex and the actors more numerous and contrary. The chains of causation would become attenuated and then broken altogether’ (Freedman 609).

The strategist can overcome said situation, Freedman notes, by ‘adding flexibility and imagination’ which ‘offers a better chance of keeping pace with a developing situation, regularly re-evaluating risks and opportunities.’ (Freedman 610). Constant vigilance is required, where ‘with each move from one state of affairs to another, the combination of ends and means will be reappraised’ (Freedman, 611).

Rita Gunther McGrath makes adaptability central to her criticism of past approaches to strategy, in particular the Harvard school, and also makes it a cornerstone of her version of strategy. In The End of Competitive Advantage (2013), Rita Gunther McGrath takes clear aim at any form of strategy that lacks an iterative component, and by invoking the term ‘competitive advantage’ in her title clearly invokes Porter and the thread of work at Harvard stemming from Porter’s work. Her main point of contention is that the world is ever changing, and that a static approach to achieving competitive supremacy is unrealistic. She notes that strategy’s purpose of achieving ‘sustainable competitive advantage’ is ‘no longer relevant’ (McGrath, xi), particularly during the current shift to transient advantage economy (184), which she explains is an environment of ‘waves of short-lived opportunities’ (p.5), where ‘advantages are copied quickly, technology changes, or customers seek other alternatives and things move on.’ (p. 7).

‘The assumption of sustainable advantage creates a bias toward stability that can be deadly’ (McGrath, 7), she notes, because ‘the presumption of stability creates all the wrong reflexes.’ Using the example of Blackberry, she illustrates how ‘a preference for equilibrium and stability means that many shifts in the marketplace are met by business leaders denying that these shifts mean anything negative for them’ (p. 8). In the case of Blackberry, the company was so successful in 2007 that it only saw the iPhone as ‘yet another competitor’ (8), whereas a short time later most users had migrated to that platform.

McGrath supports her assertion about transient advantage with a large study she and colleagues conducted in 2010 of ‘every publicly traded company on any global exchange with a market capitalization of over \$ 1 billion US dollars as of the end of 2009 (4,793 firms),’ with a focus on firms that had grown revenue by at least five percent for the five previous years, exceeding GDP growth of 4% (15). Only 8% achieved these results (15), with the ‘major conclusion’ being that top-performing firms had ‘long term perspective’ but also had ‘the recognition that whatever they were doing today wasn’t going to drive their future growth’ and had developed ‘internal stability;’ as well as ‘motivating tremendous external agility, particularly in terms of business models.’ (16)

What McGrath substitutes for a notion of strategy that is set, remains static, and is ‘worked’ by those across the organization (sustainable competitive advantage), is ‘transient advantage’, or ‘temporary, not sustainable, competitive advantage’ (12). She describes the flow of a transient

advantage as a design and launch of a new entry or concept, a period of ramp up and scaling the business requirements, a period of exploiting the advantage, and then a denouement of reconfiguring the discovered advantage, and/or disengaging from the business model all together (12-13).

In McGrath's analysis, business competition in this new reality will take place on a more tactical and granular scale, via 'a new level of analysis that reflects the connection between market segment, offer and geographic location, ' i.e. what she terms an 'arena' (9). She notes 'arenas are characterized by particular connections between customers and solutions, not by the conventional description of offerings that are near substitutes for one another' (9):

'The arena concept also suggests that conventional ideas about what creates a long-lived advantage will change. Product features, new technologies, and the "better mousetrap" sorts of sources of advantage are proving to be less durable than we once thought. Instead, companies are learning to leverage more ephemeral things such as deep customer relationships and the ability to design irreplaceable experiences across multiple arenas. They will be focused on creating capabilities and skills that will be relevant to whatever arenas they happen to find themselves operating in. And they may even be more relaxed about traditional protections and barriers to entry, because competition will devolve around highly intangible and emotional factors. (10)

She notes:

'you can think of traditional strategic analysis as being somewhat like the game of chess, which is quite sophisticated and nuanced but in which the goal is to achieve a powerful competitive

advantage in a major market, akin to checkmating one's opponent. Arena-based strategy is much more akin to the Japanese game of Go, in which the goal is to capture as much territory as possible - the winner in Go lays the strategic groundwork by adroit placement of pieces on a board, eventually capturing enough territory to overwhelm one's opponent.' (11)

McGrath further explains the arena concept as follows:

'It isn't that industries have stopped being relevant; it's just that using industry as a level of analysis is often not fine-grained enough to determine what is really going on at the level at which decisions need to be made. A new level of analysis that reflects the connection between market segment, offer, and geographic location at a granular level is needed. I call this an arena. Arenas are characterized by particular connections between customers and solutions, not by the conventional description of offerings that are near substitutes for one another.' (McGrath, November 2013)

McGrath points to a new nimbleness as being key to winning at strategy in the future. Moving into arena-style competition, firms will need an approach to strategy that emphasizes continuously reconfiguring to seize on emerging opportunity, in the context of ever 'eroding advantage.' (McGrath, 2013, p. 31). Likewise, in successful firms, 'innovation is continuous, mainstream, and a part of everyone's job' (p. 45). Similarly, purse strings must loosen and adaptable budgeting at the unit level will also be required as resource allocation becomes a means to adaptability (p. 75), and budgets are organized around opportunities instead of beholden to business units.

McGrath makes two clear contributions to strategy by way of her critique of the Harvard school. For one, per her and Freedman, strategy must be undertaken ‘in constant motion’ and be adaptive. Secondly and perhaps more subtly, is that a deeper advantage might be borne of a focus on relationships, where ‘plays’ are made in ‘arenas’ made up of networks of impressions and flows of ideas, as opposed to simple targeting of industry, category and demographics. If we take these advances to the broader question of designing strategy, we may advance through the previous approaches to include iteration, the arenas, and a focus on relationships. Dialectically at this point in our analysis, the coherent points of the schools are strategy as a methodical process (Mintzberg, Rumelt), focused on position plays based on tailoring an organization through tradeoffs to achieve said positioning in the context of competition (Harvard school), and lastly a process which is constantly evolving and iterative and relationships in arenas beyond simple ‘plays’ in terms of markets or targeted demographics (Freedman, McGrath). In the context of transient advantages, McGrath does not provide ample insight into how relationships play a role, but by examining language and the co-creation of meaning we may further expand our understanding in the following sections.

Strategy as Story

How can strategy by definition be about relationships? Per Freedman in our opening quote, strategy at some point does require transmission. The following analysis seeks to show through the work of various authors why this transmission is critical, and how a renewed definition of *strategy* must ultimately contain story (and as we shall argue later, *dialogue* also). French philosopher Michel Foucault (d.1984) is a necessary discussion point to any analysis seeking to understand narrative's role in strategy, where Foucault was a 20th century philosopher who took up the topic of strategy directly. Foucault sites his analysis in the context of how power is gathered and how it is levered on or circumscribes the subject, meaning defining the limits of subjects and creating boundaries, as is the case in religion, as well as science and politics. He notes, '[m]y objective [...] has been to create a history of the different modes by which, in our culture, human beings are made subjects,' (777) , whether by sciences, language, or sexuality (777-8).¹

Understanding a strategy gives us insight into the aim of power. Foucault notes 'one can therefore interpret the mechanisms brought into play in power relations in terms of strategies' (794). A basic component of strategy, where he begins this analysis, is communication.

Communication by its nature a strategy of power as 'communication is always a certain way of acting upon another person or persons.' (786) He does make a distinction when it comes to communication as a power strategy. Though he notes that it is 'necessary to distinguish power

¹ In Foucault's project, this desire to understand power and subjectivity derives in part from where power has been misused to extreme harm for large numbers of the populous, what he calls "diseases of power" (779), specifically 20th century 'fascism and Stalinism' (779). Strategy, or 'the antagonism of strategies' (779), is where Foucault suggests we look to understand 'power relations' (779), or the nature and uses of power.

relations from relationships of communication which transmits information by means of language' (786), and that communications only sometimes 'have as their objective or as their consequence certain results in the realm of power' (786), for Foucault, narrative and power are not 'separate domains' (786). He notes, not 'on one hand the field of things, of perfected technique, work, and the transformation of the real: on the other that of signs, communication, reciprocity, and the production of meaning: and finally, that of the domination of the means of constraint, of inequality, and the action of men upon other men. (786-7) These realms 'overlap one another, support one another reciprocally' (787) , but neither uniform nor constant' in the way (787). The power dynamics in society are put in place by communication. 'In a given society there is no general type of equilibrium between finalized activities, systems of communication, and power relations' (787)

Foucault goes further in addressing strategy in terms of deployment of narrative and framing of our reality by contouring our understanding. He broadens this to important general observations about the nature of strategy itself and its relationship to power. Strategy for Foucault is 'defined by the choice of winning solutions' (793) that 'attain a certain end' (793), 'to have the advantage over others' (793), and answering the question of how to achieve 'victory' (793). He notes, 'One may call power strategy the totality of the means put into operation to implement power effectively or to maintain it' (793) , and further, 'every strategy of confrontation dreams of becoming a relationship of power, and every relationship of power leans toward the idea that, if it follows its own line of development and comes up against direct confrontation, it may become the winning strategy' (794).

Ours is not the first attempt to analyze Foucault on strategy, narrative, and power. Margaret McLaren tracks how this understanding of narrative's impact on an individual during the postmodern or narrative turn led to new therapies based in the understanding that where narrative is strategy for power over the subject, it may have negative, long-lasting effects that can be undone by counternarrative.² She notes the field of narrative therapists where 'narrative therapists help clients deconstruct the dominant social and cultural messages that serve to oppress them'(McLaren, 2002, p. 162) and where 'individual problems are assumed to be rooted in an oppressive social system' (McLaren, 2002, p. 162). Where a narrative approach to strategy has taken hold, and shaped a world view, the effect on the individual can be profound and difficult to reverse, requiring an 'antidomination strategy' (McLaren, 2002, p. 162) also based in narrative.

Though perhaps beyond the scope of our analysis, it is worth questioning this seeming hard line that Foucault draws on strategy. We might ask, is all strategy, in life, business, politics, and war, aimed at power or control over others? In desiring, aiming for, and moving on an objective, it may very well be the case that strategy is always or certainly often a way of achieving a specific end regarding the objectives of the strategist / organization. This leads to further philosophical

² In Story Re-Visions: Narrative Therapy in the Post-Modern World, Parry and Doan provide what we might call the "ideal therapy arc" for narrative therapy thusly: 'Our work abounds with challenges to the single, dominant story by inviting our clients to imagine many other stories drawn from the texts of the lives of those with whom the clients are in intense interaction. When the very notion that there is one true story is thrown into question, people begin to realize that any story is just a story. They are freed to invent stories of their own that serve the purpose of any narrative: to provide a framework of meaning and direction so that a life may be lived intentionally' (Parry and Doan, 1994, pp. 5-6).

questions beyond the limit of our work here, including the question of whether achieving a 'win' is always simultaneously about power. Wins can certainly be mutually beneficial.

Regardless, Foucault here is immensely valuable for the theory of strategy which he provides, one which says that language, and more specifically narrative is one of the main means by which power is achieved. Strategy is the way to power over subjects and this way is through language. Narrative is powerful in reshaping our understanding, story can flesh out a world and put us in it, binding our minds.

Freedman also seeks to understand the importance of narrative to strategy as well, and takes up Foucault in the context of what he terms a 'narrative turn' (429) in the social sciences. Freedman characterizes this period as many others have, a moment where a skeptical bent toward accepted wisdom took hold. He notes this change in approach 'captured the uncertain confidence about what was actually known, the fascination with the variety of interpretations that could be attached to the same event, and the awareness of the choices made when constructing identity.' (429) This period of thinking was 'challenging the idea of a perfect knowledge of external reality' (429), and meant more than one interpretation could be offered, rather than one objective view. In other words, multiple narratives were possible of even the same event or phenomenon. He notes 'narratives describing social situations from the perspective of those who in the past might have been belittled or marginalized found their way into more established literary forms' (430) but 'not the result of any deliberate strategy' (431). French philosopher Lyotard makes a similar point in his famous text in characterizing the post-modern condition, the period to which

Freedman refers, as one in which ‘we no longer have recourse to the grand narratives’ (Lyotard, p. 60), the accumulations of knowledge and truth that had previously gone unquestioned.

Freedman builds on this understanding of narrative as an overarching story about the way the world is geared. He notes as an illustrative example the pejorative but common view of how the political class could deploy narratives to suit identities and purposes: ‘as the concept moved into the political mainstream, there was talk of grand narratives as setting the basic terms in which a political group would wish to be identified, its aims and values, and its relationship to the issues of the day. Once this narrative was set, then individual episodes might be “spun” by specialist communicators known as “spin doctors” who understood the media and made it their business to influence the daily news agenda and frame events’ (431). Freedman notes this use of narratives extended to lies like ‘convincing the public that the economy was really doing well when the latest data suggested the opposite’ (431). Here narratives could be deployed proactively, gain traction, and change the lens through which people viewed the world.

Building on this, Freedman invokes sociologist Erving Goffman to explain how narrative can shape perception. He attributes this quote to Goffman: “We frame reality in order to negotiate it, manage it, comprehend it, and choose appropriate repertoires of cognition and action” (415). Freedman continues that ‘Goffman considered how individuals struggled to make sense of the world around them and their experiences and so needed interpretative schemas or primary frameworks to classify the knowledge. When there were a number of possible ways of viewing an issue, framing meant that one particular way appeared to be the most natural. This was

achieved by highlighting certain features of a situation, stressing likely causes and possible effects, and suggesting the values and norms in play.’ (415-6) Freedman also finds this parallel in Gitlin’s work. ‘Gitlin sought to demonstrate that the media did not so much hold up a mirror to reality as shape what people assumed to be reality.’ (417)

Freedman, perhaps anticipating Simpson, attempts to expand his theory of strategy at the conclusion of his history, with a markedly communications/narrative viewpoint. Circling back to Foucault, he notes, ‘the preface offered “the art of creating power” as my short definition. This has the advantage of allowing the impact of strategy to be measured as the difference between the outcome anticipated by reference to the prevailing balance of power and the actual outcome after the application of strategy.’ (608) But, he notes, as a definition it doesn’t address application (608). Continuing, he notes ‘the essence of strategy - is to force or persuade those who are hostile or unsympathetic to act differently than their current intentions’ (627), and ‘much strategy is about getting to the next stage rather than some ultimate destination’ (628).

The refined definition, or perhaps rather *theory* of *strategy* Freedman suggests is based in stories, specifically asking us ‘the value of considering strategy as a story about power told in the future tense from the perspective of a leading character.’ (608) ‘In order to come to terms with recent trends in thinking about strategy, we need to come to terms with stories.’ (615) He goes on to state that the requirement of impactful strategy will be to create a narrative that takes hold in the minds of both internal and external parties, by way of what he calls ‘strategic scripts.’

With regard to stories, he invokes thinker Nassim Taleb ‘Metaphors and stories are “far more potent (alas) than ideas; they are also easier to remember and more fun to read.” As a result: “You need a story to displace a story.”’ (617) He further notes ‘When it comes to “battles of narratives,” what matters is not only their inherent quality but the resources behind them, reflected in the capacity for an organization to propagate its own myths and censor or counter contrary claims’ (Freedman, 618)

In attempting to refine his notion of scripting and how it helps propagate a story, Freedman remains somewhat abstract or unclear. He notes this notion of ‘internalized script’ is a key plank in his theory of strategy (619) ‘strategic script’ (621). Scripts, he says, ‘can be taken as starting points for deliberate action and even be developed and internalized by groups as they consider together a developing situation’ (619) He also notes the script ‘provides a way of addressing the problem about how individuals enter into new situations, give them meaning, and decide how to behave’ and also ‘natural link with performance and narrative’ (619), and is useful as a ‘largely internalized foundation for attempts to give situations meaning and suggest appropriate responses’ (620) ‘They do not need to take the form of screenplays in which each actor speaks in turn, but they should have a composed quality indicating the expected interaction between the main actors. They may be rooted in the past or draw on well-known events, but they have to take the present as a starting point and project forward. These strategies are stories about the future, starting with imaginative fiction but with an aspiration to nonfiction (621)

While literally talking about writing dramatic scripts, what Freedman seems to be reaching for is how to telegraph expected behaviour in a reliable way, reliable in the sense of getting the action out of someone, to simplify, that is desired. This hearkens to a term Freedman does not know, namely ‘response efficacy’. What Freedman seems to be tackling or anticipating here is something that Emile Simpson also identifies, but instead through a negative definition when he notes the need for what he calls an ‘interpretive structure’ (Simpson, 29), specifically to counteract “where people make up their own minds about the meaning of a text, rather than subscribe to a stable interpretive structure” leading to “fragmentation of meaning” (Simpson 29).

There are two important threads here. The one is more straightforward, specifically that external strategy needs to be complemented through internal communications to unify groups working within organizations or efforts on goals etc. There is nothing new in this assertion. But secondly what Freedman seems to be getting at, and perhaps lacks a framework of his own, is for strategy to deal in ‘response efficacy.’

‘Response efficacy’ may have a provenance beyond emergency health responders, but gains a clear articulation by researcher Daniel Barnett who examined the predictability of how these responders would act when an actual crisis hits (Barnett et al 2014). He conducted similar research with colleagues regarding the uptake of vaccines by healthcare workers. In both cases, he presents a framework for internal communications’ response efficacy - in other words how to effect behaviour change via communication - called the ‘Extended Parallel Process Model’:

Introduced by Witte in 1992, the EPPM has the potential to cast light on how the public health workforce can be encouraged to participate in influenza vaccination. The model posits that for a message to induce behavior change, it must simultaneously convey the constructs of threat and efficacy. The construct of threat has two components: severity or the idea that the threat is significant enough to warrant action; and susceptibility or the idea that the person initiating the behavior may be affected by the threat. The construct of efficacy also has two components: self-efficacy or the idea of confidence that the person is able to perform the behavior; and response efficacy or the idea that the behavior change will achieve the intended impact. If the message induces both perceived threat and perceived efficacy in the recipient, the message may be accepted [16]. If the message induces high levels of perceived threat, but does not promote perceived efficacy, fear will be elicited and the recipient will undergo what is known as “fear control”. In this situation, the message may be rejected or defensively avoided [17]. Importantly, self-efficacy or the confidence component of efficacy, has been identified as the component most associated with actual behavior adaptation [18]. (Barnett et al, 2013, online)

In short, Barnett and colleagues in several papers have provided a framework for communications which aids in behaviour modification and predictability of response, by simple communications that emphasize a) the realistic risk level faced, and b) instructions on what is expected in the form of If x happens, and you do y, z will be the outcome. It has been shown in their research that this framework produces. In this context, perhaps this parallels Freedman’s intention with ‘scripts’, and in any case yields a valuable concept for the attributes surrounding our revised concept of *strategy*.

By invoking contemporary examples like the political process and media, Freedman further elucidates Foucault's point. To win, strategy must change minds, alter perceptions, shape opinion. Effective strategy is a story that must take hold; and requires changing the frame through which we see the world, in this case via story and telegraphing expected or desired thinking and action via scripting. We can see here how this complements our emerging picture of strategy. Strategy must be communicated, and stories have the power to change mindset and worldview, and scripting in some context to impact perceptions further and guide behaviour. Adding this to our thinking and definition may bear further fruit in coming to a renewed theory of strategy. However, contemporary readers may take exception to the above pronouncements about power and predictably guiding behaviour, as Foucault anticipated. It is problematic to see strategy as potential manipulation, control, or power plays. And where the public is becoming more sensitive to manipulation, more skeptical of organizations and their objectives, a refined definition must come to understand building relationships, not just affecting perceptions and action.

Strategy as Narrative and Dialogic / Two-Way Communication

There is precedence for an approach to strategy which addresses the criticisms and advancements-in-thinking raised above. In his 2018 book 'War from the Ground Up' (Oxford: 2018), Emile Simpson - a former British Infantry Officer with the Royal Gurkha Rifles, and Junior Fellow at the Harvard University Society of Fellows - presents, via a renewed understanding of military strategy based on his experiences in Afghanistan, what we might take to be a working model of a new paradigm of strategy. Through Simpson's view, we can understand a strategy, especially a winning strategy, to be by necessity one that is iterative, and firmly communicative, no, dialogic in nature. Though firmly based in the urgency of war, specifically a complicated military action in a foreign country, the model and understanding of strategy presented by Simpson, we shall posit, is one that applies to all spheres of strategy, whether business, government, military or other, and again captures fluidly what we have been discussing hereto.

The ongoing conflict in Afghanistan serves as the current 'lab' for a renewed understanding of strategy, where Afghanistan represents a military action to renew a country that is besieged by a criminal and tyrannical group that would exert rule on the populus, a populus which is further challenging to understand due to it being, by nature, a 'fragmented political environment' (238) made up of various interests and viewpoints. To that end, Simpson begins his analysis by acknowledging that war takes place within a human community, or amongst human communities, and this detail is critical to the broader applicability of his observations on strategy. His starting observation, a great insight, is that strategy conveys meaning, where the success of a military action is partially dependent on the interpretation of the meaning of that action amongst

its affected communities. ‘The way in which people’s perceptions are influenced by the presence or absence of interpretive structures such as war is essential to understanding contemporary conflict, but is sometimes neglected by strateg.’ (24) (where by ‘strategy’ here he refers to the broader field of discourse). He points to the phenomenon of competing narratives within a community to make this point. ‘The outcome of an action is usually better gauged by the chat at the bazaar the next day, and its equivalent higher up the political food chain, than body counts (6).’ In this new paradigm of understanding, an action is taken and its implications ripple across the affected populous; narratives of interpretation are then developed, with some gaining more uptake or influence on the emerging political process than others. Part of war then is exerting influence over these narratives in tandem with physical force actions, where a failure to do so could transmute a force-based win into confusion or an outright loss if the affected populous misinterprets. In this way, he observes, ‘(t)he control of political space is as important, if not more important, than controlling physical space.’ (6).

Simpson summarizes:

“Once actions in war (both violent and non-violent) are seen as a form of language used to communicate meaning in the context of an argument, there is a possibility of being misunderstood. In order to use war successfully as an instrument of policy, one’s actions in war ultimately need to be interpreted in accordance with the intent of one’s policy. Thus strategy in relation to war seeks to link the meaning of tactical actions with the intent of policy to deliver the desired policy end-state. To do this, strategy seeks to invest actions in war with their desired meaning. Hence, strategy has to harmonise both of the ‘instruments’ that are contained in the

idea of war as an extension of policy by other means. Strategy does not merely need to orchestrate tactical actions (the use of force), but also construct the interpretive structure which gives them meaning and links them to the end of policy.” (28)

The remarkable point Simpson is making here is that force is just another form of the language of political discourse, whereby it is another way of communicating a meaning (27) (a thread of thinking he concedes building on from the famous military strategist Clausewitz). This has profound implications for military strategy in the mode of the above thinking by Foucault and Freedman we have invoked. In this model, strategy moves from the outdated version of a ‘one-way unquestioning execution of policy’ to a ‘continuous reconciliation of what is desired and what is possible’ (237) - a dialogue of interests, action, and recalibrated interests, mediated by narrative. And here his argument evolves further from simply that strategy is about communicating meaning and interpretation, to a two-way discourse where both sides attempt to interpret, and ideally reconcile and adjust to develop a common interpretation, or a future course of action.

We can see where this view is prophetic to other realms of human activity where strategy is deployed. For a tech giant like Apple or say an app developer, the launch of a new product might include internal and consumer testing, but success might ultimately depend on further iteration via both keeping an eye on external factors, a hallmark of business strategy back to Porter and Mintzberg and beyond, but also in adapting and attempting to penetrate the interpretation of the product launch and value/benefits by various publics and consumer groups. In politics as well

this is would be the case in determining the tradeoffs and sacrifices required to make changes to edge toward a fairer, freer, and more equitable society, and or the same type of tradeoff mentality required for economic growth or economic health. In all cases the way publics interpret actions, are engaged, and directions refined will determine the success of an overall plan.

Simpson shares this thinking where he notes that it is only via the creation of this interpretive structure that ‘then can narrative convince disparate strategic audiences in a fragmented political environment’ (238) Strategy then becomes a balancing act of abstract and practical, ‘reason by intuition, theory by experience, desire by possibility, and contemporary issues by history.’ (240) The ultimate point is around adjustment, what he describes as ‘agile adjustment of strategic narrative is necessary to maintain a balance between what is desired by policy and what is realistically possible on the ground’ (243)

In this way then, narratives arising from actions in war - different and competing explanations - are as much a space of war, or where war is won or lost, than just the physical conflict. Simpson summarizes the contemporaneity of this fact/phenomenon later in the book as follows:

‘Contemporary conflict is characterised by the proliferation of audiences beyond the enemy, as polarity gives way to politically kaleidoscopic conflict environments. These audiences always potentially existed, but were not audiences until the information revolution connected them to the conflict as audiences, hence their proliferation.’ (203) In this way, the current ‘War on Terror’ has evolved according to this new reality as ‘understood partly in terms of a continuous effort to shape worldwide political perceptions according to the West’s security interests, and its

consequent lack of a clear end point, as perceptions continuously evolve.’ (9) This of course is all in the context of a new reality, a new possibility of understanding and engaging through the ‘information revolution’ in which he clearly includes personal electronic communication and social media.

How strategy works then involves two distinct threads. He notes there are ‘decisive, sequential, strategic actions’ but this works in parallel with ‘a cumulative campaign gradually to reconfigure the political landscape’ (in this case the goal being ‘to connect people to the Afghan government’) (94). A third element are diverging views within the same publics, an almost endless sub-segmenting within a given public. ‘Strategy has to operate within a complex political environment that nobody can ever fully understand. Within this environment actors tend to act in a kaleidoscopic manner on the basis of self-interest’ (97). Evidently Simpson’s theory upends the typical marketing sales approach and the propaganda approach in war deployed especially by both sides in World War Two, characterized by one-way deployments of often false information.³

We could go a step further and say a) strategy will not be effective without understanding and planning for interpretive structures, or further b) we cannot accept something as ‘strategy’ if it does not plan to deploy through and adapt to the realities on the ground in different communities of varying thought. Winning ‘requires the people upon whom that outcome is supposed to have

³ For a deeper analysis of the deployment of propaganda by the allies against the axis and vice versa, readers may wish to see David Welch’s World War II Propaganda: Analyzing the Art of Persuasion During Wartime, 2017.

meaning to interpret events in the same way as the strategist who seeks that outcome,' (31) but beyond that, engagement and recalibration, and ultimately a cycle of mutual understanding, continued dialogue, and shifts in perspective, plans and action on both sides is the true essence of winning strategy.

In summary, 'strategy' for Simpson requires a receptivity to audience viewpoints - a specific attentiveness and adjustment - at all times. 'Essentially strategy is the dialectical relationship, or the dialogue, between desire and possibility' (116) - the desire of the strategist, or actor, and whether that desire is achievable. He notes, '[t]he two should ideally be in perpetual dialogue, not just before but also during a conflict. Desire must be grounded in possibility; possibility clearly requires an idea in the first place which informs any analysis of possibility.' (116) And further, '[u]nderstood as dialogue between desire and possibility, strategy is as much the process that handles this dialogue as the output of the dialogue itself.' (116) 'Strategic dialogue ideally produces strategy that situates the desire of policy in the possibility of its execution.' (119) All must be taken in view that 'the requirement for strategic narrative to bind its audiences is crucial' (117), yet difficult given the kaleidoscopic and self-interested viewpoints. The 'challenge' for strategic narrative as the core function of strategy is 'the strategist has to consider how a narrative can gain purchase on audiences whose political persuasions vary widely, without coming apart.' (181)

To summarize Simpson's contribution to military strategy and strategy more broadly, his theory has three components. For one, strategy includes a planned action, for example a military or

violent action, or an encroachment on territory to achieve a desired outcome. This first element of strategy must surely be taken in its broadest sense to include the frameworks of old (and new) that include assessment of internal capacities and external forces, as well as envisioning and calculating a likely desired outcome or win. Simpson adds a second, important element based on his knowledge of military history, and on his observations as a tactician and strategist in Afghanistan. Specifically, he notes that strategy then requires an attempt a binding narrative that can gain currency and change the political landscape. The narrative must gain traction amongst the population to be successful. Interestingly, Simpson observes a third element, how an iterative dialogue with the ‘kaleidoscopic’ sub-segments of the population must be engaged to calibrate and recalibrate the first two elements of the strategy. Both action and narrative are subject to change based on how they are being received and interpreted. In other words, true success in the strategy arena requires the attempt at co-generation of meaning and adjustments on both sides.

A Two-Way Symmetrical Model

Simpson’s transformative view on military strategy has far reaching implications to strategy more generally. War is commonly thought of as opposing shows of force, gaining of territory, and imposing one’s will on another. Given the complexities of 21st century life, this paradigm does not hold. Where changing perspectives on both sides becomes essential to victory, Simpson’s insight about kaleidoscopic viewpoints in a population and even more nuanced parsing of said populations is insightful. The world is one today, in war and more broadly in societies and communities, where one story does not fit all. His answer here is the cogeneration

of meaning, and meaningful adjustment to both or all actors in a war scenario. Interestingly, these insights have a parallel in another field, specifically the discourse on public relations practice since the 1980s, where the two-way symmetrical model has been developed, refined, and studied as a theory and in situ.

As previously discussed, James Grunig (with supporting collaborators) founded the modern discourse on public relations, positing that public relations would best support organizational objectives by adopting a strategic mindset, and also posited a taxonomy of approaches public relations can take toward publics, with the preferred model being two-way symmetrical (e.g. Grunig and Hunt, 1984; Grunig, 2013). Grunig notes that dialogue is at the essence of the two-way symmetrical approach (Grunig & Grunig Page 289) and that ‘[a]symmetrical communication is imbalanced; it leaves the organization as is and tries to change the public. Symmetrical communication is balanced; it adjusts the relationship between the organization and the public.’ (Grunig and Grunig page 290). In invoking this approach which is a full contrast to the asymmetrical, ‘monologue’ approach of propaganda, marketing, and persuasion. Grunig focused specifically on the net gain of a betterment of relationships with publics this dialogue approach would foster (see Grunig, L., Grunig, J. & Dozier, 2002). In describing the two-way dynamic, Grunig was seeking a complex relationship between organizations and publics, where both could undergo fundamental change in viewpoint and approach. As he more recently explained, ‘feedback is not true two-way dialogue’ (Grunig, J, Grunig, 2010, p. 43).

What is the nature of two-way? What does the two-way symmetrical model look like in practice? Put simply, ‘two-way, symmetrical public relations uses research, listening, and dialogue to manage conflict and to cultivate relationships with both internal and external strategic publics more than one-way and asymmetrical communication’ (Grunig, 2009). Elsewhere, they note that the model ‘uses research to facilitate understanding and communication rather than to identify messages most likely to motivate or persuade publics. In the symmetrical model, understanding is the principal objective of public relations rather than persuasion.’ (Grunig & Grunig Page 289) An important caveat here is that the two-way symmetrical model has, at least in some quarters, been seen as aspirational rather than an easy shift or a fait accompli for the public relations profession. The Excellence Study no doubt animated a new academic discourse, but the profession did not, by-and-large, shift to a two-way symmetrical model, as many professionals would attest. More recent studies have, however, shown a higher degree of efficacy via deployment of the two-way symmetrical approach (Grunig, 2009). In practice, the model may be far more complicated, as attested to by a groundbreaking perspective by Flynn (2006), who describes a ‘balance zone’ in which public relations practitioners must operate, balancing the internal interests and equilibrium of the organization with those of the public. He notes, ‘I see our task as seeking to understand the myriad of interests and multiple influences that constantly apply collaborative and conflicting pressure on what I call “the balance zone of organizational–public relationship management’ (Flynn, 2006, p.193); a way of being ‘where transparent communications and interactions between and within stakeholder and stakeholder groups and organizations is in a constant state of engagement’ (p. 194). In the intervening years

since this publication, the requirements and pressures of occupying that zone of balance have no doubt grown.

Whereas for some there can be competing approaches to practicing public relations, when it comes to strategy Simpson's point is that a model approximating the two-way symmetrical model is necessary, not aspirational. Further, technology of today may enable it to come to full fruition where even in very large publics we can monitor and measure narrative uptake and use existing and emerging social technology to create the iterative dialogue cycles that both Grunig and Simpson advance in their own right but in clear parallel. Furthermore, beyond the theatre of war, today we have to account too in this modern moment for intersectionality, the broad range of perspectives and backgrounds that come to inform the ongoing discussions in the public.

Strategy will require dialogue in the symmetrical two-way model that Grunig advocates if thinking and understanding are to shift. Grunig at least anticipated this possibility in noting 'the interactive nature of the social media, of the digital media, makes it more possible than it was in the 60s or 70s or 80s or 90s or even 2000 to have a two-way balanced dialogue with the public.' (Grunig and Grunig, 2010, p. 43). What would this look like? In 2010, Grunig offered the following: 'if public relations is indeed a two-way street, then we can also use the new media to do research and bring information into the organization that we couldn't otherwise do. And this makes the strategic management function easier than it was before because we can follow what people are saying about a certain organization. We can identify the problems that they experienced with the organization or what they would like the organization to deal with. We can determine when they formed into publics and began talking with each other, and we can identify

the issues created and the crises that they're going through. With digital and social media, we can do this much more effectively than we could with traditional media.' (Grunig, J, Grunig, 2010, p. 48).

Where the discourse is founded on strategic communications and two-way symmetrical. We can argue this notion of strategy articulated by Simpson represents an inversion of the discourse. Specifically, Grunig's philosophical contributions are, in short, that a) communications is a strategic discipline and should be practiced strategically, and b) that communications either best contributes to strategy, or should aspire to, a two-way symmetrical model. Two way symmetrical is described thusly: organizations and publics enter into a dialogue where adaptations occur on both sides of a dialogue. In Simpson's model, effective strategy is two-way symmetrical by its very nature.

Grunig may, on the one hand, be criticized for being short sighted, placing communications/public relations as subordinate to strategy; despite the advances still seeing the work as a corporate department in service to the broader vision: a 'participant in organisational decision-making rather than a conveyor of messages about decisions after they are made by other managers. It also views public relations as research-based and a mechanism for organisational listening and learning. Its purpose is to help all management functions, including but not limited to marketing, to build relationships with their stakeholders through communication programmes that cultivate relationships with the publics that can be found within categories of stakeholders that are relevant to each management function' (Grunig, 2009). But within the same publication Grunig has prophetic insight about the data that can be yielded through digital communications,

and the broader implications thereof. He notes, 'I believe it is possible to use cyberspace as a database for measuring the type and quality of relationships developed with publics using the concepts of trust, mutuality of control' (Grunig 2009).

The strategic management paradigm emphasises two-way communication of many kinds to provide publics a voice in management decisions and to facilitate dialogue between management and publics both before and after decisions are made. The strategic management paradigm does not exclude traditional public relations activities such as media relations and the dissemination of information. Rather, it broadens the number and types of media and communication activities and fits them into a framework of research and listening. As a result, messages reflect the information needs of publics as well as the advocacy needs of organisations (Grunig, 2009).

Combining Simpson and Grunig here is of great interest and ground for further debate. Where our analysis started by stating strategy is ill-defined in the literature and therefore the basis of Grunig's depiction of public relations as a strategic discipline or function may be misconstrued, we have found our way to a different view, namely that what Grunig advanced as the two-way symmetrical model of public relations is extremely prophetic where it mirrors the essence of strategy in our connected and kaleidoscopic world.

Proposing a Renewed Theory of Strategy

To summarize, we have identified competing and often overlapping schools of modern strategy thinking - process, positioning, iterative, and narrative, and dialogic:

- Process focused planning keeping in mind resources (Mintzberg, Rumelt)
- Positioning in the context of competition (Porter, Martin)
- Iterative, fast-evolving (Freedman, McGrath)
- Narrative, Story, Scripting (Foucault, Freedman, drawing on Barnett)
- Dialogue and the co-generation of meaning; two way symmetrical; achieving a balance (Simpson, Grunig and collaborators, Flynn)

The core tenets of each have been identified, the thinking behind each further analyzed and problematized, and their merits discussed and distilled above. It is in aggregating through synthesis that we have propose the below definition of *strategy*.

Strategy is a process of visioning, design, and positioning and repositioning to establish and maintain competitive advantage through adjusting two-way/dialogic narrative and related actions.

In this model we also propose that to ‘do’ strategy, per the above, requires making a remaking what we would term ‘position plays,’ where the position play requires a foreknowledge of the circumstances, the arenas, the kaleidoscopic views that may come to bear of the play, and including internal and external analysis, as well as existing dialogue with internal and external stakeholders. The position play is then designed, taking into account the above, as a form of action or initiative supported by narrative, to gain ground in the arena. Lastly, the position play must have active nodes of dialogue, and an ability to sub-segment and measure the uptake of the narrative amongst those it is aimed at. Further to this, in listening and speaking in a two-way

model, the position play stays ‘active,’ requiring adjustment to the play itself as well as the internal balance of the organization beyond the individual play.

Based on the above proposal, two immediate areas of further study and needed framework development emerge: a) the measurement of narrative, dialogue, and relationships within arenas of kaleidoscopic viewpoints, and b) the process, thinking, and mind required to envision and design the position play for the above environment.

Measuring Story

Regarding measurement, there is a great deal of precedence and ongoing work in the current field, where measuring relationships and narrative uptake is possible in a way that it was not just five years ago. For example, in studying engagement with the narratives presented in television programs, researchers Busselle and Bilandzic (2009) deployed a model taking into account narrative understanding, attentional focus, emotional engagement, and narrative presence. This has evolved into what is now called NEM, (Crowley and Jacki, 2017). In fact, an entire nascent field of applied listening research and applied study, delivering models and frameworks for analysis is chronicled in The Sourcebook of Listening Research: Methodology and Measures edited by Debra L. Worthington and Graham D. Bodie (2017), and charts the use of NEM, as well as myriad other helpful measurement tools aimed at quantifying story and dialogue as they happen. Some examples include technology informed measurement like the microanalysis of gestures and expressions in dialogue via video recording of participants, or Microanalysis of Face-to-Face Dialogue (MFD) (Bavelas et al. 2017). Some are theories and tools to measure narrative efficacy, like the ‘Narrative Believability Scale (NBS-12)’ (Bodie, 2017). Research is

ongoing into effective story telling, yielding refinement in narrative crafting, for example a recent study showing via the measurement of heart rate that auditory narrative delivery has a more profound emotional impact on the subject (Richardson et al., 2018). There has also been some promising initial work in measuring dimensions of online conversations (Romenti et al. 2016). It is beyond the scope of this analysis to give a full summary of the myriad tools and emerging research and frameworks that will enable us to measure story and dialogue now and in future, however, our model of strategy will require the evidence-based uptake and deployment of these tools as they are refined. A position play, per Simpson, will require reliable and immediate feedback loops that are only possible through the advent of new listening technologies.

A New Strategy Mind

The leadership competencies and mind requirements for our proposed theory of strategy must also be considered. Daniel Pink (2005) envisioned a new age where right-brained competencies would be valued highest as technology and artificial intelligence would overtake the left-brained reasoning skills praised in today's business environs. He notes 6 competencies of this 'conceptual age' (p. 65), specifically design, story, symphony (creative synthesis), empathy, play and meaning (p.65-66). Parallels abound here between Pink's pronouncements about the prized competencies of the future, and the requirements of our proposed paradigm shift in strategy. Leadership will be informed by left-brain, analytic, technology informed data, but must do what a machine alone likely cannot. Drawing on empathy and other right brained-thinking, the strategist of today will write a narrative about the play over the 'map' of reality, determining

what position can be held in which arena, how, how it will be maintained, who to speak to to influence and hear from and adjust. Knowing that a 'position play' is precarious, this level of design thinking requires perpetual awareness of changing terrain and views.

'Design thinking' per Roger Martin here is critical. The strategist requires a matrix mind, and ability to see the multi-dimensional world in which a 'position play' is possible, and craft a narrative about a realistic and possible reality based on that knowledge. This design thinking must take into account Emile Simpson calls 'kaleidoscopic political activity' (50) ; an understanding of the world based in kaleidoscopic human activity is a key capability of the strategist; how narratives connect the disparate into an interpretive framework applies to conflict, politics, and business with equal importance. This cannot be the old model of a firm looking out, and then inscribing, but must be a perspective anchored in a human world, a phenomenological perspective that can convincingly get at 'what's going on.' This hearkens back to an observation Freedman has about Clausewitz: 'by saying that strategy was the art of making war upon the map, he was interested in how the theatre of operations as a whole was conceived by the commander and the moves against the enemy formulated, while taking advantage of the spatial awareness made possible by modern cartography.' (Freedman, p. 84) Today where data is plentiful, the map in our analogy is potentially overwhelming where data on economics, operational effectiveness, reach, myriad perspectives, and external events are possible. Freedman notes 'Clausewitz's concept of genius as involving "a combination of rational intelligence and subrational intellectual and emotional faculties that make up intuition" (Freedman 613) ...' could be developed through experience and education (Freedman) what about a quick Malcolm

Gladwell reference here? 'Isaiah Berlin spoke up for instinct and flair, challenging the idea that good judgment in politics could be scientific and founded on "indubitable knowledge".

(Freedman, p. 613) 'This grasp of the interplay of human beings and impersonal forces, sense of the specific over the general, and capacity to anticipate the consequential "tremors" of actions involved a special sort of judgment' (Freedman, p. 613). 'Like a grandmaster at chess, a gifted strategist will be able to see the future possibilities inherent in the next moves, and think through successive stages.' (Freedman, p. 611)

Conclusions

We here have depicted a world where technology and connectedness have led to transient advantage, lack of permanence, and arenas being the fragmented ground of competition over industry-level focus. This is a paradigm shift. We have also found tools, frameworks and competencies that will enable an evolution of strategy for this new world.

The implications for the organization are myriad. New listening and dialogic competencies are needed. Perhaps of great importance, as anticipated by Daniel Pink, the expectations of senior leadership must also evolve. The very phenotype of the CEO, the expectation by and for the head of the organization, must also evolve, where the CEO is traditionally seen as 'architect of the organization's purposes and objectives' (Rumelt, p. 51), with strategy being the foremost core competency. Where the new model of strategy echoes and bolsters the thread of communications studies led by the Excellence study, will the core competency of the CEO of the future not

include communications competencies? The master of story, dialogue, and adaptation will surely replace the infallible, unwavering grand visionary in today's connected world.

It is remarkable that two leading volumes on Strategy, one an extensive history (Freedman) and one a phenomenology of sorts from modern conflict (Simpson), both land on communications as a core aptitude for strategy in the 21st century. Decades of work on strategy can synthesize into something very closely resembling the key findings of the contemporary discourse on public relations.

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