

CORPORATE COMMUNICATION IN SOUTH AFRICA: BETWEEN GOVERNANCE, TRUST, AND TRANSFORMATION

CONTRIBUTORS: CORNE MEINTJES, UNIVERSITY OF JOHANNESBURG; THABISILE PHUMO, SIBANYE-STILLWATER

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Corporate communication in South Africa has evolved within a uniquely complex sociopolitical environment. Shaped by the country's post-apartheid transformation, diverse stakeholder landscape, and strong governance frameworks, corporate communication must navigate a pluralistic society in which transformation, equity, and social justice are central to both stakeholder relationships and organizational legitimacy. Drawing on the expertise of Corne Meintjes (University of Johannesburg) and Thabisile Phumo (Sibanye-Stillwater), this article provides an overview of current practices, challenges, and future directions in South African corporate communication, integrating both academic and practical experience.

THE CURRENT STATE OF CORPORATE COMMUNICATION

South Africa at a glance

- › **Political system:** Constitutional multiparty democracy, with three spheres – local, provincial, and national government. National and provincial elections are held every five years.
- › **Capitals:** Pretoria (administrative), Cape Town (legislative), Bloemfontein (judicial). The Constitutional Court is in Johannesburg.
- › **Population:** Approx. 63 million, spanning 1.22 million km².
- › **Languages:** 12 official languages, including English, Afrikaans, Zulu, and South African Sign Language, all of which are granted equal status.
- › **Religious beliefs:** Christianity (85%), Traditional African religion (8%), Atheism (3%), Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Bahaism, Judaism, Agnosticism, and Satanism.
- › **Key industries:** Mining, transport, energy, manufacturing, tourism, and agriculture.

Corporate communication in South Africa is evolving under the combined pressures of governance expectations, stakeholder demands, and the rapid rise of digital platforms. An increased focus on authentic corporate citizenship and relational transparency has emerged as a defining trend, reflecting the ongoing importance of stakeholder trust amid historical challenges to institutional credibility. “Over the past two decades, corporate communication in South Africa has undergone a marked evolution, shifting from a predominantly technical and publicity-driven function to one increasingly defined by strategic and managerial imperatives,” explains Dr. Corne Meintjes, Associate Professor of Strategic Communication at the University of Johannesburg. “Research into local practice indicates that professionals now primarily identify their roles as strategic, with managerial responsibilities preceding technical tasks.”

This evolution mirrors global trends, yet South Africa’s sociopolitical and economic realities give it a distinctive character. Thabisile Phumo, Executive Vice President and Head of Stakeholder Relations and Social Sustainability at Sibanye-Stillwater, emphasizes the importance of stakeholder trust: “Stakeholders expect companies to take an integrated ecosystem approach to business, taking into account the contribution of natural resources and people to business input and growth and the responsibility to secure the social license by creating sustainable shared value.”

South African corporate communication is closely tied to governance structures, particularly the *King Reports on Corporate Governance*, which emphasize ethical and effective organizational leadership and stakeholder accountability. Meintjes highlights that these frameworks shape the profession: South African organizations “are increasingly expected to integrate communication into their governance structures, with communication professionals advising at the board level on stakeholder engagement, integrated reporting, and reputational sustainability.”

Yet strategic recognition at the executive level remains uneven. A 2024 report by the Public Relations and Communications Association (PRCA) Africa and the African Public Relations Association (APRA) notes that while some progress has been made, those reporting that the role of PR and communications is not appreciated at board level dropped from 45% to 40%. Significant challenges remain for South African corporate communication professionals seeking greater influence at the executive level.

The King Reports on Corporate Governance

- A series of influential governance codes and guidelines for South African organizations, developed by the Institute of Directors in Southern Africa and the King Committee.
- Provide standards for ethical and accountable organizational leadership.
- Require board-level oversight of stakeholder engagement and integrated reporting.
- Encourage communication as a strategic advisory function.

Media and information challenge

The South African media landscape is formalized and regulated but increasingly challenged by digital disruption. Phumo notes: “We have an experienced and wide network of media catering for general and niche segments of the population. We have a credible code of ethics and conduct and a media ombudsman to ensure checks and balances for any unfair reporting.”

At the same time, mirroring global trends, social media has “by far overtaken traditional media, with print media being the most affected by the unprecedented growth of social media. This also democratizes information, where companies need to work harder to position themselves as sources of credible corporate information – we’re also not immune to the challenges of misinformation and disinformation that is a global phenomenon.” Meintjes further underlines that this shift toward digital and social media “has introduced a complex array of opportunities and risks,” including “the emergence of computational propaganda, threats to online reputation, and the demands of managing political and organizational brands in digital spaces.” As the industry is still developing advanced digital communication competencies, managing such a rapidly changing digital environment poses a particular challenge.

At the same time, reaching audiences through digital channels is not straightforward. South Africa faces a significant digital divide, with a large portion of the population partially or fully excluded from online communication

channels. This means that even well-designed digital campaigns must be complemented by traditional media and offline engagement strategies to ensure all stakeholders can access critical information. As Meintjes notes, “effective communication strategies must continue to operate across both digital and traditional platforms.”

Challenges in stakeholder engagement

Trust remains a persistent concern for South African organizations. As Meintjes notes, corporate scandals – both local and global – have eroded stakeholder confidence, requiring organizations to work significantly harder to demonstrate authentic corporate citizenship through transparency and credible engagement. This challenge is compounded by the complexity of South Africa’s multi-stakeholder environment. Engagement often takes place across diverse groups with differing expectations and historical contexts. Meintjes highlights that approaches conducted in bad faith – described as “coercive, non-consultative, or reactionary” – frequently fail, particularly in high-conflict settings such as labor relations. In such cases, poor engagement can lead to prolonged strikes and entrenched distrust. By contrast, more constructive approaches, what she terms “purposeful, learning-oriented dialogue that is receptive, reciprocal, and values all stakeholders’ social roles,” can help transform conflict into collaboration.

A third structural challenge lies in the limited development of measurement and evaluation practices. Meintjes observes that “the measurement and evaluation of communication impact remain underdeveloped,” with evidence from the Global Future of PR study showing that it “is still low on the agenda of many South African practitioners.” This, she argues, undermines the profession’s ability to demonstrate both social value and strategic impact to organizational leaders, reinforcing the broader difficulty of securing influence at executive level.

Within this broader context, Phumo points out that the most acute reputational risks vary by industry, but that corporate governance, environmental concerns, and human rights issues “tend to top the list,” illustrating how closely stakeholder trust is tied to questions of accountability and responsible business conduct. According to Meintjes, recent studies indicate that South African organizations face major crises including labor protests, service delivery disruptions,

and reputational scandals. The country also faces ongoing risks such as kidnap, extortion, active assailant events, maritime piracy, terrorism, and political violence, which continue to influence crisis management needs in the region.

PROFESSIONALISATION, EDUCATION, AND SKILLS

Preparing practitioners for these challenges requires training that reflects both global standards and South Africa’s specific context. As Meintjes explains, “communication and public relations education in South Africa is supported by a well-established regulatory framework,” with institutions such as the Public Relations Institute of Southern Africa (PRISA) accrediting qualifications over several decades. At the University of Johannesburg, this is reflected in a “comprehensive academic pathway” that extends from undergraduate to doctoral level in strategic communication.

Governance and stakeholder thinking are integral components of the curriculum. Students develop integrated communication plans, prepare governance reports for mock board presentations, and facilitate stakeholder feedback sessions. As Meintjes puts it, “such projects bridge theory and practice, ensuring that governance principles are not merely taught as abstract concepts but experienced as core competencies relevant to the profession.”

At the same time, she points to persistent gaps. Research competencies, critical thinking, reflective practice, and the integration of measurement and evaluation frameworks remain unevenly developed. Addressing these shortcomings, she suggests, will require stronger collaboration between academia and industry. Existing initiatives, such as the multi-year partnership between the University of Florida and Tshwane University of Technology, illustrate how closer alignment can support more structured internships, collaborative research, and practice-oriented training. In this model, industry does not merely receive graduates but actively contributes to shaping the skills pipeline.

Towards professional success

Beyond formal education, Meintjes emphasizes that professional success in South Africa depends on a distinctive

set of competencies. She summarizes this in the triad “map, engage, govern”:

- **Map** stakeholder landscapes thoroughly;
- **Engage** through authentic and responsive relationship management; and
- **Govern** with deep fluency in corporate governance frameworks, especially the *King Reports*.

These competencies are further shaped by the country’s social and cultural realities. Effective practice requires sensitivity to linguistic and cultural diversity across 12 official languages, as well as the ability to facilitate meaningful multi-stakeholder dialogue in contexts marked by historical power imbalances. Meintjes also highlights the importance of understanding transformation imperatives such as Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment (B-BBEE), South Africa’s program to promote economic inclusion of historically disadvantaged groups, which shapes both internal and external communication environments. At the same time, South African professionals require experience in crisis communication within volatile sociopolitical contexts, as well as in community engagement in under-resourced environments.

For scholars, the ability to conduct contextually relevant research, moving beyond the mere application of Northern or Western theoretical frameworks, is increasingly essential. There is a growing expectation that African communication scholars contribute original theoretical perspectives grounded in the African experience. For example, scholars might consider developing an Ubuntu-inspired stakeholder engagement model that foregrounds interconnectedness and communal values as guiding principles for communication strategy, or articulating frameworks for relational accountability that better reflect African social dynamics.

LOOKING AHEAD: AI, TRUST, AND SOCIAL IMPACT

Looking ahead, both experts recognize the influence of global trends, such as AI and social media, but emphasize their local implications.

From a scholarly perspective, Meintjes identifies several research themes that are likely to gain prominence. Research will increasingly focus on the social impact and

societal value of communication, authentic stakeholder engagement, and the transition from performative to substantive dialogue, particularly in contexts such as labor relations, community engagement, and governance. Digital environments and brand trust are also critical, given rising threats from computational propaganda and digital manipulation. Additionally, the intersection of communication, transformation, and social justice represents a uniquely South African priority, asking how communication can contribute to building a more equitable society rather than reinforcing existing power structures.

Key do’s and don’ts for corporate communication

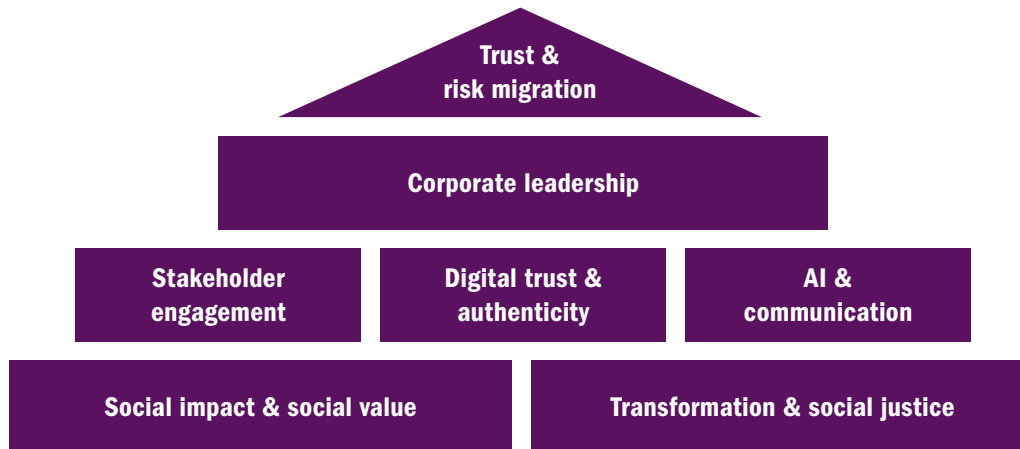
Do’s

- Embrace genuine, dialogic stakeholder engagement.
- Align communication with corporate governance principles.
- Invest in measurement and evaluation to demonstrate impact.
- Build trust through credible and consistent relationships.
- Integrate global best practices with local expertise.

Don’ts

- Don’t apply communication theories without adapting them to the South African context.
- Don’t confuse information dissemination with meaningful engagement.
- Don’t underestimate the sociopolitical environment.
- Don’t rely on superficial localization (e.g., translation without context).
- Don’t neglect ethical responsibility in a highly unequal society.

Key trends driving the next era of corporate communication in South Africa



Source: Corne Meintjes & Thabisile Phumo

From a professional practice perspective, Phumo highlights how these trends translate into organizational priorities. “AI will play a much bigger role as an enabler in corporate communication, and leaders need to understand and harness it to effectively drive their own narratives,” she

says. Beyond technology, organizations are expected to provide leadership on internal and external issues affecting their stakeholders, while recognizing that in an era of constant flux, trust remains the key risk mitigation factor for corporate sustainability.

CONTRIBUTORS



DR. CORNE MEINTJES is Associate Professor of Strategic Communication and Director of the Centre for Academic Technologies at the University of Johannesburg, South Africa. Her main research areas are dialogic communication, brand authenticity, and stakeholder engagement. She holds a National Research Foundation (NRF) rating, benchmarking South African researchers against global standards. [linkedin.com/in/cornemeintjes](https://www.linkedin.com/in/cornemeintjes)



THABISILE PHUMO is Executive Vice President and Head of Stakeholder Relations and Social Sustainability at Sibanye-Stillwater, Johannesburg, South Africa. She is past President of the Public Relations Institute of Southern Africa, serves on the Executive Committee of the World Communication Forum Association, and is co-editor of *Strategic Communication: South African Perspectives*. [linkedin.com/in/thabisile-phumo-apr-fprisa-89863236](https://www.linkedin.com/in/thabisile-phumo-apr-fprisa-89863236)

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

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