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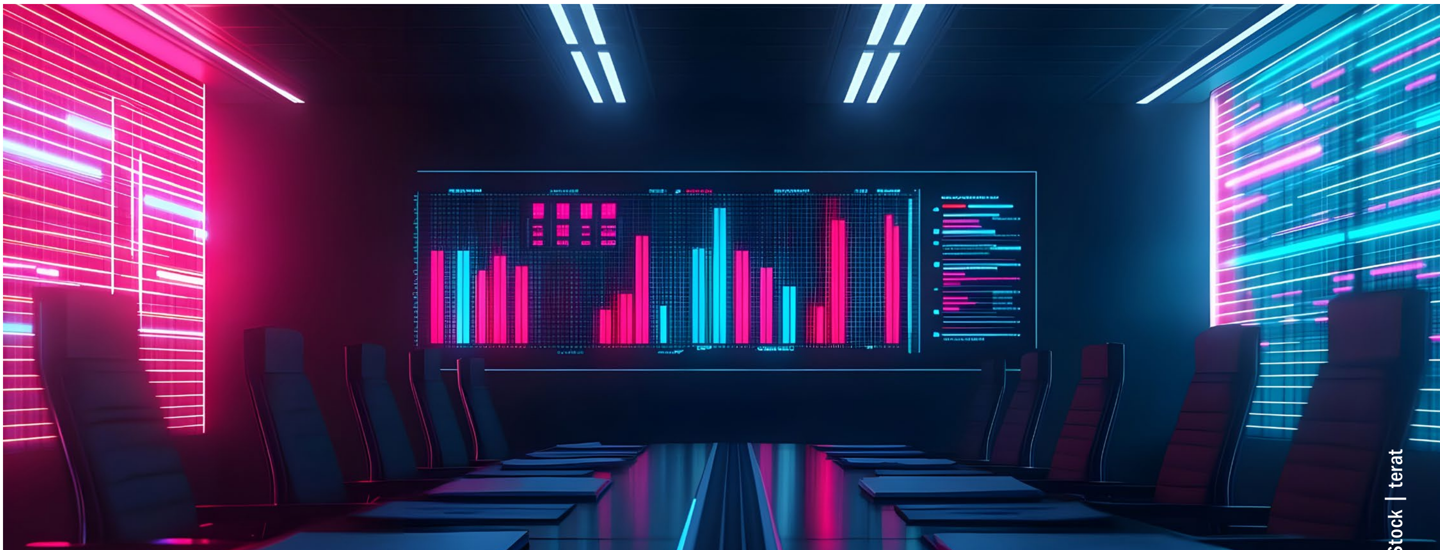

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Evaluation of corporate communication and related practices including government and organizational communication and public relations has a long and problematic history. Based on academic research and practical experience working with the World Health Organization during the COVID-19 pandemic, this article identifies three key barriers to evaluation and offers insights for best practice.

INTRODUCTION

Numerous researchers have noted that public communication in the corporate, government, non-government, and the nonprofit sectors is not evaluated thoroughly, particularly in terms of outcomes and impact (Gregory & White, 2008; Macnamara, 2023; Nothhaft & Stensson, 2019).

Lack of budget and time are often proposed as barriers to evaluation but are rejected by evaluation specialists because there is a range of low-cost and even no-cost methods available along with outsourced services that make little demand on practitioners' time. A quarter of a century ago, Walter Lindenmann wrote that research for evaluation "doesn't have to put you in the poorhouse" and listed numerous examples of cost-efficient evaluation methods and tools (Lindenmann, 2001).

While individual practitioners face localized challenges in undertaking evaluation of communication, extensive research over more than 20 years and case studies reveal three key obstacles that stand in the way of valid best practice evaluation.

1. INFORMATION OVERLOAD OF MODELS AND FRAMEWORKS

The field has fostered a proliferation of models and frameworks, which add to confusion among practitioners. More than 20 models and frameworks for evaluation of public communication have been published, including:

- The *Planning, Implementation, Impact* (PII) model developed by public relations scholars Cutlip, Center and Broom (1985);
- The *Integrated Evaluation Framework* (IEF) of the International Association for Measurement and Evaluation of Communication (AMEC), the de facto international standards body;
- New academic models, such as those proposed by Buhmann and Volk (2022); and
- The *Evaluation Cycle* introduced by the UK Government Communication Service (GCS, 2024).

Many models and frameworks for evaluation of corporate communication, government communication, public relations, and related fields of practice are superfluous because outside of these fields there is a large body of literature on evaluation that can be applied to public communication. This literature and 15 models for the steps and processes of evaluation were summarized and reviewed in an article titled "Revisiting the disciplinary home of evaluation" (Macnamara & Likely, 2017), which argued that widely used models and frameworks in fields such as international development can inform the evaluation of corporate, government, and organizational communication and public relations. However, half a dozen new models and frameworks have been developed and championed since.

While models and frameworks are useful in providing a scaffold for conceptualizing a process, evaluation of public communication is arguably over-theorized and underpracticed. This indicates that progress in implementing evaluation of public communication requires the field to stop reinventing the wheel and focus on "praxis" – changing and improving practice – rather than further academicization. Case studies that demonstrate best practice are one way to achieve what eminent communication scholar Robert Craig calls "practical theory" that goes beyond grand theories and models to improve communication (Craig, 2018).

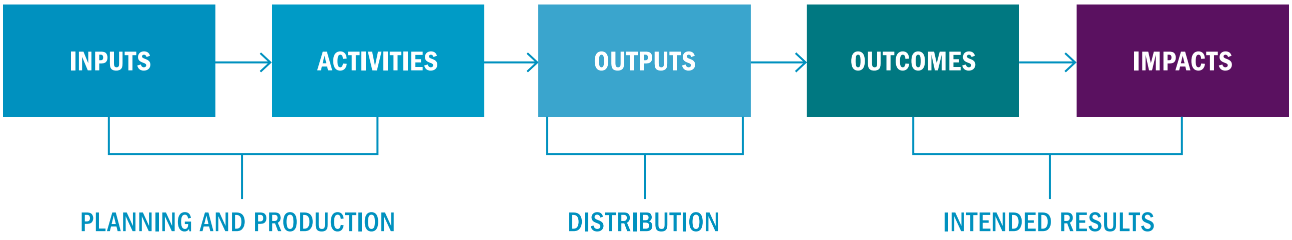
2. THE SEARCH FOR A "SILVER BULLET"

An enduring barrier to rigorous, valid evaluation of public communication is a search for a single method or even a single metric to identify and report the results of communication, referred to as the "myth of a silver bullet" (Gregory & White, 2008; Likely & Watson, 2013; Macnamara, 2018). This pursuit has led to simplistic ratings and scores that purport to reflect the effectiveness of communication despite diverse objectives, channels, and audiences. The field is awash with sentiment scores, impact ratings, and grossly exaggerated vanity metrics (Bartholomew, 2016), most of which relate to media content rather than audience effects and many of which are based on black box algorithms with questionable validity (Macnamara, 2018, 2023). Researchers are unanimous that there is no single method or metric that can reflect the diversity of corporate, government, and organizational communication objectives and results.

3. STOPPING AT OUTPUTS – OUTCOMES AND IMPACT BLIND SPOTS

Perhaps the most debilitating barrier to valid and reliable evaluation of corporate, government, and other public communication is a preoccupation with counting, rating, and reporting outputs – the content that organizations produce and distribute such as media publicity gained through media releases or interviews, videos, and website pages. While outputs are necessary steps in communication, they are only halfway to results as described in classic program logic models that identify key stages as inputs, activities, outputs, outcomes (sometimes referred to as "outtakes" or separated into short-term and longer term), and impact (Kellogg Foundation, 2004).

A classic program logic model



Source: Kellogg Foundation, 2004

The over-focus on outputs is exacerbated by what is referred to as "substitution error," identified as an all-too-common occurrence as early as 1985 (Cutlip & Center, 1985; Grunig, 2008). This occurs when a measure taken at one stage of a program or campaign is claimed to report a downstream or higher-level stage. Research reveals that many practitioners are confused between outputs, outcomes, and impact.

Common examples of substitution error are reporting audience reach and impressions as outcomes of communication.

- **Reach** refers to the potential audience of a channel or platform based on circulation figures, followers, or broadcast ratings.
- **Impressions** are sometimes synonymous with reach but are often amplified by multiplying the claimed audience reach by the number of times messages appear in content.

While reach and impressions are relevant metrics to identify the potential exposure of messages – emphasis on potential exposure – they are not indicators of audience receipt, reaction, or response. All media consumers practice selective attention. People often ignore media and other types of information content, or reject it because of cognitive biases, or forget it even if they engage with it. Radios and TV sets are left on in vacant rooms of homes and the number of followers on social platforms is hardly the number of people paying attention to a post.

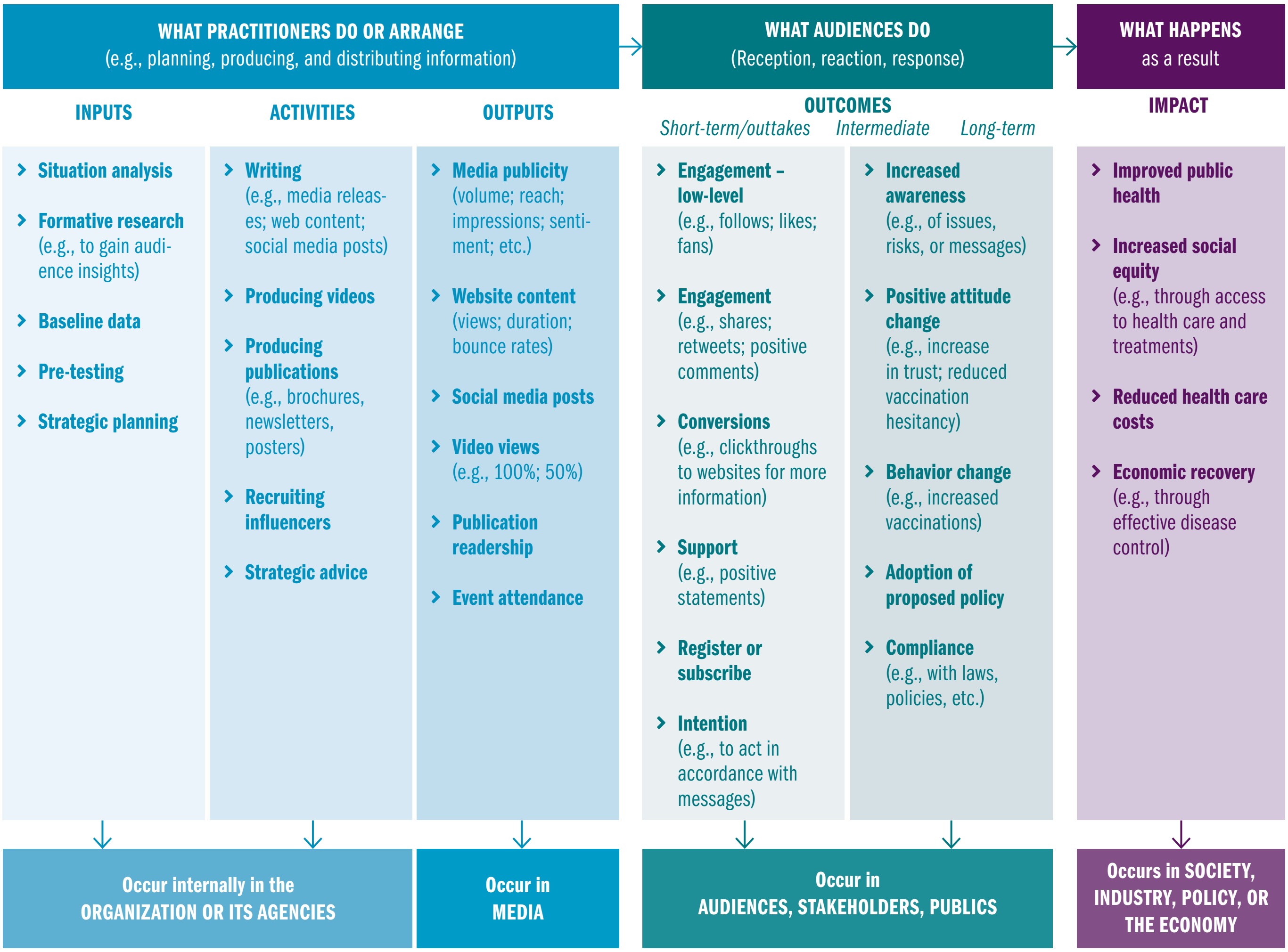
Even if the claimed audience of communication is exposed to messages, it cannot be assumed that exposure changed their awareness, attitudes, or behavior. As stated at many conferences, the number of impressions is not the number of people impressed.

The Dissected Program Logic Model as a practical tool

The figure below expands classic program logic models as a tool to help practitioners correctly identify inputs, activities, outputs, outcomes, and impact. It shows examples including short-term and longer-term outcomes and impacts of strategic communication for corporate as well as other types of organizations and arranges them by stage, who does them, and where they occur. This categorizes media publicity and posts on social media measured as reach or impressions, video views, readership of publications, and attendance at events as outputs – not outcomes. They are what practitioners do or arrange and they appear in communication channels of various types. They are not what audiences do in response to attempts at communication.

The figure clearly shows that outcomes are what audiences do from reception to reaction and response. Low-level outcomes include likes and shares on social media, clickthroughs for more information online, registering or subscribing, and comments that indicate awareness, support, or intention to act. More advanced outcome measures, which are desirable, show increased awareness, changed attitudes or behavior, as well as results such as support for a policy or compliance with laws, regulations, or recommendations. Impact is what happens in a business or policy environment, industry, economy, or society wholly or partially as a result of communication outcomes achieved.

Dissected Program Logic Model for planning and evaluating strategic communication



Source: Macnamara, 2025

A LEARNING CASE STUDY

An early version of the *Dissected Program Logic Model* for planning and evaluating communication shown in the figure above – so named because it dissects or separates inputs, activities, and outputs from outcomes and impact – was a key tool used for conducting evaluation of World Health Organization (WHO) communication during the COVID-19 pandemic from early 2020 to 2023. The WHO needed to ensure that its communication was effective in achieving outcomes and impact such as mask wearing, physical distancing, and vaccination. It is not an exaggeration to say that during the peak of the pandemic, effective WHO communication was a matter of life or death for many.

Feedback from WHO communication and technical staff in its six region offices revealed that knowledge of evaluation was basic, the focus was predominantly on measuring media outputs; media metrics such as impressions were commonly perceived and reported as outcomes (i.e., substitution error); and budget was limited because priority had to be given to WHO's health programs.

The diversity of the WHO's public communication quickly disavowed the myth that a single metric could report communication effectiveness. The WHO was expected to communicate at a technical level with scientists and health professionals worldwide, at a policy level with national governments, and with the general public. Furthermore, the WHO needed to report to and maintain the support of its partner organizations and funders on which it depends for its budget; with frontline healthcare workers whose role was vital; and with its employees worldwide. In addition, the WHO engaged the support of influencers ranging from sports stars to Lady Gaga to mediate its messages credibly and influentially to various community sectors. Clearly, evaluation of such communication activities required multiple methods ranging from media monitoring, media content analysis of traditional and social media, and website statistics tracked with Google Analytics to key stakeholder interviews and public surveys. Demonstrating ways of doing evaluation on a limited budget, the WHO negotiated with the Edelman Trust Barometer to include a question on trust in institutions such as the WHO and the UN, gaining global reputation and trust data at no cost.

Other key findings in the case study reported in detail in Macnamara (2025) included:

- **The need to increase knowledge of evaluation and related research methods,** which led to implementation of a series of online workshops for WHO staff worldwide and production of a customized manual;
- **A lack of applying insights from evaluation to inform future strategy.** The above requirement to "learn about evaluation" and the opportunity to "learn from evaluation" led to refocusing evaluation as measurement, evaluation, and learning (MEL), socialized through the WHO *MEL Manual*, training workshops, and videos;
- **The need to integrate and synthesize quantitative and qualitative data** from multiple sources and methods including traditional media, social media, the WHO website, internal and external surveys, stakeholder interviews, and third-party reports, which led to the production of dashboards reporting 7–9 key metrics each month; and
- **The need to ensure the validity of methods and data used,** which led to rejection of "fake impact scores" provided by some service providers (Macnamara, 2023).

The WHO evaluation was based on the AMEC *Integrated Evaluation Framework* recognizing this as a standard (i.e., claims of a lack of standards no longer apply). It recognized the need to report multiple relevant and valid metrics rather than peddle spurious algorithmic scores and vanity metrics. Third, it looked beyond outputs to strenuously seek to identify outcomes and impact – the ultimate and essential goals of corporate, government, organizational, and other forms of public communication.

TOWARDS EVALUATION REFORM IN COMMUNICATION

The *Dissected Program Logic Mode*l for planning and evaluating strategic communication has subsequently been published in guides distributed by AMEC along with its *Integrated Evaluation Framework* that is presented as an industry standard and other tools (see www.amecorg.com and https://amecorg.com/amecframework). These remove reasons and excuses for lack of evaluation and overcome key common barriers to evaluation of communication.

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MORE INFORMATION

An extended discussion of the learning case study can be found in Macnamara, 2025, as listed above.

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