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Metaphors of communication professionals in higher education: between the trivial and significant

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Abstract   This study explores the evolving, however also "messy", role of communication professionals in higher education institutions (HEIs), who are involved in organizational science communication. Despite substantial growth and professionalization within HEIs' communication departments, limited research delves into these professionals' own perspectives and their self-understanding. Our investigation employs a metaphors-in-use perspective, through 26 interviews in ten Scandinavian HEIs. The paper contributes to the research on organizational science communication by unraveling the metaphors used by communication professionals: the salesman, the marketplace-facilitator, the police, the missionary, the storyteller, and the overhead-cost, gaining an understanding of how communication professionals perceive their own role.

Introduction   The rise of numerous new professions within higher education institutions (HEIs) has been widely recognized [Karlsson & Ryttberg, 2016; Krücken & Meier, 2006]. One such profession that has gained particular significance is communication professionals, who often are made responsible for organizational science communication understood as the internal and external, public communication from scientific organizations such as HEIs [Schäfer & Fähnrich, 2020]. Research indicates that communication departments in HEIs have witnessed substantial growth, evolving into larger, more comprehensive, and professionalized units [Elken, Stensaker & Dedze, 2018]. Despite this, the exploration of professional ideals, values, and perspectives within the communication profession in higher education remains limited [Hartley & Morphew, 2008; Elken et al., 2018]. Since 2018, however, several research papers have been published with the aim of describing and explaining the role of communication professionals in HEIs.

This research has been published within the field of both science communication [e.g., Fischer & Schmid-Petri, 2023; Koivumäki, Karvonen & Koivumäki, 2021], communication management [e.g., Rödder, 2020; Schäfer & Fähnrich, 2020], public relations [e.g. VanDyke & Lee, 2020; Volk, Vogler, Fürst, Schäfer & Sörensen, 2023], as well as within studies of higher education policy and management [e.g. Sataøen, Lövgren & Neby, 2023; Christensen & Gornitzka, 2019]. Recent research focuses on whether communication departments consist of a coherent and consistent profession, as the actual staffing of these units seems to be diverse, including different backgrounds, expertise, and educational profiles [Moldenæs & Pettersen, 2021]. Moreover, Schwetje, Hauser, Böschen and Leßmöllmann [2020] show how communicators in higher education and research institutions have a broad range of tasks, differing internal expectations, and shifts between many roles in their daily work. Claessens [2014] argues that communication practitioners in higher education are neither doing pure science communication or proper public relations, as the practice is a mix of different purposes and targets. As succinctly expressed by Metcalfe [2022], science communication is inherently "messy", both in its theoretical foundations and in its practical implementation.

The objective of this paper is to contribute to this emerging body of research on the perceived roles of communication professionals in HEIs who are involved in organizational science communication. This is achieved through an exploration of the metaphors used by communication professionals to articulate and define their roles. Over the years, metaphors have served various functions in social sciences [Schmitt, 2005]. For instance, they have been used as rhetorical instruments and therapeutic tools, to describe results of qualitative research, in the self-reflection process of researchers, as well as to elicit explicit metaphors from research participants [Schmitt, 2005]. In this paper, we are interested in metaphors employed to portray and theorize on professions and professional roles in general [Liljegren, 2012], and we do so by focusing on the metaphors used by professionals to describe their role. By utilizing metaphors-in-use [Cassell & Lee, 2012; Cornelissen, Oswick, Thøger Christensen & Phillips, 2008], that is, the way communication professionals themselves use metaphors in describing their role, we are taking the communicational professional's own perspective(s) into account. This is an inductive approach, where the meaning-making around metaphors is extracted from the informant's use of language [Cornelissen et al., 2008].

In studies focusing on communicational roles in science communication and public relations, it becomes evident that metaphors not only serve as linguistic resources for professionals to articulate their roles but also as labels used by researchers to describe what communication professionals do and how their work has evolved. Despite this, the impact of metaphors in expressing and shaping professionals' self-understanding remains largely unexplored in this area of study. Hence, the key research question in this study is: how do communication professionals involved in organizational science communication perceive their own roles within HEIs through their use of metaphors?

Professions, logics and sensemaking through metaphors

How professionals act is intricately connected to how they reason, make sense of, and understand themselves. As experts, professionals are likely to distinguish themselves from others with reference to the particular role they play in the wider organizations and systems they are part of. Many scholars argue that experts operate under different institutional logics, leading them to inhabit distinct "thought worlds" [Sutter & Kieser, 2019, p. 2]. Over time, these logics become ingrained and accepted within professional communities, shaping common perceptions, values, and beliefs about how work should be carried out [Friedland & Alford, 1991]. These logics are institutionalized and disseminated through professionals within organizational fields. How professionals talk is therefore of outmost importance for understanding the logics under which professions operate. It also requires attention to the explicit descriptions and conceptions that professionals have of their work and roles, such as metaphors.

Metaphors and analysis of metaphorical language have recently been used in the study of professions [Liljegren, 2012; Liljegren & Saks, 2016]. Liljegren and Saks [2016] argue that metaphors are pivotal to interpret both the professional's self-understanding as well as the actual perspectives and frameworks we use to analyze and understand professions. In general, the core nature of metaphors lies in comprehending and encountering one type of entity by relating it to another [Lakoff & Johnson, 1980]. Hence, metaphors can be seen as cognitive structures borrowed from one domain and applied in another [Liljegren & Saks, 2016]. This process results in new meaning to our pasts, our daily activities, and our existing knowledge and beliefs [Lakoff & Johnson, 1980]. Consequently, metaphors play a generative role, enabling us to create new meanings and understandings [Cassell & Lee, 2012]. Hence, an exploration of the metaphors-in-use by our informants should grant us insight into how communication professionals comprehend their roles and the strategies they employ.

In organizational research on metaphors, two main approaches are distinguished: a cognitive linguistic approach and a discursive approach [Cornelissen et al., 2008]. The cognitive linguistic approach focuses on identifying metaphors used across various speakers and contexts to extract shared cognitive meanings. It assumes the existence of culturally shared repertoires of metaphors in a de-contextualized manner. In contrast, discursive approaches aim to contextualize metaphors by highlighting their locally specific uses, meanings, and interaction with other elements of discourse. These two approaches are not necessarily contradictory but can be integrated as complementary methodological strategies [Cornelissen et al., 2008, p. 9–10].

Although we, as do Cornelissen et al. [2008], see these approaches as complementary, our aim is to analyze potential underlying structures represented by metaphors. To take one example: within the field of science communication, researchers often employ metaphors such as "gatekeepers" and "the bridge-builders" to characterize communication professionals' roles. These two metaphors provide fundamentally different approaches to the work. The metaphor of a "gatekeeper" suggests a role focused on control, regulation, and filtering information. In this context, communication professionals are seen as guardians, determining what information is allowed to pass through, emphasizing a certain level of authority and responsibility. On the other hand, the metaphor of a "bridge-builder" paints a picture of connection, facilitation, and collaboration.

Here, communication professionals are perceived as facilitators, fostering connections between different stakeholders, building bridges for effective communication, and emphasizing a collaborative and inclusive approach. As Liljegren [2012, p. 88] neatly puts it "[t]he metaphor chosen fundamentally affects how the reality is perceived and presented".

However, the context in which the metaphor is presented cannot be completely ignored. In this paper, therefore, we follow Weatherall and Walton [1999, p. 481], who emphasize the indexical or situated nature of social categories in linguistic interaction. Thus, we view metaphors as linguistic tools utilized within specific contexts, requiring sensitivity to context in the analysis. Therefore, we do not perceive metaphors as having universal meanings. Instead, they are ambiguous, and serve as sense-making devices triggered by events and actively employed to manage interests in social interaction [Cornelissen et al., 2008, p. 12]. Our standpoint is also that metaphors are formative, connecting realms of human experience and imagination, guiding perceptions, interpretations of reality, and formulation of visions and goals [Cornelissen et al., 2008, p. 3]. When individuals seek to understand something new or explain complex situations, they often rely on assigning symbolic or metaphorical significance to it. Hence, symbols, particularly language-based ones like metaphors, are fundamental in sense-making processes [Gioia, Thomas, Clark & Chittipeddi, 1994]. Additionally, metaphors may play a role in shaping professional habitus. Bourdieu's [1977] notion of habitus is about the accumulation of personal experiences that become embodied within individuals, guiding their actions and perceptions. This embodied phenomenon acts as a generative principle, facilitating regulated improvisation for professional practitioners within their respective fields [Bourdieu, 1977]. Professional habitus are cultural models, bridging structure and agency, with language playing a pivotal role. For example, professionals in different occupational fields may possess distinct vocabularies, rhetorical styles, and communication norms that reflect the habitus of their respective professions [Jensen & Wagoner, 2009].

Background: communication work in HEIs

Recent transformations of academic institutions has led to blurred boundaries and identities among academic and support staff, with the entry of new disciplines and professions into universities [Karlsson & Ryttberg, 2016]. One example is so-called Higher Education Professionals (HEPROS) [Schneijderberg & Merkator, 2013]. HEPROS, as non-academic personnel, specialize in tasks such as finances, legal advisory, internationalization, student counseling, quality assessments, and communication. Within our study, we understand and analyze the communication professionals as HEPROS, recognizing them as part of this relatively heterogeneous group of professionals. They contribute to the development and differentiation of functions and tasks within the realm between top management and the core activities of academic staff, responding to the growing demands for professionalization of university governance. The perception of communication in organizations varies along different dimensions. For instance, communication can be perceived as strictly adhering to protocols and guidelines, or it can be seen as more transformative, where participants surpass existing, and often fixed, perceptions and positions [Macnamara, 2019]. Additionally, different emphasis can be placed on communication's creative versus controlling functions, as well as its role on the strategic-operational spectrum [Falkheimer, Heide, Simonsson, Zerfass & Verhoeven, 2016]. Furthermore, the role of communication professionals within

organizations can be viewed as highly significant, contributing to strategic decision-making. Alternatively, communication practices may be marginalized or even stigmatized as trivial or "shady" [Edwards & Pieczka, 2013]. In the next sections, we will outline previous research on communication work in HEIs.

Putting labels on communication professionals' work in HEIs is challenging. Research into (science) communication within HEIs is a relatively recent development and have been explored through various terms, such as university public relations, university communication, institutional science communication, higher education communication, and broadly, science public relations [Volk et al., 2023]. In its most basic sense, science communication can be defined as the communication and dissemination of information related to scientific knowledge, methodologies, processes, or practices in contexts where individuals who are not part of the scientific community are acknowledged as a significant audience [Fischer & Schmid-Petri, 2023; Metcalfe, 2022].

Contemporary communication departments are responsible for a multitude of tasks ranging from web-based information, development of information and branding material (logos, design schemes, etc.), and rapid responses to public media [Elken et al., 2018]. The communicational functions in HEIs are also more diversified than before, and it has become "albeit to a somewhat lesser extent — more professional and strategic" [Fürst, Volk, Schäfer, Vogler & Sörensen, 2022, p. 515]. Such development is relatable to a general shift of the communicator as a supportive *technician* to a manager or strategist [Dozier & Broom, 1995]. Also, within HEIs the strategic role of communication has recently been emphasized, and professional communicators often work closely with the institutional management and leadership, and their tasks are closely linked to the strategy of the institutions. Communication departments tend to be mediators between institutional leadership and the "fragmented heartland of the university" [Elken et al., 2018, p. 1119]. This has led researchers to assume that communications officers are part of a new "management profession" in the HEIs whose main responsibility is to handle the gradually more complex relationship between society and HEIs [Krücken & Meier, 2006]. In addition, several other studies of science communication in HEIs emphasize general professionalization [e.g., Fähnrich, Vogelgesang & Scharkow, 2020; Vogler & Schäfer, 2020]. Still, it has been argued that "pure" science communication tasks often clash with other communicational functions and tasks within HEIs such as public relations, marketing and "administration" [Entradas, 2022]. Hence, understanding and defining the role of communication professionals in HEIs is challenging due to a multitude of expectations [Schwetje et al., 2020], as well as numerous and differing role-descriptions [Volk et al., 2023].

By utilizing and drawing on both public relations and science communication perspectives, Volk et al. [2023] identified four primary role conceptions through their empirical research: (1) the leading all-rounder, (2) the generalist, (3) the science mediator, and (4) the service partner. The two first categories are oriented towards guarding the HEIs' reputation although with many additional roles. Science mediators see engaging in public dialogue as a main task, whereas service partners mainly provide internal support. When reviewing the literature on organizational science communication in HEIs, several other role descriptions and metaphors are mentioned, such as "translators", "mediators", "service providers", "popularisers" [Leßmöllmann et al., according to Fischer & Schmid-Petri, 2023].

Schwetje et al. [2020] mentions roles in metaphorical language, such as "administrators", "agenda-setters", "contextualisers", "advocates", "multipliers", "gatekeepers", "service units", networkers", "bridge builders" "counselors", "consultants" "boundary spanners", "court jesters". In addition, Claessens [2014] uses descriptions such as "teachers" (communication professionals educating scientists in science communication) and "influencers" (of public opinion) to characterize the role. In addition to these descriptions, Volk et al. [2023] mentions "curators", "conveners", "civic educators", "public outreach officers" "brokers". With all these ex-post role-descriptions and metaphors mentioned above in mind, it is not surprising that communicational work in HEIs may not necessarily be perceived as a unified profession, reflecting the "messy" nature of science communication practices [Metcalfe, 2022]. It also opens up avenues for research on the communication professionals' own perceptions of their role through their own use of metaphors. In this study we contribute to filling this gap in existing understanding.

Methods and analysis

26 communication practitioners in 10 Scandinavian HEIs are interviewed in this qualitative study (see Table 2, appendix). The sample of HEIs was purposive, and we strived to include different types of HEIs. Drawing inspiration from Christensen and Gornitzka's [2017] categorization, this led to the selection of *specialized*, *old and general*, "*68-ers*", and *new* universities. Moreover, we categorized communication practitioners in three types: first, as the operations of communication departments often is seen in a context of strategic development and tight linkage to central leadership [Elken et al., 2018], we interviewed employees with leading and strategic roles. Second, HEIs are now equipped with a fast-growing group of 'in-house' communication personnel focusing on design, visual and multimodal communication. As noted by Moldenæs and Pettersen [2021, p. 185] graphic designers are "perhaps the most professionalized group within a community of experts which loosely can be denoted as the communication profession" in HEIs. Hence, the second category includes "creative" employees involved in design, visual or multimodal processes and production of communication in HEIs. The third category of interviewees includes senior employees working in the intersection of media and research where (external) science communication is prioritized.

Scandinavian HEIs are fairly similar: all belonging to the so called "Mass Public Model" characterized by notably high enrollment rates, almost entirely public ownership, and sustained by substantial funding levels with extensive public investments [Bleiklie & Michelsen, 2019]. Still, reforms have pushed HEIs towards heightened autonomy, particularly from the 1990s. This transformation has given rise to a development towards corporeal influenced style of unique profile creation and visibility [Engwall, 2008]. The driving principles behind the reforms in Scandinavian HEIs have remained remarkably consistent, centering around the values of quality, efficiency, and relevance [Bleiklie & Michelsen, 2019]. In short, therefore, Scandinavian HEIs are becoming more active, promotional, and "complete" organizations — characterized by a well-defined identity, a hierarchical structure, and the capacity for rational action [Brunsson & Sahlin-Andersson, 2000].

After selecting the sample of HEIs, we contacted the heads of communication departments at each institution. Despite some declines or withdrawals from

interviews, we ultimately conducted a total of 26 interviews from 10 HEIs. The interviews were a combination of in situ interviews, and interviews carried out through video-conferencing technology. The interviews were semi-structured, as there were four main themes to be covered in sequence: (a) the societal role of HEIs and communication's potential contribution; (b) communication-as-work: roles, identities and autonomy; (c) the development and responsibilities of the communication function; (d) the content and strategies of communication and its perceived development. The interviews lasted from 50 to 80 minutes. The interviews were conducted in Norwegian, Swedish, and Danish, which are the native languages of the interviewees. Consequently, during the analysis phase, where we searched for metaphors, we relied on the interviewees' native languages. However, in reporting the results, we translated quotations into English. Of course, this process of translation presents analytical challenges, as the meaning and connotations of metaphors can vary across languages and cultures.

For the actual analysis process, we systematically searched all interviews to inductively identify metaphors used by the informants to describe their role. The metaphors were "elicited" from the interviews (in the original language), and, hence, the first step of the analysis involved "identifying metaphors in the context of people's language use and examining their uses, meanings and impacts" [Cornelissen et al., 2008, p. 10]. These metaphors-in-use were found in various parts of the interviews, and they were elicited without restriction to specific job-related contexts in the interviews. Subsequently, the metaphors and their contextual occurrences were grouped together and compared to unveil their meanings. The analysis of metaphors involved: (a) identifying underlying structures conveyed by the metaphors, including conventional understandings and associations; (b) interpreting metaphors in light of existing literature on role-conceptions and related research; (c) incorporating professionals' own descriptions of the metaphors from interviews, capturing contextual dimensions. These steps also informed the structure of our analysis section. In presenting our final results, both the metaphors and their textual contexts were translated into English.

Results

In our study, we found that across several interviews and in the majority of the studied organizations, there was a consistent appreciation for communication professionals embodying a generalist mentality. While the concrete metaphors and expressions related to this concept vary (e.g., "altmuligmand" in Danish, "alltiallo" in Swedish, and "renessansemenneske" in Norwegian), they all indicate a role conception that encompasses both operational and strategic competencies. "Alltiallo" and "altmuligmand" suggest a craftsman capable of performing a wide range of duties. On the other hand, a "rennesansemenneske" is someone who can integrate diverse and sometimes conflicting domains such as arts, crafts, and science. All three metaphors, however, tie well with the informants' narrative of versatility and adaptability of communication departments. The pervasive generalist perception is most prevalent among practical actor categories, such as design/creative and research communication. Intriguingly, this perception also applies to the managing category, where there might be an expectation of a more pronounced focus on strategic leadership. This partly contradicts previous research, such as Dozier and Broom [1995] which emphasizes that communication professionals have shifted from being supportive technicians to undertaking more

managerial and strategic roles. The following sections explore additional metaphors, moving beyond the generalist perspective, which primarily pertains to tasks and responsibilities.

The salesman

The metaphor of the "salesman" ("selger"/"sælger"/"säljare") is frequently found in the narratives of communication professionals, especially those engaged in visual productions and design. This metaphor captures the perception of their role as akin to an in-house salesperson for communication products and services. By adopting the metaphor of the salesman, the communication professionals assert their value and the importance of their contributions, highlighting the active engagement in promoting and advocating for their communication offerings and support. The use of economic language underscores the entrepreneurial aspect of their role, where they strive to position communication as a valuable asset that faculties can benefit from. The underlying structure conveyed by this metaphor emphasizes the role of communication professionals in marketing, persuading, and promoting communication to various stakeholders within HEIs.

The metaphor of the salesman does not directly align with previous researcher-constructed metaphors. It shares some affinities with the "service provider" [Fischer & Schmid-Petri, 2023] and "brokers" [Volk et al., 2023]. However, the salesman metaphor complements the portrayal of the communication department as an internal communication agency, which is consistent with our conceptualization of communication professionals as HEPROs [Schneijderberg & Merkator, 2013]. Furthermore, within the framework of organizational science communication [Koivumäki et al., 2021], it underscores that communication professionals often concentrate on internal public(s), endeavoring to persuade and advocate for communicational productions.

When considering the context of the interviewees' accounts and metaphors, it is interesting to note that one informant describes their department as a "buying and selling unit" (interview I16). This interviewee describes his function as having assigned working hours for each faculty, and by employing economic language and concepts, the metaphor of the salesman emphasizes the communication department's role as an internal communication agency, providing services that can be invoiced to the faculties. This portrayal highlights the supportive function of communication within a highly compartmentalized and specialized organizational structure of modern Scandinavian HEIs.

The marketplace-facilitator

Closely intertwined with the metaphor of the salesman is the mentioning of being a "facilitator for a well-functioning marketplace" ("vi tillhandahåller torget") (interview I21). By using this metaphor, the communication professional likens their function to providing the platform or marketplace where various stakeholders within HEIs can interact. Although primarily focused internally within HEIs, the metaphor of the marketplace facilitator also highlights the role of communication professionals in creating an environment where researchers, the public, politicians, and the media can interact and exchange information. This

metaphor underscores the perceived neutrality of the communication function and its focus on enabling communication between different actors rather than actively shaping or influencing the content. The underlying structure of being a market-place facilitator has to do with "working behind the scenes" to arrange communication among diverse stakeholders.

This metaphor shares affinities with the "bridge-builder" and "broker"-metaphors known from previous research [Schwetje et al., 2020; Volk et al., 2023]. However, it clearly downplays the role of the communication function by positioning it as a neutral facilitator, rather than an active participant. The communication professional portrays their role as one of organizing and ensuring the smooth functioning of the marketplace, without directly influencing the content or substance of the communication. In this framework, the communication professional assumes the position of a service or support function within the organization.

Contextualizing this metaphor within the Scandinavian HEI, the economic language stands out as particularly important. The following excerpt, where this metaphor is used, is illustrative:

> "We [the communication department] provide the marketplace. And then you can try to tell the HEIs' staff that "yes, but you who sell fish should not stand in the sun, and you who sell fruit should be able to stand next to the other fruit and vegetables". We secure that the marketplace is swept and clean [laughter]" (interview I21).

The metaphor highlights the communication professional's responsibility for maintaining order and fairness within this marketplace, akin to sweeping and cleaning (cf. interview excerpt above) to ensure a conducive environment. However, it also inadvertently downplays the strategic importance of communication and its potential for driving transformative change within the organization.

The police

The responsibilities of communication departments extend beyond tangible assets and encompass intangible elements such as reputation, brand, logos, and profiles. The communication professionals often describe their role as being "a police" for such intangible elements ("polis"/"politi"). The underlying structure has different dimensions: it is about enforcing specific regulations particularly related to brands and communicational strategies. However, it is also related to a sense of authority and control over certain activities, as well as monitoring and detecting deviations. Finally, by using the police-metaphor, the communication professionals also suggest a duty to protect certain elements of communication. A notable example of this protective role described with the police-metaphor is illustrated by an interviewee who expressed frustration over other employees misusing the university's brand profile and logos, even going as far as inserting their own pictures in the university logo (interview I11). Such instances disrupt the work of communication departments, leading them to adopt a police-like role in safeguarding the integrity of the HEIs' logos, brands, and profiles. In assuming this

responsibility, communication professionals also take on a protective role, which also aligns with metaphors used elsewhere such as "the gatekeeper" [Schwetje et al., 2020].

Moreover, when seen in context, it is noteworthy that this metaphor of the communication professional as "police" is often actively resisted by the informants as per quotes underneath:

> "Yes, but I'm not sitting here being a brand police. Or, I don't have the expertise for that. Of course, you can get caught up in things like fonts… I mean, those kinds of things, at that level" (interview I23)

> "We try not to start as police. Because that doesn't lead to any… It's not what people want [laughs]. Instead, we start with this reasoning that we are… many say they are climate-friendly and sustainable because it's trendy. But we have always been that" (interview I4)

Interviewees often express a reluctance to be perceived solely as brand police, emphasizing the need for someone to take responsibility but not wanting it to be their sole role. As one interviewee aptly states, "No, I definitely don't want to be a brand police, but sometimes someone has to be responsible". The active positioning against the police metaphor can also be attributed to the communicational professions' alignment with more "creative" ideologies, where notions of flexibility, openness, and avoiding strict enforcement align with their core principles and ideals.

The missionary

The interviewees are also using the metaphor of being a "missionary" in order to characterize and illustrate their role ("misjonær"/"missionær"/"missionär"). Central to the missionary metaphor is the recognition that communicational perspectives are crucial but often challenging to implement. It involves "strategically placing communicational questions on the agenda in subtle and implicit ways", as expressed by a communication department leader. Hence, this metaphor implies a commitment to spreading particular ideas of communication principles within the academic environment. Moreover, it has to do with enlightening others about the importance and benefits of communication strategies and techniques. It also implies a strong commitment to a cause or mission related to communication advancement within HEIs, often driven by passion and dedication. Related to this, an intriguing parallel emerges as HEIs sometimes are understood as "a church", as expressed by one interviewee: "working with communication at a university can best be compared to working in a church" (interview I8). In an everyday understanding of the church as a symbol, it embodies notions of authority, community, tradition, salvation, and clear ethical principles. This metaphor underscores the authority and sanctity attributed to academic contexts, rituals, and hierarchies. The metaphor also carries ideological connotations of conservatism and traditionalism, reflecting a perception of HEIs as bastions of established norms and values. This perception aligns with the notion of HEIs as conservative entities resistant to rapid change and innovation. Hence, the metaphor is also helping the communication professionals to position themselves as something else and something new compared to a conservative institution. By

distancing themselves from the traditionalist image associated with HEIs as a church, communication professionals can assert their role as agents of change and within academia. This comparison further emphasizes the missionary role, highlighting the perceived sacredness and importance attributed academic contexts.

Notably, the missionary metaphor manifests in two versions: a weaker and a stronger interpretation. The strong version of the missionary metaphor assigns communication a pivotal role in maintaining and shaping the HEIs' relationship with its surroundings. Some interviewees in leading positions embrace this notion. An illustrative example is presented below:

> If you ask me why I go to work every morning, it is fundamentally because I believe research should make a difference in the world. Research should be applied and utilized. I understand that not everyone agrees with this perspective. However, that is what I live for, that is where I find meaning in my job. It is when research is put into action and used in practice within society. I believe it is necessary not only to conduct research but also to communicate, convey, and utilize it (interview I9).

Here, the communication manager finds the very idea of communication to be the primary purpose of her professional life. The metaphor of being a missionary for communicational perspectives is commonly used to describe the role of communication professionals in HEIs, however with slightly different conceptualizations, such as e.g. "agenda-setters" [Schwetje et al., 2020] and "curators" [Volk et al., 2023].

When seen in context, the use of the missionary metaphor, also points towards seeing communication as crucial but often challenging to implement. It involves "strategically placing communicational questions on the agenda in subtle and implicit ways", as expressed by a communication department leader. This perception reveals how communication professionals internalize the criticism directed at communication practices in HEIs, where the need for communication is acknowledged but must be tactfully integrated without explicitly highlighting it or flagging it as a communication issue. In context, the metaphor also resonates with her core vision of communication in a HEI, which sees it as an institution that actively engages with society, fosters knowledge transfer, and leverages research to address pressing societal challenges. In particular, it ties well in with one of the key drivers behind reforms in Scandinavian HEIs, namely *relevance* [Bleiklie & Michelsen, 2019].

The storyteller

Some informants, particularly those with a background in journalism, journalistic education, or an explicit journalistic identity, employ the metaphor of "the storyteller" to describe their role within HEIs ("storyteller", also in original transcripts). The underlying structure of this storyteller-metaphor has different dimensions. First, it implies a focus on crafting interesting and appealing narratives and stories. Second, it suggests a role in facilitating meaning-making and interpretation by framing information and experiences. Third, the metaphor

may imply a role in shaping institutional identity and representing particular values of the HEI through storytelling practices. As such, when the interviewees are using the storyteller-metaphor, it has affinities with metaphors used by researchers such as "the populariser" [Fischer & Schmid-Petri, 2023] and "influencer" [Claessens, 2014].

When seen in context, the storyteller-metaphor manifests in two distinct versions. The first version revolves around the communication professionals' understanding of media ideology and their ability to identify, modify and "pitch" stories that have potential "news value". Factors such as the simplicity of research, its relevance outside the academic community, and its potential appeal to the media are taken into account. For instance, one informant from a younger HEI in the sample explained that due to the organization's relatively short history, their focus was on gaining visibility in regional and national media. Consequently, the communication department established close collaborations with the university's schools, dedicating one day each week to physically work within a specific school to generate compelling stories. The idea was that:

> We wanted to show that exciting things were happening at our university. We wanted to share the good story, the good research story, the good results with the world. And for that, we needed some professionally trained individuals to do it. So, I would sit decentralized out at the schools and find the good story! And the good journalistic story is not the same as the scientific article (interview I25).

In this context, the communication department acts as an internal "media house", finding, crafting and pitching stories that are attractive to the media. The second version of the storyteller metaphor goes deeper into the role. Here, the emphasis is on the communication professional's role in scanning the media landscape for emerging political debates and overarching trends in society:

> Our new boss has a different approach to communication tasks. She is highly focused on impact. That means we shouldn't sit and wait for a research project to come along, then create a communication package around it and hope that someone finds it interesting. On the contrary, we should look at what's happening in the world and then seize it. And then we should think about what researchers and research projects we have that can contribute to that discussion and provide perspective: *we* should set the agenda. It's not the projects that should dictate it (interview I14).

The vision of the communication department is to create stories based on the HEIs' activities that can tap into and influence these trends and debates. Hence, this "strong" version of the storyteller positions communication professionals in a pivotal role where they possess the agency to craft narratives by selectively incorporating research results that align with their own priorities and objectives.

The overhead-cost

The final metaphor employed to depict the role of communication practitioners is that of the "overhead cost" ("overhead" in original transcript). While this

metaphor was only mentioned in one interview (interview I8), it reveals intriguing perspectives. Drawing upon concepts and attitudes prevalent in the daily workings of the organization's administration, the metaphor compares communication practitioners to indirect costs associated with research, such as infrastructure, insurance, space, library resources, and computing facilities. By adopting the metaphor of "overhead cost", the interviewee positions herself as a form of support, yet also acknowledges her status as an expense outside the core realms of research and education. The overhead cost-metaphor's underlying structure implies a perception of communication professionals as an expense that must be allocated resources within the institution's budget. It also suggests that communication professionals provide essential support services that contribute to the overall functioning of the institution. This metaphor effectively captures the fundamental concept of communication professionals as HEPROs, where communication professionals struggle to find their place in a layered reality situated between the support function and academic staff [Karlsson & Ryttberg, 2016].

In the context of Scandinavian HEIs, the use of "the overhead cost" as a metaphor is particularly interesting. The quote, "I have always been the overhead cost: 'Hi, I am the one you have to pay for although you don't want to do so' [laughs]. We have to earn our trust" (interview I8), vividly captures the resistance faced by communication practices and practitioners within HEIs in Scandinavia. This resistance permeates the way communication professionals perceive themselves and their role, and it illuminates the challenges communication practitioners encounter in asserting their value and legitimacy within an academic context primarily focused on research and education.

Discussion

The use of metaphors by the informants unveils distinct variations in how science communication in HEIs is acknowledged by the very professionals responsible for it. Interestingly, some metaphors downplay the role and significance of communication, while others distinctly exaggerate it. For instance, the salesman and overhead-cost, downplay the role and significance of communication, portraying it as a mere transaction or operational necessity. On the other hand, metaphors such as the missionary and storyteller distinctly exaggerate the importance, emphasizing communication's transformative power. To exemplify the differences, we developed an ideal-type framework (see, Table 1). The framework encapsulates essential attributes shaping perceptions regarding the role of communication in HEIs, focusing on communication as rule-following or transformative [Macnamara, 2019]; creative or controlling; or as either strategic or operational [Falkheimer et al., 2016]. An ideal-type is inherently a simplification that implies "aloofness from detail", aiming to capture essences and differences by analytically accentuating particular elements [Aspalter, 2020, p. 94]. Consequently, the two ideal-types presented here are grounded in empirical evidence but do not constitute exhaustive descriptions of "reality".

On the one hand, communication is depicted as pivotal, transformative, spontaneous, creative, strategic, and a core function. This perspective emphasizes the intrinsic value of communication, highlighting its potential to shape the organization's image, impact stakeholders' perceptions, and drive the success of research and education. This is typically illustrated in the metaphors of the

Table 1. The metaphor's difference in relation to the perceived significance and nature of communication.

	Pivotal (communication as a core function)	*Trivial (communication merely supporting)*
Intrinsic value of communication	Communication is inherently valuable	Little value on its own right
Communication type	Transformative (the strong version of a missionary)	Rule-following (ex. the police)
Creativity and control	Spontaneous and creative (the storyteller)	Controlled (the marketplace-facilitator)
Strategic-operational spectrum	Strategic (the weak version of the missionary)	Operational (the overhead cost)

missionary and the storyteller. These constitute communication as indispensable for the dissemination of research and the overall success of the institution. Conversely, the opposing side of the spectrum presents communication as trivial, rule-following, controlled, and operational. From this viewpoint, communication is seen as a functional support system that assists the core activities of a HEI without possessing inherent value in itself. This perspective emphasizes the pragmatic role of communication, contributing to the attainment of organizational goals and facilitating the smooth functioning of the institution. Metaphors such as "police" and "overhead-cost" are typical examples. By using such metaphors, communication professionals' picture themselves as support functions that serve and help the core activities of the HEI. However, it is worth noting that this perspective somewhat contradicts previous research, which more often highlights the emerging managerial functions of communication professionals [Krücken & Meier, 2006] as well as the professionalization of the role [Vogler & Schäfer, 2020]. Some interviewees even express the belief that researchers could handle communication tasks themselves, rendering dedicated science communication professionals redundant:

> "The university is about research and education, and I am not involved in those activities. I am a support function. I could have been discontinued, and instead we could have had researchers running around communicating. That would have been great!" (Interview, I25).

The coexistence of these contrasting perspectives illustrated in the metaphors-in-use, reveals an inherent tension between recognizing the importance of communication while perceiving it as a subsidiary function serving other goals.

It is crucial to note that the metaphors employed by the informants were elicited directly from their discussions during interviews [Cassell & Lee, 2012]. These metaphors are not only reflective of the individual perspectives of the interviewees but also serve to contrast and, in some cases, complement the prevailing metaphors found in the existing literature. For instance, the "overhead-cost" metaphor, absent in existing research literature, distinctly positions science communicators as prototypical HEPRO [Schneijderberg & Merkator, 2013]. The absence of certain metaphors, specifically those reflecting bureaucratic roles, not only mirrors participants' self-perception but also prompts questions about what organizational science communication is not about. It raises interesting considerations about

which metaphors may be "missing" Liljegren [cf., 2012] and how these omissions could influence perceptions of communication in HEIs. The analysis of metaphors-in-use not only unveils distinct variations in communication professionals' self-understandings, but it also sheds light on the underlying institutional logics that shape these perceptions. As Friedland and Alford [1991] assert, institutional logics permeate through professionals, and metaphors serve as reflective markers, offering insight into the thought worlds of these professionals. This concept is closely intertwined with Bourdieu's notion of habitus, which suggests that individuals accumulate personal experiences that become embodied, guiding their actions and perceptions within their respective fields [Bourdieu, 1977]. For instance, the contrasting metaphors such as "missionary" (weak and strong versions) and "overhead-cost" highlight the divergence in perceptions: the metaphorical portrayal of communication as pivotal and transformative reflects an institutional logic that emphasizes communication's intrinsic value, while the depiction of communication as trivial and operational aligns with an alternative logic that views it merely as a support function. These contrasting perspectives signify a role that is flexible and a professionalization process that tends to be somewhat non-linear.

Conclusion

By focusing on metaphors in our analysis, we gain an "epistemological window" into the perspectives, self-understandings, and sense-making of communication practitioners. While previous research often employs metaphors retrospectively to categorize and label different roles, our study builds on elicited metaphors, which serve as mechanisms through which we can understand and describe communication practices. These metaphors offer a novel and insightful perspective on the everyday and nitty-gritty work of communication practitioners, a perspective that is not easily captured elsewhere in the literature. The findings reveal multiple and simultaneously ongoing professionalization projects. The perspective on metaphors-in-use contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the evolving roles of communication professionals compared to previous characterizations in the literature. The identified tension in depicting communication as both pivotal and trivial highlights the diverse expectations that communication practitioners deal with in their work.

Overall, the analyzed metaphors suggest that communication professionals may serve a dual role — functioning as a supportive service and a transformative force within HEIs. In future, it would be instructive to examine the influence of key variables, including age, gender, and educational background [see e.g., Golombisky, 2015], on perceptions of roles in science communication. Further exploration could, for instance, investigate whether and how the metaphors employed by communication professionals differ across these demographic factors, providing deeper insights into this relatively understudied field.

Appendix A. Sample

Table 2. List of interviewees.

Participant ID	Primary function	Institutional type	Career stage	Main professional background	Gender
I1	Communication manager	Young university	Senior	Journalism	Female
I2	Communication manager	Young university	Senior	Communication and PR	Female
I3	Communication manager	Old university	Senior	Social sciences	Female
I4	Communication manager	Old university	Senior	Journalism, media relations	Female
I5	Communication manager	Specialized	Senior	Science communication	Female
I6	Communication manager	Specialized	Senior	Science	Female
I7	Communication manager	Specialized	Senior	Social Sciences	Mail
I8	Communication manager	Post war	Senior	Media and communications	Female
I9	Communication manager	Post war	Senior	Social Sciences	Female
I10	Design-oriented communicator	Young university	Mid-level	Digital media, marketing	Male
I11	Design-oriented communicator	Young university	Mid-level	Graphic design	Male
I12	Design-oriented communicator	Old university	Mid-level	Media production	Male
I13	Design-oriented communicator	Old university	Senior	Graphic design	Male
I14	Design-oriented communicator	Specialized	Mid-level	Graphic design	Female
I15	Design-oriented communicator	Specialized	Senior	Humanities, leadership	Male
I16	Design-oriented communicator	Post war	Senior	Autodidact	Male
I17	Design-oriented communicator	Post war	Senior	Digital development	Male
I18	External science communicator	Young university	Senior	Journalism and marketing	Female
I19	External science communicator	Young university	Senior	Journalism, communication	Female
I20	External science communicator	Old university	Senior	Journalism	Female
I21	External science communicator	Old university	Senior	Journalism	Female
I22	External science communicator	Old university	Mid-level	Journalism, communication	Mail
I23	External science communicator	Specialized	Senior	Science	Female
I24	External science communicator	Specialized	Senior	Journalism	Male
I25	External science communicator	Post war	Senior	Journalism	Female
I26	External science communicator	Post war	Senior	Journalism	Female

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