

CORPORATE COMMUNICATION REVIEW

RESEARCH AND INSIGHTS FOR COMMUNICATION LEADERS

CORPORATE POSITIONING

The impact of strategic communication and calls to action in a polarized world

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In this second issue, we explore corporate positioning in times of geopolitical turmoil, when organizations must carefully consider how and when to make their voices heard. We take a closer look at questions such as: What exactly is corporate advocacy, and how does it differ from corporate activism? When should a CEO weigh in on political or social issues? To what extent can calls to action, or the ancient Hellenistic philosophy of Stoicism, be helpful in guiding communication strategies?

We hope these perspectives provide insights to help communication leaders navigate the challenges ahead.

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Dr. Michelle Wloka
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HUMAN CONNECTION IN A DIGITAL WORKPLACE

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The digital transformation in the workplace has shifted many employee and management interactions from face-to-face to online channels. While this shift offers greater convenience, it may also reduce satisfaction with internal communication. This article presents findings from a study examining how digital and face-to-face interactions affect employees' communication satisfaction and whether attitudes toward digital technology influence this relationship.

A DIGITAL AGE DILEMMA

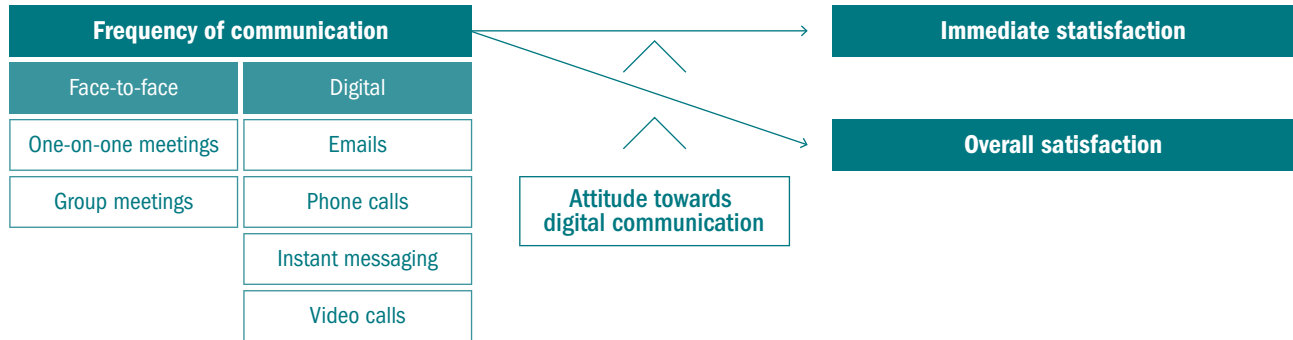
Digitalization has transformed the way employees communicate. Email, instant messaging, and video conferencing platforms dominate daily work routines. They offer speed, flexibility, and convenience. They also dismantle traditional barriers between departments, fostering transparency and accountability. The Covid-19 pandemic accelerated this shift, embedding digital communication into everyday work. Even after offices reopened, hybrid work – where employees split their time between home and the office – became prevalent. Flexible work arrangements have now become a key factor in employee retention and satisfaction (Smite et al., 2023). But a paradox has emerged: While digital tools make work faster and more flexible, they often leave employees feeling less connected. This contradiction lies at the

***The Internal Communication Paradox:
Digital channels offer convenience and efficiency, yet face-to-face interactions provide greater satisfaction.***

core of what we call the “Internal Communication Paradox”.

Digital tools enhance efficiency, accessibility, and connectivity, but they also introduce challenges such as information overload, increased interruptions, and heightened expectations of constant availability (ten Brummelhuis et al., 2021). This paradox extends beyond stress to include tensions between autonomy and surveillance, collaboration and overload, and engagement and exhaustion (Kokshagina & Schneider, 2023). The loss of casual interactions that occur naturally in shared workspaces can lead remote workers to feel isolated, weakening collaboration. The digital transformation therefore impacts various facets of the organization, including employee roles, leadership dynamics, and the organizational culture.

Analyzed variables associated with satisfaction with internal communication



Source: Tkalcac Verčič & Verčič, 2025

Studying communication in real time

To better understand this paradox, we conducted a diary study with 104 employees of a large telecommunications company in Slovenia. Over five consecutive workdays, participants logged every communication activity, from one-on-one conversations to instant messages. After each interaction, they rated their level of satisfaction. This approach provided real-time insights into communication practices, avoiding the recall bias common in surveys. To measure satisfaction, we applied established internal communication tools and recent conceptualizations of communication acceptance, building on emerging literature that shows how communication infrastructure, digital platforms, and hybrid meeting arrangements are reshaping organizational life (Ellis et al., 2022; Zeffass, Buhmann, Tench, Verčič, & Moreno, 2022).

Methodology in glance

Key aspects of the study are:

- **Sample:** 104 employees, telecommunications company (Slovenia)
- **Design:** Five-day diary study recording all communication interactions
- **Channels studied:** one-on-one meetings, group meetings, email, instant messaging, phone calls, video calls
- **Measures:** immediate satisfaction (7-point scale);

overall satisfaction (Internal Communication Satisfaction Questionnaire); digital attitudes (Digital Communication Acceptance Scale)

- **Frameworks applied:** research on hybrid meetings, CommTech, and remote communication

The study is embedded within a larger research initiative examining the impact of digitalization on internal communication, funded by the Croatian Science Foundation and the Slovenian Research and Innovation Agency.

KEY FINDINGS: FACE-TO-FACE STILL WINS

The study confirmed the central argument of the Internal Communication Paradox: Employees rely on digital tools for efficiency but draw the greatest satisfaction from face-to-face encounters.

- **One-on-one, in-person conversations** were the strongest predictor of communication satisfaction. These interactions provide trust, immediacy, and emotional richness that digital tools cannot replicate.
- **In-person group meetings** also contributed positively but less consistently, perhaps reflecting differences in meeting quality.
- **Emails, instant messages,** and phone calls were the most frequently used channels, yet their frequency had little to no impact on satisfaction. They deliver information efficiently, but rarely foster engagement.
- **Video calls** were satisfying in individual cases, but their frequency did not predict higher overall satisfaction.

Even employees with positive attitudes toward digital communication did not report greater satisfaction from using digital channels. This echoes findings that remote communication may maintain efficiency but does not automatically translate into higher engagement or well-being (Dhanesh & Picherit-Duthler, 2021).

THE PARADOX IN PRACTICE

The pandemic accelerated the adoption of remote work and digital communication tools, offering a window of opportunity for both employees and employers to explore new ways of working. Video conferencing platforms like Google Meet, Teams, and Zoom demonstrated that many tasks could be effectively managed from home, leading to spread enthusiasm for hybrid and remote work models. Many organizations seized on the opportunity to reduce physical office space and cut costs associated with real estate and in-person infrastructure. While this initially seemed like a win-win situation for both employers and employees, our study supports the idea that long-term reliance on digital communication alone may have unintended consequences, particularly regarding organizational commitment and employee engagement. Organizations, therefore, need to strike a new balance between digital and live communication that meets the need for one-on-one interactions.

While digital tools such as email, instant messaging, and video calls have become indispensable for day-to-day operations, organizations should not over rely on them to drive communication satisfaction. Digital channels are undoubtedly efficient, but they can lack the emotional richness and immediacy required for more complex or relational exchanges. This calls for a more intentional approach to integrating both digital and in-person interactions to maximize satisfaction and engagement. For example, routine tasks and updates may be efficiently handled through digital means, but discussions requiring deeper emotional engagement or complex decision-making should be reserved for in-person interactions or high-quality video meetings.

While technology can enhance efficiency, it cannot fully replace the human need for direct, personal contact. Simply increasing the use of digital tools will not lead to higher levels of satisfaction; instead, organizations should focus on creating environments where digital and face-to-face communication complement each other. Hybrid work

models should be designed such that employees have regular opportunities to meet in person, collaborate, and build relationships. Occasional social gatherings or team-building events are not enough; regular, face-to-face communication is needed that can sustain interpersonal connections. As hybrid work becomes the norm, organizations must consciously create opportunities for meaningful, in-person interaction, ensuring that technology enhances rather than replaces the human element in place communication.

Managing the Internal Communication Paradox

To navigate this paradox, organizations must:

- Rebalance digital and face-to-face communication;
- Create intentional opportunities for personal interaction;
- Focus on the quality of exchanges, not just their volume; and
- Train leaders to prioritize genuine conversations with their teams.

DESIGNING COMMUNICATION FOR CONNECTION

The Internal Communication Paradox highlights a critical organizational challenge. Leaders often invest heavily in digital platforms, believing they will improve communication. Yet, if face-to-face conversations are neglected, employees may feel increasingly disconnected despite being digitally “connected” all day long. This challenge resonates with recent reviews of internal communication research showing that while digitalization dominates the field, the human and relational aspects of communication remain central to employee motivation and organizational culture (Yue et al., 2025).

The paradox is not a call to abandon digital communication. On the contrary, digital tools remain indispensable for modern organizations. But the study shows that efficiency without connection is not enough. To thrive in the digital workplace, organizations must recognize that satisfaction comes from being seen and heard. This requires balancing high-tech solutions with high-touch interactions.

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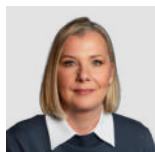
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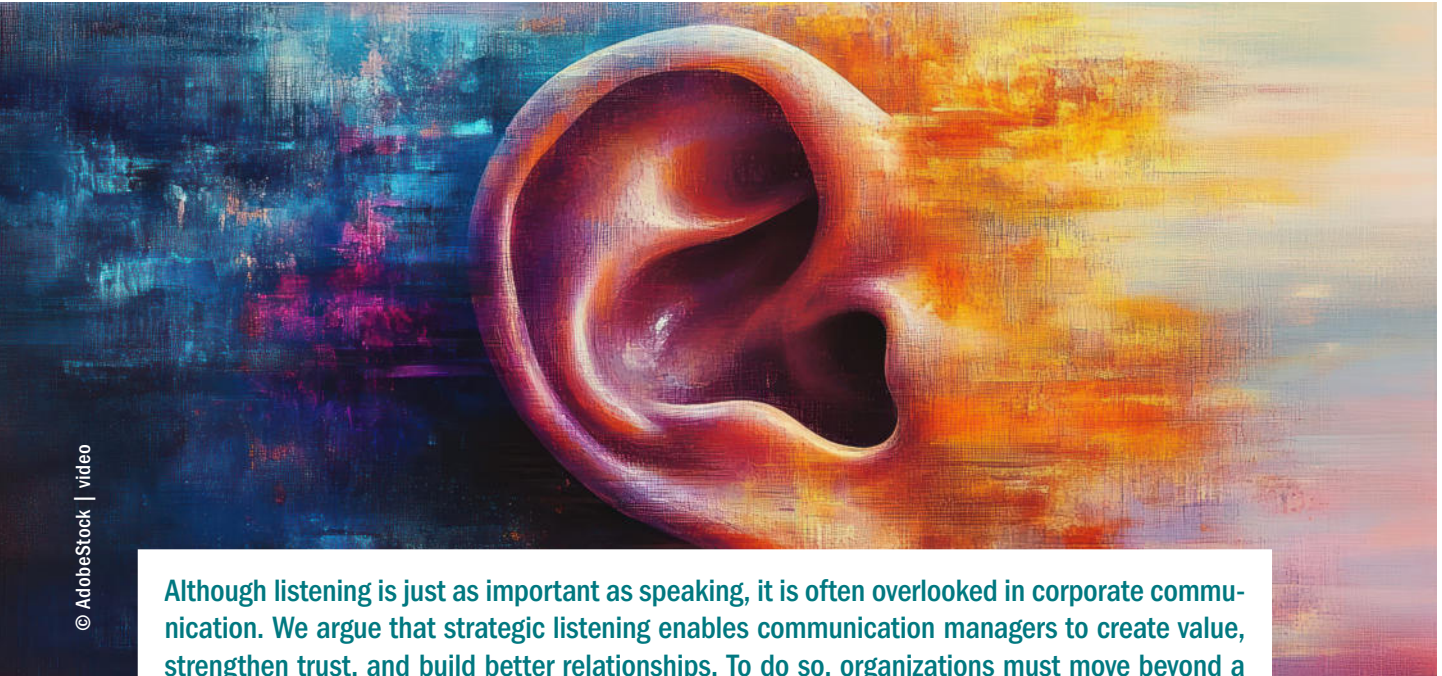
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MORE INFORMATION

A detailed description of this study is available in Tkalac Verčič & Verčič, 2025, as listed above.

STRATEGIC LISTENING – A BLIND SPOT OF CORPORATE COMMUNICATION

AUTHORS: MATS HEIDE & ANETTE SVINGSTEDT, LUND UNIVERSITY



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Although listening is just as important as speaking, it is often overlooked in corporate communication. We argue that strategic listening enables communication managers to create value, strengthen trust, and build better relationships. To do so, organizations must move beyond a sender-focused mindset and adopt a service logic that prioritizes understanding others. In this article, we introduce the Framework of Strategic Listening (FSL), a practical tool that helps communication managers incorporate listening into their strategies to make corporate communication more effective and relationship-driven.

LISTENING IN A SPEAKING WORLD

It is rather peculiar that those who are experts in communication mainly focus on only one part, namely telling/informing/distributing/sending messages. However, communication is a matter of both telling (send) and listening (receive). So even if communication professionals value listening, they rarely make it a priority (Neill & Bowen, 2021). And most of us are guilty of this, whether in private or professional settings – we prefer to talk and inform others rather than listen. For example, think about what often happens during a dinner party: Individuals either talk and share their opinions or experiences or wait for their turn to talk. The New York-based author Fran Lebowitz (1981) ascertains: “The opposite of talking isn’t listening. The opposite

of talking is waiting.” In strategic communication research, it is well established that organizations seem to ignore the value of listening by instead focusing on broadcasting and sending out information to stakeholders. Below are some figures that clearly confirms the low interest in listening:

- 80% of organizational communication consists of speaking and broadcasting information (Macnamara, 2022).
- Managers use 90% of their workday to instruct and inform with only little effect (Elvnäs, 2017).

Hence, there is a sender-focused approach among both organizations and managers, mainly aiming to deliver messages. Instead of genuinely listening to what stakeholders

need or are concerned about, organizations and managers too often concentrate on convincing people that their own views are correct.

We have identified a “Listening Paradox”, which means that it is easy to understand the value of listening more and listening better, yet it is difficult to put it into practice (Heide & Svingstedt, 2024). Why is that the case and how can an organization become a listening organization? Strategic listening is a blind spot of corporate communication, and we invite communication managers – the true communication experts of organizations – to develop organizational listening to achieve higher internal and external trust, better return, more learning, stronger relationships, and many other benefits for the organizations. In this article, we present the Framework of Strategic Listening (FSL) that can help organizations, and especially communication managers, to strive for better and more effective listening.

THE BENEFITS OF STRATEGIC LISTENING

What is listening?

Listening is more than simply hearing. It requires attention, intention, and responsiveness, and it involves understanding the speaker’s perspective. In other words, effective listening means putting yourself in someone else’s shoes and actively trying to grasp what they think, feel, and prioritize.

Researchers have been studying listening for over a century. Early thinkers like the philosopher John Dewey and the business manager Dale Carnegie emphasized its importance in education and relationship-building. Over time, listening has been explored across multiple disciplines, including communication, psychology, philosophy, and sociology, making it a rich and evolving field. One influential concept is active listening, introduced by Rogers and Farson (1957). Active listening encourages being fully present, giving feedback, and building trust. Importantly, research shows that listening is not just a personal skill but also a key factor in strengthening relationships – whether with coworkers, managers, customers, or family members. Good listening can even create a state of togetherness, where the listener and speaker feel connected and understood.

Strategic listening

Despite decades of recognition, listening remains underdeveloped and undervalued in organizational contexts. Most research focuses on tactical aspects, and there is still little attention on listening as a strategic, value-creating activity.

Historically, early studies in the 1950s laid the groundwork. However, broader interest only emerged in the 1980s, when popular management books such as *In Search of Excellence* (Peters & Waterman, 1982) brought attention to the topic. Today, research shows that effective listening can enhance performance, creativity, leadership, and employee well-being. It is also critical for ethical engagement, democratic participation, and citizen-centered services (see info box below).

Yet many organizations still fall short. According to Lewis (2020), strategic listening is not about willingness alone – organizations often fail to recognize its value or lack systems to act on what they hear. Instead, they collect information without engaging meaningfully, a phenomenon known as pseudo-listening (Heide & Svingstedt, 2024). This leads to information graveyards: large amounts of underused data that could otherwise help organizations learn and develop. To address this, we propose a shift in managerial logic, moving from a traditional goods-focused approach to a service logic mindset.

KEY BENEFITS OF STRATEGIC LISTENING

- **Better conversations:** When people feel truly heard, they open up. Genuine listening encourages honesty, deeper dialogue, and stronger connections. It is the foundation of meaningful communication.
- **Trust and confidence grow:** Feeling listened to fosters a sense of appreciation. This not only boosts self-confidence but also strengthens trust between individuals – whether in the workplace or beyond.
- **Greater job satisfaction, lower absenteeism:** In organizations where managers actively listen to their teams, employees report higher job satisfaction and show up more consistently. Listening creates a culture of respect and engagement.

- **Boosted productivity and work quality:** Listening is not just polite – it is powerful. It helps individuals learn from others, expand their perspectives, and improve performance. The result? Higher productivity and better-quality work.
- **Improved sales performance:** Salespeople who listen closely to their customers are more likely to close deals, increase sales volume, and deliver compelling presentations. Listening is a key driver of commercial success.
- **Stronger relationships:** Managers who listen build stronger bonds with their teams. Likewise, customers gravitate toward salespeople who show genuine interest. Listening lays the groundwork for lasting relationships.
- **More likable and trusted:** Good listeners are often seen as caring and trustworthy. Their attentiveness makes others feel valued, enhancing likability and deepening interpersonal trust.

RETHINKING VALUE CREATION: THE LIMITS OF GOODS LOGIC

In many organizations – both public and private – management practices are still heavily influenced by what is known as goods logic. This perspective, rooted in the manufacturing industry, takes a rational view of how people work, interact, and communicate. It assumes that value is something created internally by the organization, embedded in products or services, and then delivered to stakeholders as a finished package. The term clearly reflects the idea that value is pre-defined and tangible – something the organization produces and controls (Grönroos, 2023). Despite, or rather due to, its simplicity, goods logic remains dominant in management thinking (Vargo & Lusch, 2019).

This inside-out approach assumes that the organization knows best what stakeholders need. As a result, there's often little interest in listening to stakeholders' experiences, feelings, or perspectives. Communication becomes a one-way street, focused on delivering information rather than engaging in meaningful dialogue.

In practice, this means organizations often communicate to stakeholders rather than with them. Even though many managers recognize the importance of dialogue, most organizational communication still revolves around broadcasting messages (Heide et al., 2019). The underlying assumption is that communication should serve business goals like profit maximization.

Even when organizations seek stakeholder feedback, it is often with the aim of refining their own messaging – not genuinely understanding others' viewpoints. This approach aligns with the two-way asymmetrical model in public relations, where feedback is used to persuade rather than to learn or adapt (Dozier et al., 1995). As Grunig and Hunt (1984) put it, the goal is to “persuade publics to accept the organization's point of view,” not to engage in true listening.

In short, goods logic and its associated communication practices prioritize control and persuasion over empathy and learning. For organizations looking to build trust and create real value, it may be time to rethink this approach.

From goods to service:

A shift in how organizations create value

Service logic emerged as a response to the long-standing dominance of goods logic in marketing and management. Traditionally, goods logic has treated value as something produced by the organization and delivered to customers. But this view does not fully capture how value is actually experienced – especially in service-based organizations.

Early research highlighted the intangibility of products, as Levitt (1981) pointed out: Customers cannot fully evaluate products until they are used, which emphasizes the importance of understanding customer experience. Building on this, Berry (1983) highlighted the importance of long-term relationships with customers and the key role of employees in maintaining them. Over time, these ideas evolved into service management, emphasizing that marketing is not just the job of marketers, but happens throughout the organization. Everyone contributes, from salespeople to receptionists to managers, making marketing a strategic management issue.

A major turning point came with service-dominant logic (Vargo & Lusch, 2004), which sees value as created in use by stakeholders rather than in production. Value emerges through interaction and experience, not just through the product or service itself. Service logic adopts an outside-in perspective.

Goods vs. service logic

GOODS LOGIC		SERVICE LOGIC	
VALUE			
Produced by organization		Created together with stakeholders	
PERSPECTIVE			
Inside-out		Outside-in	
FOCUS			
Extracting value		Co-creating value	
COMMUNICATION			
Broadcast/top-down		Listen & co-create/bottom-up	
RELATIONSHIPS			
Transactional		Long-term, trust-based	
MINDSET			
Control		Collaboration & learning	

Source: Mats Heide & Anette Svinstedt

Organizations must actively engage with stakeholders – listening to their needs, understanding how they create value, and learn from feedback.

In other words, it is a bottom-up approach, in contrast to traditional top-down management thinking. In this context, communication also changes. It is no longer about broadcasting information, but about co-creating meaning. Communication becomes a way of shaping reality together. From a sensemaking perspective, reality is socially constructed through dialogue (Weick, 1969). This aligns well with the two-way symmetrical model of communication produced by the well-known PR guru James Grunig and his colleague Todd Hunt (1984). According to this model, organizations should genuinely listen to other perspectives and reflect on their own assumptions. With a goods logic, organizations are not interested in changing their assumptions and ideas. They are convinced that they are right, which is a ridiculous presumption. By listening to stakeholders and

customers, the organization provides them with a voice that is important and valuable.

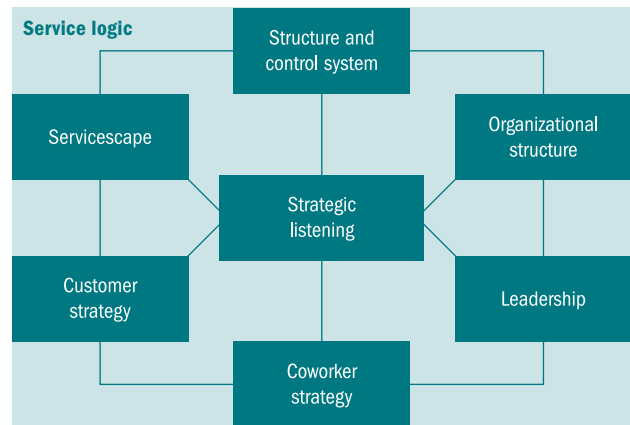
In short, while goods logic focuses on extracting value, service logic is about creating it – together with stakeholders. It is a shift from control to collaboration, from broadcasting to listening, and from delivering to co-creating.

A FRAMEWORK FOR STRATEGIC LISTENING FOR CORPORATE COMMUNICATION

Drawing from this service management research, we define strategic listening as follows: “Strategic listening is a relationship-driven, goal-oriented, and systematized organizational practice that adopts an outside-in perspective to foster value creation, operational success, and long-term sustainability” (Svinstedt & Heide, 2025).

This definition emphasizes that strategic listening is not just a communication tool – it is a mindset that should permeate the entire organization. To help communication managers put this into practice, we have developed the Framework of Strategic Listening (FSL). The framework is based on a simple principle: To take listening seriously as a strategic tool, organizations and their management must adopt a service logic mindset. This mindset forms the foundation of the FSL, as illustrated in the figure below.

The Framework of Strategic Listening (FSL)



Source: Heide & Svinstedt, 2024

We see listening as a way to bring this mindset to life and actually put it into practice. The framework looks at strategic listening from a holistic perspective. It covers six key areas in an organization:

- › How things are structured and governed;
- › The organizational culture;
- › Leadership;
- › How coworkers approach listening;
- › How stakeholders are engaged; and
- › The servicescape (basically, the environment where services are delivered).

The different areas in the model have no hierarchical order. As can be seen in the framework, there are links between the different areas, as they are related to and interdependent on each other. A model is always a simplification of reality, but it can still help us better understand and manage a complex reality.

ADDRESSING THE BLIND SPOT

All of us who have taken academic courses in communication know, by heart, that communication is a matter of speaking (or informing) and listening. And this is actually knowledge that most know without any courses in communication. Still, the vast majority of organizations' and human communication happens in speaking, where they

take an inside-out approach. We tell others what we think, what others can learn, or what actions they should take. But there is less interest in understanding what others think, believe, understand, prioritize, and experience. Listening appears to be a blind spot in corporate communication, despite the potential for numerous positive outcomes, including increased trust and improved relationships, which are key objectives of corporate communication. We believe that it is time for communication managers to finally start facilitating and developing strategic listening in organizations. By focusing more on listening as a strategic value-creating activity, there is greater potential for an increased status of communication professionals.

We believe that the Framework of Strategic Listening (FSL) is a valuable tool to reflect on the communication practices of an organization, and then undertake different activities to gradually improve strategic listening. To become an organization that listens more is complex and takes time. It is therefore important to be realistic and set up smaller sub-goals such as improving internal meetings by letting go of the communication pattern to inform and instead start engaging the meeting participants by listening more.

In the future, we would also like to see more cooperation between different fields and expertise, such as communication, service management, and HR, to better understand the complexity of corporate communication and how it can become even more effective.

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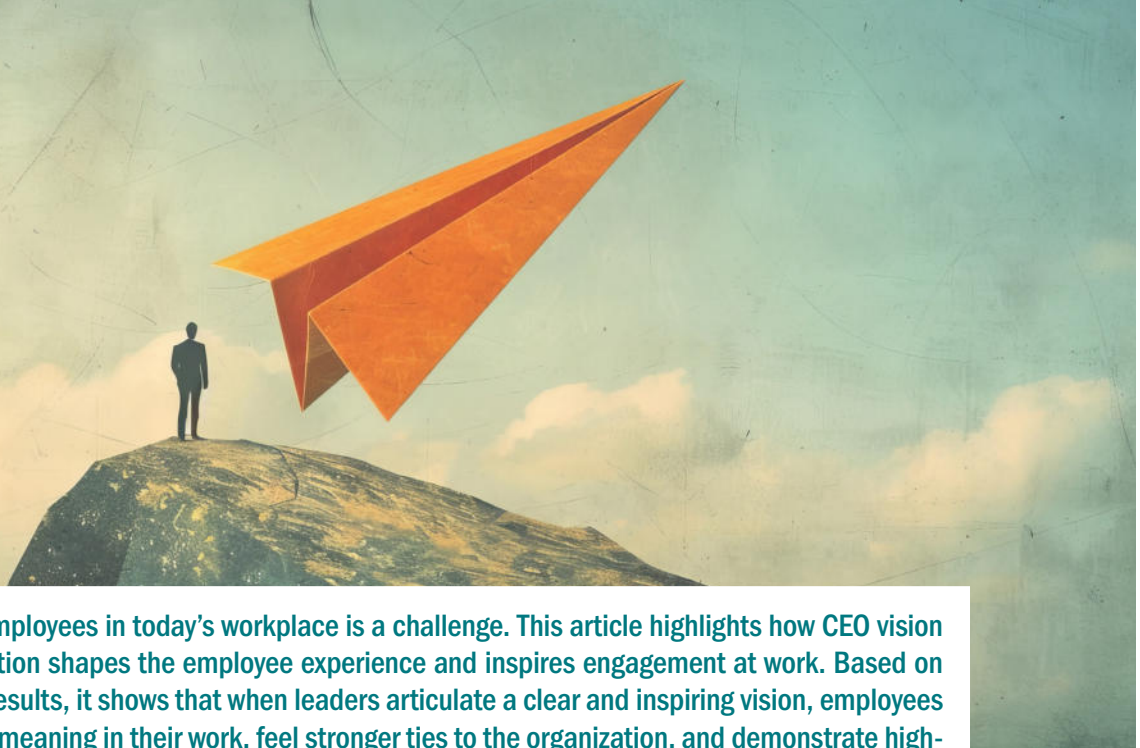
MORE INFORMATION

A detailed description of the framework is available in Heide & Svingstedt, 2024, as listed above.

COMMUNICATING THE BIG PICTURE AT WORK

AUTHOR: YUFAN "SUNNY" QIN, JAMES MADISON UNIVERSITY

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Engaging employees in today's workplace is a challenge. This article highlights how CEO vision communication shapes the employee experience and inspires engagement at work. Based on the survey results, it shows that when leaders articulate a clear and inspiring vision, employees see greater meaning in their work, feel stronger ties to the organization, and demonstrate higher engagement. Practical recommendations are provided to help CEOs and communication professionals translate vision into everyday messages that inspire.

WHY CEO VISION COMMUNICATION MATTERS

Organizations today are dealing with change and challenge – remote and hybrid work models, technological disruption, and shifting employee expectations. In this environment, employees can easily feel disconnected. They may know their immediate tasks, but without a broader context, their work can feel repetitive or insignificant. Employees are often inundated with information about day-to-day operations, shifting strategies, and financial updates, but what many crave most is a sense of purpose (Lleo et al., 2021). They want to know why their work matters and how it contributes to the long-term success of the company.

When CEOs share the big picture, employees see meaning in their work, not just tasks.

This is where vision communication becomes essential. A strong organizational vision communicated directly by the CEO gives employees a map of where the company is headed and why their contributions matter. Rather than feeling like cogs in a machine, employees can see themselves as critical parts of a larger journey (Men et al., 2021).

This is particularly evident in the post-pandemic workplace. With hybrid and remote models, employees are dispersed across geographies and time zones. In this environment, employees may struggle to see how their work connects to the organization's future. Intentional vision communication

from CEOs helps close this gap. By reinforcing the big picture, leaders create a sense of connection that transcends physical distance. Employees in different locations and functions can rally around a shared sense of purpose, reducing feelings of isolation and fragmentation.

Moreover, younger generations in the workforce increasingly expect their employers to articulate a meaningful mission (Chillakuri, 2020). Millennials and Gen Z workers often place a high value on purpose-driven work. CEOs who effectively communicate the organization's vision are not only motivating current employees but also positioning the company as an attractive place for future talent.

VISION COMMUNICATION: MORE THAN JUST A SLOGAN

At its core, vision communication is about translating strategy into a way that people can understand. A company's strategic plan may outline revenue targets, market expansion, or technological investments, but employees connect most strongly with narratives that explain why these goals matter. For example, a financial services company may outline a strategy of adopting new digital tools. Without a clear vision communication, employees might view this as just another software upgrade. But if it is framed as part of a larger vision to make financial services more accessible and inclusive, employees can connect their daily efforts with a mission that is meaningful.

Vision is not just a slogan or a line buried in the company's annual report. Vision communication should be far more powerful when it is treated as an ongoing leadership behavior. Effective CEO vision communication means that CEOs:

- Describe the desirable future state of the organization in a way that employees can understand and support;
- Highlight the values that guide organizational decisions and behaviors;
- Show the link between employees' daily work and long-term goals; and
- Reinforce purpose during times of uncertainty, helping employees navigate challenges with confidence.

Vision communication should be treated as an ongoing leadership behavior that shows people why their work matters.

ABOUT THE STUDY

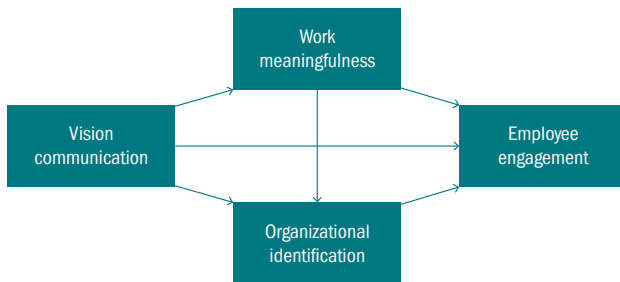
To see how CEO vision communication plays out in the workplace, we conducted an online survey study with a sample of employees in the United States. The goal was to test whether and how a CEO's vision communication influences employee engagement.

We collected data from 580 full-time employees across a wide range of industries, including technology, healthcare, finance, and others. Participants worked at companies of different sizes, from small businesses with fewer than 100 employees to large corporations with more than 500. We also included employees at all levels – non-management staff, supervisors, middle managers, and even some executives (Qin et al., 2023). This mix allowed us to capture a realistic view of how CEO communication is experienced across the organization. The survey asked employees about four main things:

- 1. How they perceive their CEO's ability to communicate a clear vision.** For example, do employees feel their CEO articulates a compelling picture of the future and sets high expectations tied to that vision?
- 2. How meaningful employees find their work.** Do they believe their daily efforts make a difference and contribute to something larger?
- 3. How strongly employees identify with their organization.** Do they feel a sense of pride and belonging – saying “we” instead of “they” when talking about their company?
- 4. How engaged they feel at work.** Are they enthusiastic, committed, and willing to put in extra effort for the organization?

HOW DOES CEO VISION COMMUNICATION INSPIRE EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT?

The conceptual model of the study



All the links are statistically significant and positive, meaning that when one increases, so does the other.

Source: Qin et al., 2023

Vision turns work into something meaningful

The study results showed that when employees perceived strong CEO vision communication, they were more likely to experience a better sense of work meaningfulness. Vision acts like a motivator: it connects everyday work with something bigger. A CEO who clearly communicates the organization's vision helps employees see why their daily responsibilities matter in the larger scheme of things. When leaders explain how an employee's project supports the company's long-term goals, that work feels more significant. Employees who view their work as meaningful are more likely to invest extra energy, show persistence in the face of challenges, feel proud of their contributions, and have lower risk of burnout or disengagement (Wang & Xu, 2019). Without this sense of purpose, employees can become disengaged and simply treat their work as a checklist.

Vision strengthens organizational identification

The results also showed that CEO vision communication inspired the sense of organizational identification – the degree to which employees feel they belong to the company. When CEOs communicate values and direction in ways that resonate with employees, they help employees

align their personal values with the organization's goals. It also strengthens the emotional bond between employees and the organization. Employees see the company as “us” instead of “them.” This identification builds loyalty and encourages employees to go the extra mile because they feel they are part of the organization's successes and challenges (Van Dick et al., 2006).

The sense of work meaningfulness and identification work together to inspire engagement

Drawing from the study results, the two factors – work meaningfulness and organizational identification – served as the underlying mechanisms explaining how CEO vision communication influences employee engagement. When employees find meaning in their work, they perceive their daily tasks as purposeful and aligned with a larger organizational mission. This sense of purpose could foster a deeper identification with the organization. At the same time, this sense of identification can motivate employees to engage deeply in their work. Together, the sense of work meaningfulness and identification create a reinforcing cycle that encourages employees to bring more energy and effort to their jobs.

Sharing vision is not just about picturing the ideal state an organization aims to achieve; it is about explaining why it matters and how employees connect to it.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR CORPORATE COMMUNICATION

Show employees how their work connects to the vision

One of the strong drivers of engagement is when employees see meaning in their daily tasks. Communicators can bridge the gap between high-level vision and everyday work. Create communication campaigns that spotlight employee stories – showing how individual roles, from frontline staff to senior managers, contribute to achieving the vision.

Use visuals and testimonials to reinforce that every job matters. Coach leaders to use “we,” “our,” and “together” in vision messages. Avoid overly formal or detached phrasing. It is also important to acknowledge employees’ contributions, making them feel part of the company’s journey. Employees are not just executing instructions – they are co-owners of the company’s future.

Employees do not engage with numbers or abstract strategy – they connect with stories about why those goals matter. Communication professionals should help CEOs translate complex strategies into relatable language that highlights purpose and human impact.

Vision communication should go beyond the CEO

While CEO communication is critical, mid-level managers and team leaders also play a role in reinforcing vision. Employees often rely on their direct supervisors to translate the CEO’s big picture into team-level relevance. Develop toolkits for managers with talking points, stories, and examples that align with the CEO’s vision. This ensures consistency and prevents gaps in understanding at different levels of the organization. This is especially important for front-line supervisors, who play a critical role in translating the vision from senior leadership to their team members, making it more tangible and connected to employees’ daily work. Corporate communication professionals should also see themselves as strategic partners in shaping vision communication. Their role is to help CEOs deliver the vision clearly, consistently, and meaningfully.

Make vision a continuous conversation

Vision cannot be a one-time speech at the annual meeting or a paragraph in the annual report. It needs to be part of ongoing communication. Employees are more

engaged when they hear the vision consistently across different channels and contexts. Build a communication calendar that integrates vision into quarterly updates, CEO videos, employee newsletters, and internal social platforms. Treat vision as a recurring theme, not a special occasion.

With dispersed teams and remote work, vision must travel across geographies and time zones. Employees who feel physically isolated are less likely to feel connected to the organization. Encourage CEOs to use video messages, virtual town halls, and interactive Q&A sessions where employees can respond directly. Supplement live communication with recorded formats so employees across time zones can engage.

OUTLOOK

Employees now want more than work instructions; they need to understand the “why” behind their work and feel that they are part of something meaningful. CEOs who make vision communication a consistent practice help create this sense of meaningfulness and connection. Vision communication, when done well, creates motivation that no policy or work guidelines can fully replace.

Looking ahead, corporate communicators need to keep adapting vision messages for a workplace that is increasingly digital, diverse, and dispersed. Employees expect more authenticity, more personalization, and more relevance. For leaders, this means shifting from delivering polished speeches to engaging in ongoing, human-centered conversations about the organization’s goal. Ultimately, vision communication is about everyday reinforcement of meaning, identity, and purpose.

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MORE INFORMATION

A detailed description of this study is available in Qin et al., 2023, as listed above.

CORPORATE POSITIONING

TAKING A STANCE IN CORPORATE COMMUNICATION

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Taking a stance on controversial or polarizing sociopolitical topics has become an increasingly difficult aspect of corporate communication. Stakeholders expect companies to position themselves, yet they are increasingly taking different, sometimes polarized stances themselves. Practitioners are grappling with the question of whether, when, and how to communicate a stance. However, what constitutes as “taking a stance” remains unclear in both research and practice. Terms such as corporate advocacy and activism are often used interchangeably, and the boundaries to fields like communicating corporate identity or values are blurred. This article seeks to clarify the phenomenon of taking a stance in corporate communication and highlight what it means for communication practice.

CORPORATE STANCE COMMUNICATION: KEY CONCEPTS AND CHARACTERISTICS

The phenomenon of a company communicating its stance concerns the question of whether, how, and to what extent corporate communication addresses controversial or polarizing sociopolitical topics, and communicates a stance towards them (e.g., Dhanesh, 2025).

➤ **Corporate communication** is understood as goal-oriented and systematically planned, implemented, and controlled communications that are often institutionalized, for example, in the form of a working group or department.

➤ **Controversial or polarizing sociopolitical topics** are defined as those that currently elicit diverse viewpoints and intense, sometimes polarized public debate within society. Present-day examples of such topics include diversity and LGBTQIA+ issues, environmental issues, and topics related to political elections (e.g., Denner et al., 2025).

Corporate stance communication is used here in a broad sense to grasp the phenomenon as comprehensively as possible and encompass related concepts.

It refers to the part of corporate communication that addresses controversial or polarizing sociopolitical topics and develops and communicates a stance on them.

A stance can be understood as an internal viewpoint on a particular topic that is based on (corporate) values, involves an evaluation and self-positioning (e.g. against or in favour of the object of stance), and can be communicated externally (e.g., Du Bois, 2007).

RESEARCHING STANCE COMMUNICATION

To understand and distinguish stance communication, and to identify and characterize the similarities and differences of the concepts used to capture it, a systematic literature review in the form of a scoping review was conducted. The literature search spanned four databases – Communication & Mass Media Complete, OLC Medien- und Kommunikationswissenschaften [media and communication studies], Springer Link, and Web of Science – using search strings related to corporate advocacy and activism and their manifestations such as CEO and brand activism, as well as stance communication in German, with title, abstract, and keyword fields searched where applicable. After applying formal and content-related selection criteria and conducting additional snowball sampling, 73 publications were analyzed thematically.

In public relations research and practice, the question of whether, how, and to what extent a corporation communicates a stance on controversial or polarizing sociopolitical topics is discussed under several concepts. The two most prominent are corporate activism and advocacy, often further specified for the corporate context (e.g., corporate social/political advocacy, CEO activism, brand activism). While these concepts share a common focus on the phenomenon named, they also have differences. To thoroughly analyze these differences and, consequently, the underlying phenomenon, the following dimensions can be used (see also Bojanic, 2023; McKeever et al., 2023; Weber et al., 2023).

- **Goal orientation:** What goals are being pursued? Are they exclusively organization-centered (e.g., reputation,

image) or also externally orientated? If externally orientated, do they tend to support or challenge the existing societal system (e.g., economic or political)?

- **Degree of activity:** Is the communication more active or passive?
- **Tone of voice:** Is the communication more positive or negative (e.g., adversarial or confrontational)?
- **Attributed risk:** Are the risks to the company considered to be high or low?

Dimensions of corporate stance communication

Goal orientation	Degree of activity	Tone of voice	Attributed risk
also externally oriented ↗ challenging system ↘ support system	active	negative	high
organization-centered	passive	positive	low

Source: Helena Stehle & Julia Lührmann

Corporate activism

Corporate activism can be understood as “a company’s willingness to take a stand on social, political, economic, and environmental issues to create societal change by influencing the attitudes and behaviors of actors in its institutional environment” (Eilert & Nappier Cherup, 2020, p. 461).

The concept is often further specified for individuals (e.g., CEO activism), brands (e.g., brand activism), and specific topics (e.g., corporate sociopolitical activism). In terms of goal orientation, corporate activism, as described for example by McKeever et al. (2023), focuses on externally oriented goals that complement organization-centered ones. The emphasis is on achieving broader, longer-lasting change of an existing societal system. This includes, for example, questioning prevailing beliefs and ideas.

According to this concept, an activist actor operates from outside the system in order to exert influence on it.

In terms of the degree of activity, activism is characterized by direct, often energetic communicative actions. These extend beyond traditional, established practices, such as those stemming from lobbying and public affairs, and can include civic engagement, for example, participating in or organizing demonstrations. Regarding the tone of voice, activism can be adversarial and confrontational, and thus negative in expression. A positive tone of voice is also possible when companies, for instance, emphasize their own ideas and present them in a positive light compared to the prevailing ones that are being challenged.

Given these characteristics, corporate activism is typically associated with higher risks for the organization, including time and financial costs and potential erosion of relationship capital with representatives of the existing system.

Corporate advocacy

Corporate advocacy can be defined as “voicing or showing explicit and public support for certain individuals, groups, or ideals and values with the aim of convincing and persuading others to do the same” (Wettstein & Baur, 2016, p. 200).

It can also be further specified, particularly by topic (e.g., corporate political advocacy). As described by, for example, Zhao et al. (2024) and McKeever et al. (2023), corporate advocacy also focuses on externally oriented goals. It aims to maintain existing systems rather than challenge them. It is oriented towards amplification and backing up prevailing ideas. Advocacy does not involve exerting influence on a system from outside. Rather, it operates within an existing system. This may be the case when a corporation aligns with or supports others that seek to advance a specific cause or community (e.g., organizations, policies, or individual actors).

The degree of activity in communication is described as more subtle and less active in corporate advocacy. Regarding the tone of voice, advocacy is not automatically associated with positive tonality, despite its system-supportive nature. The tone of voice can be both positive and negative. However, communication is described as more nuanced and softer than in activism.

Correspondingly, corporate advocacy is generally attributed with fewer costs and risks for the organization than activism.

Corporate stance communication

The analytical focus of the concepts above is primarily on externally oriented goals. However, if one assumes that communicating a stance on controversial or polarizing sociopolitical topics should primarily serve corporate goals, as is generally assumed in corporate communication, a third concept emerges: corporate stance communication in the narrow sense, or strategic corporate stance communication.

Reflecting Acharya et al. (2019), corporate stance communication can be defined as the part of corporate communication that addresses controversial or polarizing sociopolitical topics and develops and communicates a stance on them based on the company’s beliefs and values to contribute to its goals (e.g., increasing intangible assets like reputation or image). Corporate stance communication in the narrow sense is characterized by striving for a direct contribution to corporate value creation. Regarding the degree of activity, this communication can be either active or passive, but is generally considered more passive. It is assumed that companies are more reserved when drawn into discussions on controversial or polarized sociopolitical topics, for example, to protect reputation. The tone of voice can also be positive or negative. However, a positive tone is more typical as such communication aims, for instance, to maintain or build reputation.

Given, in particular, the lower level of activity and strong internal focus, the risks attributed to companies from stance communication are significantly lower than those associated with corporate advocacy and, especially, corporate activism.

Overall, the designation of the phenomenon in question remains unclear, and terms and concepts are sometimes used interchangeably (see, e.g., Zhao et al., 2024). This highlights the importance of focusing on the characteristics used to describe it, and of considering where a company situates itself in relation to the four dimensions above. Taken together, the three concepts discussed can be mapped onto a spectrum consisting of the four dimensions.

At the one end of the spectrum, corporate stance communication (in the narrow sense) has a more organization-centered goal orientation, is generally passive in nature, and is considered to pose a lower risk for the company. At the other end of the spectrum is corporate activism, which has a stronger external orientation, challenges an existing

Concepts of corporate stance communication

Goal orientation		Degree of activity	Tone of voice	Attributed risk
Corporate activism	<p>also externally oriented</p> <p>challenging system</p> <p>support system</p> <p>organization-centered</p>	more active	more negative	higher
Corporate advocacy				
Corporate stance communication (in the narrow sense)		more passive	more positive	lower

Source: Helena Stehle & Julia Lührmann

system and status quo, and has a higher degree of activity, with an energetic, direct, execution-oriented character. This approach is considered to pose the highest risk. All three concepts can be expressed with either a negative or positive tone of voice.

IMPLICATIONS FOR CORPORATE COMMUNICATION

The phenomenon of a company communicating its stance can be defined and described more clearly using the dimensions and concepts outlined above. While this is an analytical, ideal-typical perspective and real-world cases will show shades of grey, the approach provides a useful framework for understanding and characterizing the phenomenon further.

1. Reflecting and adjusting stance communication

In corporate communication practice the framework can first be used to reflect on existing stance communication (in the broad sense) and, if necessary, adjust it accordingly. When considering whether to communicate on controversial or polarizing sociopolitical topics, companies can use the dimensions above to inform their decision and determine the approach. The question of the objectives,

i.e., what a company wants to achieve, is particularly crucial in this context.

2. Differentiating stance communication from other related concepts and fields

Second, using the definitions and characterization above, the phenomenon can be distinguished from others and their associated fields of research and practice, and their differences and links can be highlighted.

For example, **corporate value communication** is a related field. Values are often considered the core of corporate culture and can be defined as “the weight which corporate decision makers attach to alternative goals when making their decisions” (Thomsen, 2004, p. 32). The focus is on the organization’s fundamental value system, which is developed through communication and then communicated using techniques such as storytelling (Ellerup Nielsen, 2016). Corporate value communication is distinguished by being fundamental and ideally continuous, whereas stance communication is situational and addresses a specific sociopolitical topic in the present. Ideally, stance communication builds on value communication.

Corporate identity, defined as “the profile and values communicated by an organization” (Cornelissen, 2023, p. 7), and its communication and management are also closely related. Similar to value communication, identity

communication and management are often considered fundamental and independent of specific topics.

Further connections and distinctions can be drawn to specific, thematically defined fields of corporate communication, such as sustainability or DEI (diversity, equity, and inclusion) communication. These fields focus on topics that are not necessarily being discussed in a controversial or polarized manner at present. Therefore, they may focus less on communicating a specific stance and more on communicating activities in the field or fundamental corporate values.

CONCLUSION AND OUTLOOK

The article responds to the need of communication managers to reflect on stance communication more deeply. The analytical, ideal-typical distinctions described above can support them to further develop and reflect on their own corporate communication when an internal or external need or desire arises to take a stance on controversial or polarizing sociopolitical topics. The characterization dimensions (goal orientation, degree of activity, tone of voice, and

attributed risk to the organization) can facilitate this process. Distinguishing between similar phenomena and fields helps clarify the focus in a given situation (e.g., whether the task concerns the company's fundamental values or taking a stance on a controversial topic).

There is still much for research to explore in this area. Most existing studies have focused either on the effects of stance communication in a broad sense or on content and discourse analyses (e.g., Sauter & Jungblut, 2024; Ciszek & Logan, 2018). Future work could, for example, ask communication managers about their motives and objectives and address how they approach stance communication strategically and operationally. One may also ask how these motives and objectives align with stakeholder expectations, what the consequences are of meeting or violating those expectations, and how this influences risk attribution. This is particularly important when assuming that the heterogeneity of stakeholder expectations will continue to increase.

Finally, examining other fields of research can help further analyze corporate stance communication. For example, insights from linguistics or rhetorics could help clarify how stance is expressed in practice (e.g., Fuoli, 2018).

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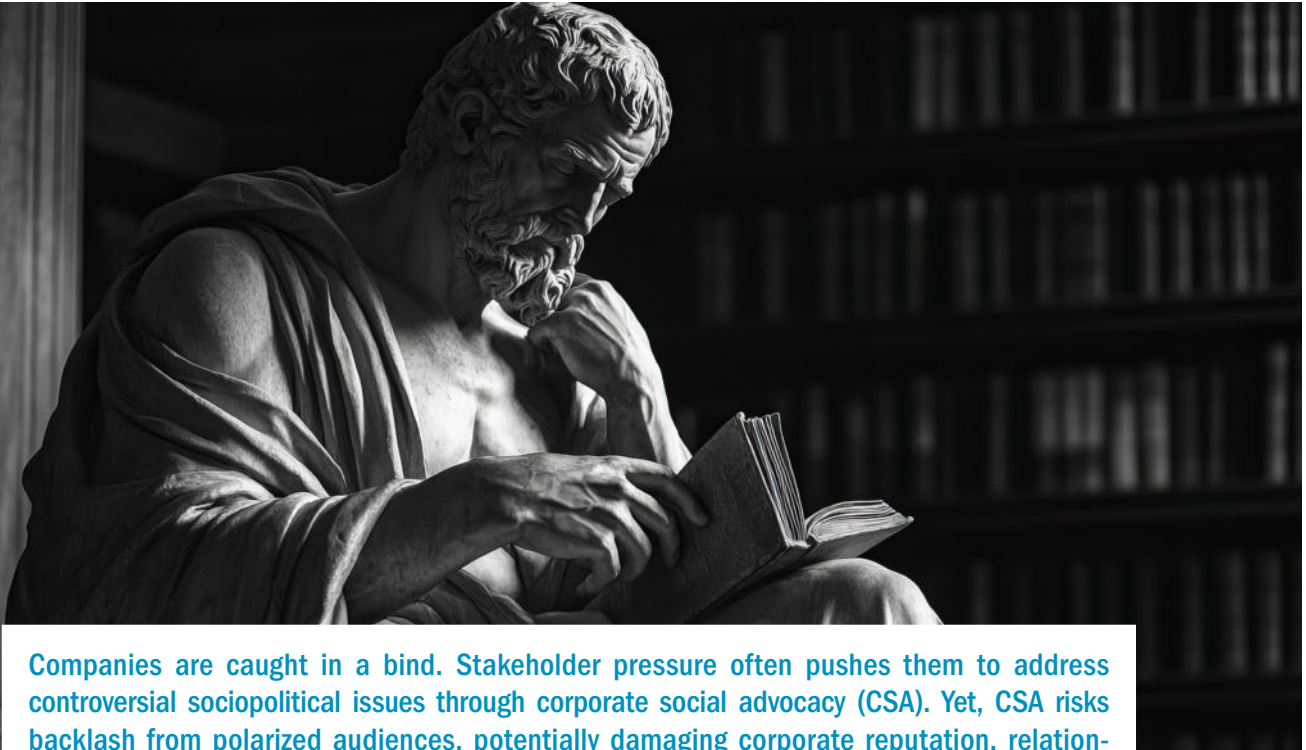
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MORE INFORMATION

The systematic literature review presented in this article is part of an ongoing research project that also includes an interview and Q-sort study with communication managers on the relevance, design, and challenges of corporate stance communication. The project is expected to be finalized by the end of 2025. Further information can be found at <https://bit.ly/sc-study-muenster> and <https://bit.ly/sc-study-aguk>.

NAVIGATING STORMY TIMES WITH STOICISM

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Companies are caught in a bind. Stakeholder pressure often pushes them to address controversial sociopolitical issues through corporate social advocacy (CSA). Yet, CSA risks backlash from polarized audiences, potentially damaging corporate reputation, relationships, and legitimacy. This dilemma sparks the question: Should companies engage in CSA in polarized times? I turn to the ancient Hellenistic philosophy of Stoicism for answers. I discuss four selected Stoic thoughts and offer practical advice for managers on whether and how to engage in CSA in stormy, polarized times.

WHEN SPEAKING UP BECOMES A DOUBLE-EDGED SWORD

In today's fractured and contentious world, businesses face a multitude of tensions in articulating their roles in society. On the one hand, they are being asked to go beyond shareholder value maximization. The *23rd Edelman Trust Barometer*, bylined *Navigating a Polarized World*, revealed that while trust in governments, media, and NGOs has eroded, business remains the only institution seen as competent and ethical. 85% of respondents want CEOs to take public stands, 63% choose brands aligned with their beliefs, and nearly 70% value societal impact when considering potential employers.

This heightened expectation is fueled by the rise of stakeholder activism, driven not only by external activist groups, but also by employees, investors, and socially conscious millennials and hypermodern individuals, who demand corporate engagement with issues such as racial justice, gender equality, and climate change (Marschlich & Dhanesh, 2024). As a result, many companies have been stepping beyond the boundaries of corporate social responsibility (CSR) into corporate social advocacy (CSA), where they adopt stances on divisive social and political issues.

However, CSA is fraught with risks in polarized times. Taking a stand can invite praise and admiration from some stakeholders, while drawing ire, boycotts, and even political pushback from others (Cammarota et al., 2023). Intense reactions to Target's recent pullback of its commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives in the United States is a case in point. Target, the U.S. retailer, announced that it is rolling back its three-year DEI goals, will no longer report to groups such as the Human Rights Campaign's Corporate Equality Index, and is discontinuing a program that sourced products from Black- and minority-owned businesses. However, the announcement led to sustained consumer boycotts and significant drops in foot traffic and revenue.

For managers, this raises difficult questions:

- Should businesses engage in sociopolitical advocacy in polarized times?
- If they do, can they endure potential repercussions?

I argue that current approaches to communicating businesses' roles in society often fall short, leaving leaders and managers without clear frameworks for action. To address this gap, I turn to Stoicism. This ancient Hellenistic philosophy, forged in turbulent times, offers practical principles for navigating uncertainty, distinguishing between what lies within one's circle of control and what does not, and maintaining ethical clarity under pressure. Drawing on the writings of Seneca, Epictetus, and Marcus Aurelius, I outline four Stoic thoughts that provide managers with both philosophical grounding and actionable guidance to better decide whether, when, and how to engage in CSA in a polarized era.

CORPORATE SOCIAL ADVOCACY AND RESPONSIBILITY: UNDERSTANDING KEY DIFFERENCES

CSA, which overlaps with concepts such as brand activism, and corporate sociopolitical activism, occurs when a company takes a public stand on controversial sociopolitical issues, whether they relate to its core business or not. Unlike traditional notions of CSR, CSA involves taking stances that may strengthen ties with some stakeholders while alienating others (Dodd & Supa, 2014). Consider Nike's decision to feature Colin Kaepernick in its 30th anniversary

campaign. In 2018, Nike featured Colin Kaepernick in its ad campaign after he was ousted from the National Football League (NFL) for kneeling during the national anthem to protest racial injustice. The ad, with the tagline "Believe in something. Even if it means sacrificing everything," drew widespread attention, sparking praise from supporters and backlash from critics. By aligning with Kaepernick's protest against racial injustice, Nike sparked anger and admiration.

This differs from CSR, which Carroll (1991) famously defined as "the simultaneous fulfillment of the firm's economic, legal, ethical, and philanthropic responsibilities." This definition focuses on a wide range of stakeholders meeting a plethora of responsibilities across diverse sets of stakeholders. Examples would include Lego trying to move to more sustainable materials in their bricks and elements, or IKEA's commitment to working with social entrepreneurs. Thus, CSR is about balancing a wide range of responsibilities while CSA is about taking a clear stance on controversial issues. While CSA is often considered an evolution of CSR, its most distinctive characteristic is the communicative angle. CSA emphasizes advocacy, making public statements, issuing positions, or launching campaigns around divisive issues, which highlights the role of communication.

COMMUNICATING BUSINESSES' ROLES IN SOCIETY

Two dominant approaches emerge in the literature on communicating businesses' roles in society (Verk et al., 2021). The first is a **functionalist, persuasive approach**, wherein companies shape narratives to strengthen reputation, and stakeholder relationships and loyalty. By leveraging behavioral insights and emotional storytelling, they build ethical corporate identities that signal corporate values and purpose. For socially conscious stakeholders, identification with corporate ethical identity fosters engagement, loyalty, and trust. Yet, persuasion has its limits, especially when addressing polarizing issues. Carefully crafted messages may falter when audiences are deeply divided.

This is where the second approach, the **co-creational approach**, offers an alternative. Here, CSR is seen as something that companies and their stakeholders create together through dialogue. Drawing on Chantal Mouffe's concept of agonistic pluralism, this perspective embraces

respectful conflict rather than trying to smooth over differences (Winkler et al., 2020). The goal is not consensus but creating space to capture and amplify diverse stakeholder voices. Consider Ben & Jerry's support for Black Lives Matter. On declaring their support for the movement, their Facebook page was filled with passionate and often hostile comments, creating a space for stakeholders to express divergent views.

While both approaches have their own merits, in polarized contexts of practice, neither offers a clear path. This brings back two pressing questions for managers:

- Is CSA for everyone? Just because a handful of large, global brands engage in highly visible acts of advocacy, should everyone else follow?
- If they decide to, then how can they prepare for potential backlash?

STOIC PRINCIPLES TO FRAME BUSINESSES' ROLES IN SOCIETY

Stoicism, founded by Zeno in 301 BCE, emerged in ancient Greece and Rome during turbulent times. At its core, Stoicism argues that human flourishing stems from virtue, not external circumstances. It emphasizes a few core principles -- living in harmony with nature, practicing the virtues of wisdom, justice, courage, and self-control, and focusing only on what lies within one's control while accepting external factors as "indifferents." Recently, Stoicism has seen renewed interest in entrepreneurship, leadership studies, and environmental sustainability. I draw on four Stoic thoughts, with quotes taken from Holiday and Hanselman (2016), to help organizations decide whether and how to engage with divisive societal issues in polarized times.

1. Stoic thoughts on identity



Whatever anyone does or says, for my part, I'm bound to the good. In the same way an emerald or gold or purple might always proclaim: "Whatever anyone does or says, I must be what I am and show my true colors."

(Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, 7.15)

The Stoics taught that human flourishing rests on four cardinal virtues – wisdom, courage, justice, and self-control. Applied to business, this suggests that “good” companies demonstrate moral authority by aligning their actions with these virtues. A Stoic-inspired company would show wisdom in choosing which social issues to engage with, temperance in responding to factors beyond its control, fairness toward multiple stakeholders, and courage in addressing difficult topics.

Companies express their “true colours” through corporate identity, which answers the question “who are we?” and reflects a company's enduring traits expressed through its values, mission, and culture (Balmer et al., 2007). For example, IKEA's vision is not just to sell affordable furniture but to “create a better everyday life for the many people.” This broader purpose legitimizes its commitments to sustainability and social responsibility, leaving space for engagement with issues such as equity and inclusion.

When advocacy reflects an organization's true identity and practices, it strengthens trust. But when companies adopt causes opportunistically or without alignment to their purpose, they risk being perceived as inauthentic, which is often worse than staying silent on issues. Stoic thought reminds us that criticism is inevitable. What matters is whether the company's CSA consistently reflects a morally grounded ethical identity, engaging in advocacy only where it is authentic and true to its core ethical identity and values.

2. Stoic thoughts on circles of control



The chief task in life is simply this: to identify and separate matters so that I can say clearly to myself which are externals not under my control, and which have to do with the choices I actually control. Where then do I look for good and evil? Not to uncontrollable externals, but within myself to the choices that are my own.

(Epictetus, *Discourses*, 2.5.4-5)

A central Stoic principle is to focus only on what lies within one's control and to accept everything else with equanimity. The Stoics viewed health, wealth, power, and reputation as "indifferents" or factors ultimately beyond our control. Applied to CSA, this raises an important question: What is truly within a company's control?

Internal factors could include aligning advocacy with corporate identity, ensuring brand-cause fit, exercising moral courage, and drawing on the convictions of leaders, owners, and employees. These reflect choices that are more or less within the company's spheres of influence. By contrast, shifting consumer cultures, political currents, social movements, institutional pressures, and industry reputation tend to fall outside a company's relative circle of control. Stoicism urges companies not to be pressured by these external uncertainties but to act with integrity on what is within their spheres of influence.

3. Stoic thoughts on facing obstacles



While it's true that someone can impede our actions, they can't impede our intentions and our attitudes, which have the power of being conditional and adaptable. That which is an impediment to action is turned to advance action. The obstacle on the path becomes the way.

(Marcus Aurelius, Meditations, 5.20)

If companies choose to engage in CSA, Stoic philosophy offers a valuable guide for navigating potential backlash. For the Stoics, obstacles are not setbacks but opportunities to practice wisdom, justice, courage, and self-control. Applied to CSA, this means that once a company adopts a public stance consistent with its identity, it should hold fast to its values and principles rather than retreating at the first sign of backlash. Hastily backtracking under pressure can erode stakeholder credibility and damage trust.

That said, Stoicism does not equate steadfastness with rigidity. Changing course can be acceptable, but only when guided by reasoned judgment and alignment with corporate identity, and not as a knee-jerk reaction to vocal opposition or shifting public opinion. In polarized environments, the challenge is to filter noise from substance, remain anchored in corporate ethical identity and values, and make decisions rooted in values rather than expedience.

4. Stoic thoughts on facing obstacles



I will keep constant watch over myself and most usefully will put each day up for review. For this is what makes us evil: that none of us looks back upon our own lives. We reflect upon only that which we are about to do. And yet our plans for the future descend from the past.

(Seneca, Moral Letters, 83.2)

Stoicism emphasizes the need for reflection, deeply reviewing everyday thoughts and actions to better inform the future. This parallels the practice of reflective practice, widely applied in fields from education and medicine to communication management, to help professionals accept responsibility and navigate uncertainty (van Ruler, 2021). Reflective practice has two dimensions. Reflection-in-action occurs during implementation, when practitioners draw on experience and judgment to respond in real time. Reflection-on-action happens afterward, as they assess outcomes and ask: What worked? What failed? How can we improve?

Reflective practice is critical in the context of CSA. Managers must engage in reflection while designing and executing advocacy initiatives and when evaluating them. Through reflection, managers can analyze causes and outcomes, accept responsibility for decisions, embrace uncertainty, and ensure CSA efforts stay anchored in the company's core values and identity, an essential factor in polarized times.

STOIC STRATEGIES FOR CORPORATE SOCIAL ADVOCACY IN POLARIZED TIMES

Anchor CSA in corporate identity

Before taking a public stand, companies must ask: Does this issue align with who we are? Advocacy should not be opportunistic but rooted in corporate identity, purpose, and values. Even organizations in stigmatized industries can credibly engage with CSA if there is strong brand-cause fit and alignment with their stated mission. Because CSA inevitably provokes both support and criticism, the decision to engage should come from within, rather than from pressure to appease external voices.

Focus on what you can control

Environmental scans can help organizations distinguish between internal factors they can influence and external factors they cannot. Consumer culture, political ideologies, and activist movements will always shift. What companies can control is whether their advocacy aligns with identity, brand-cause fit, and perhaps, the convictions of employees and shareholders. Stoic wisdom suggests directing energy towards these relatively controllable factors rather than being led by uncontrollable externals.

Confront obstacles with reasoned choice

Potential backlash is part of CSA. Stoicism advises resilience: Remain steady when criticism comes, and do not retreat unthinkingly. At the same time, companies must exercise reasoned choice. If resistance becomes overwhelming, they can adapt, but only if the decision to change is deliberate, grounded in values, and aligned with corporate identity, not dictated by noise from polarized audiences.

THE STOIC PLAYBOOK FOR CORPORATE SOCIAL ADVOCACY

1. Anchor in identity

Only engage in CSA when the issue clearly aligns with your company's mission, purpose, values, and identity. Authenticity matters more than external pressure.

2. Focus on what is within the company's control

Accept that factors such as shifting consumer culture and ideologies are beyond the company's control and focus on factors that are relatively within the company's control, such as corporate identity, and brand-cause fit.

3. Face obstacles with reasoned choice

If you engage in CSA, expect backlash. Stay steady in your stance, but adapt, if necessary, through reasoned, values-based judgment, not reaction to noise.

4. Build strengths in reflection

Train teams in reflective practice. Build in structured reflection sessions before, during, and after campaigns to ensure decisions remain authentic and identity-driven.

Build strengths in reflective practice

Finally, companies should embed reflective practice into how managers and teams approach CSA. Beyond campaign monitoring, reflective practice means ongoing evaluation, during planning, execution, and after implementation. Training practitioners to ask hard questions, assess alignment, and learn from obstacles ensures that decisions are thoughtful and identity-driven. Reflection equips leaders and managers to know when to persist and when to recalibrate.

OUTLOOK: FROM DANCING TO WRESTLING

Marcus Aurelius wrote, “The art of living is more like wrestling than dancing” (Meditations, 7.61). In today’s stormy, polarized climate, the metaphor resonates. CSR may often resemble a delicate dance of balancing competing responsibilities. CSA, however, is closer to wrestling, requiring strength, agility, and courage. For companies, the Stoic challenge is clear: to step into the arena prepared, principled, and ready to withstand blows without compromising core corporate identity, values and purpose.

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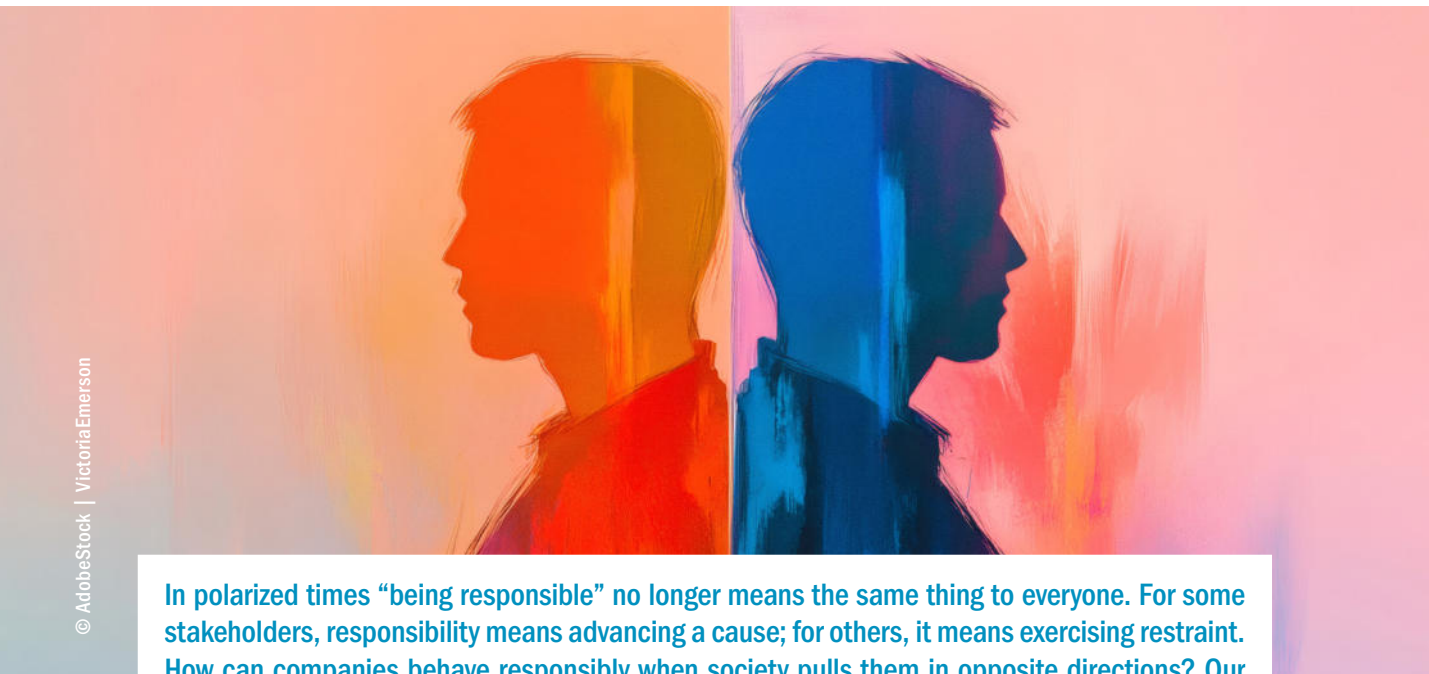
MORE INFORMATION

This research insight article is based on Dhanesh, 2025, as listed above.

DIALOGICAL VS. PARTISAN CSR: A CORPORATE DILEMMA IN POLARIZATION

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In polarized times “being responsible” no longer means the same thing to everyone. For some stakeholders, responsibility means advancing a cause; for others, it means exercising restraint. How can companies behave responsibly when society pulls them in opposite directions? Our study of Italian telecom companies during the 5G rollout shows that managers address this dilemma through what we call “partisan CSR”: engaging only with supportive audiences while ignoring critical ones. This selective approach may seem efficient because it reinforces shared views and relationships with favorable stakeholders while avoiding confrontation with critical ones. Yet it comes at a cost. By fueling a one-sided dialogue, companies risk deepening societal polarization, redefining responsibility around business interests rather than societal ones, and eroding the long-term trust that genuine CSR generates.

HOW MANAGERS ADDRESS MUTUALLY DELEGITIMIZING DEMANDS

For some, digitalization is the very definition of progress. Fast, reliable connectivity is seen as a social good, forming the foundation for education, healthcare, and economic opportunity. Policymakers and institutions expect telecom companies to accelerate digital access and provide the infrastructure that makes development possible. From this perspective, fostering digitalization is not just a

business strategy but a core responsibility to society.

For others, however, digitalization looks very different. Activists and local communities warn about electromagnetic radiation, environmental costs, and the health risks of constant connectivity. In their view, responsibility does not mean increasing digitalization but limiting exposure, slowing expansion, and protecting vulnerable groups.

The same technology, two irreconcilable demands. One side demands acceleration, the other restraint. For telecom companies, this raises a fundamental dilemma: How should companies behave when society pulls them in opposite directions? Or, in other words: How can managers act responsibly when society itself disagrees on what responsibility means?

Traditionally, the dominant answer has been dialogue. CSR has been framed as listening to stakeholders, integrating their concerns, and adapting practices to demonstrate responsiveness. By engaging with society as a whole, companies could build legitimacy and reputation (Colleoni, 2013; Scherer & Palazzo, 2011). At times, when expectations proved particularly fragmented or contentious, some managers have also opted for silence; a more cautious stance aimed at minimizing potential backfire. Yet dialogue has remained the ideal and expected approach for understanding, aligning with, and addressing stakeholder expectations.

How can managers act responsibly when society itself disagrees on what responsibility means?

frames connectivity as a fundamental right; another frames it as a fundamental threat. These are not two perspectives in the same conversation but two parallel conversations that mutually delegitimize one another. Engaging with one side validates its worldview while automatically alienating the other. Attempts to bridge them rarely succeed, because compromise is interpreted as betrayal: Reassuring activists looks like slowing down development, while reassuring institutions looks like dismissing public health.

In this fractured landscape, an all-stakeholder dialogue is impossible. Managers simply cannot rely on dialogue to navigate responsibility because there is no single conversation to join. Instead, they face a structural dilemma of irreconcilable responsibility demands.

It is within this context that we examined how the five largest Italian telecom companies communicated their CSR during the launch of 5G technologies. By analyzing their reports over a three-year period, we sought to uncover how managers actually deal with polarized responsibility demands, and what their choices reveal about the changing role and meaning of CSR in polarized times, as well as the potential long-term implications of them.

DIALOGUE AS A BATTLEGROUND

Pure dialogue sounds good in theory, but rarely works that way in practice. While in theory it describes an enlightened and democratic exchange aimed at finding compromise among diverse interests and priorities, in practice it is rarely harmonious. CSR dialogue often involves power plays, rhetorical confrontation, and strategic persuasion rather than open deliberation.

CSR dialogues can be better understood as strategic arenas where companies and stakeholders compete to shape meanings and influence public understanding. As research shows (Scherer et al., 2013; Dawson & Brunner, 2020), these interactions bring together actors with contrasting moral claims, positions, and interpretations of what counts as responsible behavior, making dialogue less about consensus-building and more about negotiating and orienting moral authority.

But in polarized environments, this approach is impossible. Stakeholders do not simply have different priorities; they inhabit separate realities, grounded in incompatible assumptions about what is true and what is right (Knight & Tsoukas, 2019). In the case of digitalization, one group

HOW WE STUDIED IT

We examined how Italian telecom companies managed their CSR communication during the rollout of 5G. Specifically, we analyzed 18 CSR reports published between 2018 and 2021 by the five largest players in the market – TIM, Vodafone, WindTre, Fastweb, and Tiscali.

Through a thematic analysis, we explored how these companies framed 5G and digitalization, which stakeholders they engaged in their CSR activities, and how they positioned these initiatives within broader societal debates. To triangulate our data and enrich our findings, we conducted semi-structured interviews with CSR and communication managers from the same companies.

A NOVEL APPROACH: PARTISAN CSR

Our analysis shows that telecom companies do not attempt to reconcile the two opposing views of digitalization. Instead, they practice what we call partisan CSR: engaging only with the favorable conversation and systematically ignoring the critical one.

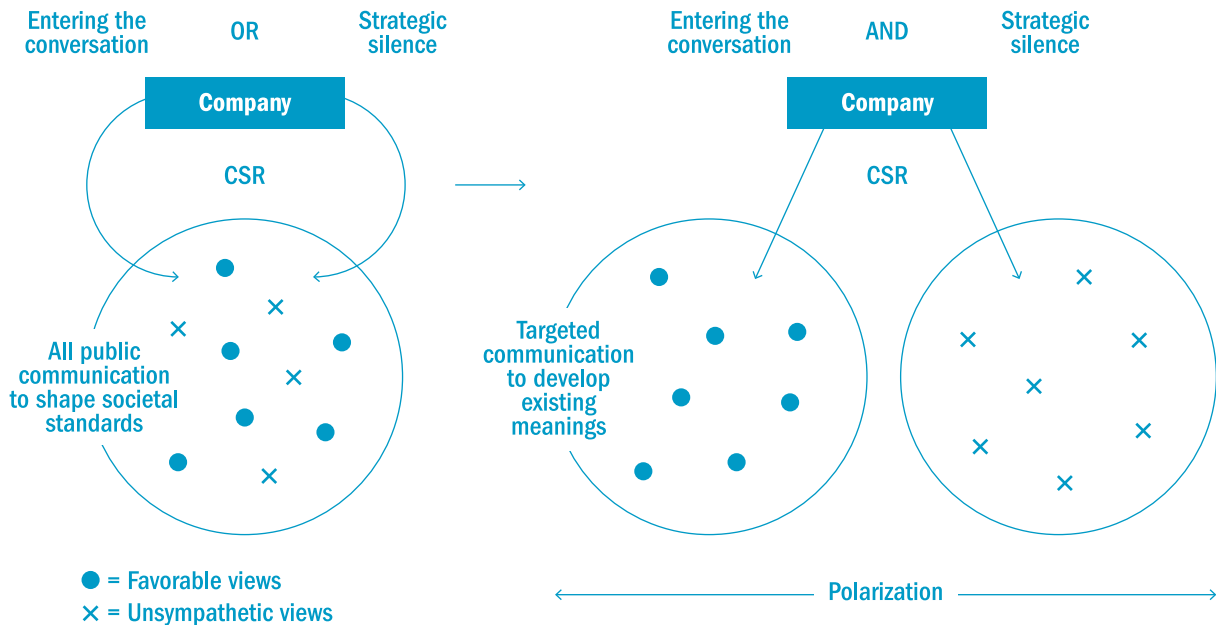
This approach unfolds in two steps:

- › Framing digitalization as a legitimate CSR issue.** Telecoms elevate the need of digitalization to the same level as climate change or gender equality issues, often echoing the discourses of powerful institutions like the EU or the UN, for example by linking it to the UN's Sustainable Development Goals. In this way, what is essentially their core business is reframed as a matter of responsibility.

- › Capitalizing on this framing.** Once digitalization is established as a "responsible" cause, companies can:
 - › Present their everyday business – building networks, expanding 5G – as socially beneficial.
 - › Sidestep criticism about health risks by dismissing it as misinformation or marginal concern, without ever entering into direct debate.

Taken together, these moves show how partisan CSR works: Companies selectively amplify positive interpretations of their role while muting or delegitimizing negative ones. As a result, CSR shifts from balancing diverse societal expectations to crafting one-sided narratives that reinforce positive perceptions of responsibility in the eyes of key stakeholders.

Changing the approach to CSR and CSR communication in polarized environments



Source: Gualtieri & Lurati, 2024

What makes partisan CSR so tempting

Traditionally, managers facing polarizing issues have had two options for CSR communication:

- › Dialogue:** Actively engage with all stakeholders, even

critics, in an effort to shape the conversation and win the moral struggle.

- › Silence:** Stay out of controversial debates, reducing the risk of backlash when expectations are fragmented or unfavorable.

Partisan CSR blends these two alternative approaches, but in a highly selective way. Instead of trying to speak to everyone, companies focus on the audiences already inclined to see them as responsible. This approach allows them to:

- Enter the favorable conversation to further reinforce the CSR narrative in a positive direction, strengthening the company's reputation as a responsible actor.
- Stay silent in the hostile conversation, avoiding direct clashes with critical stakeholders and the reputational dangers of public confrontation.
- Dismiss critical voices indirectly, not by debating them head-on, but by framing them as marginal, misinformed, or irrelevant to the broader discussion.

For managers, this approach can feel like a “best of both worlds” solution. On the one hand, it leverages the benefits of dialogue by shaping and amplifying supportive meanings. On the other, it enjoys the protective shield of silence, sidestepping the risks of engaging with deeply critical audiences. The result is a communication posture that looks proactive and values-driven, while in reality staying cautious and risk-averse.

Yet this comfort comes at a cost. By engaging only with supportive audiences, managers may gain short-term legitimacy, but they also risk reinforcing social divides and jeopardizing the very meaning of responsibility. In the long run, this has consequences not only for society, which becomes more fragmented, but also for business itself. When CSR loses its moral credibility, it stops generating genuine trust, which is the very foundation of long-term positive reputation and corporate success.

How partisanship may jeopardize the very notion of CSR

Partisan CSR may look like a smart strategy: targeted, efficient, and low-risk. But beneath the surface, it carries profound implications for the role of business in society. Our analysis highlights two implications in particular.

First, it fuels polarization. One of the central promises of CSR has always been its bridging role: It creates a forum where companies listen to multiple stakeholders, negotiate shared understandings of responsibility, and

adapt their behavior accordingly. Implicit in this model is the idea that CSR communication addresses society as a whole. Partisan CSR breaks that assumption. When companies speak only to supportive audiences and ignore critical ones, CSR is no longer a collective dialogue. It becomes a selective tool to reinforce the views of those already on the company's side. The supportive conversation is amplified and institutionalized, while the opposing one is ignored or actively delegitimized. The result is sharper divides. Allies feel validated; critics feel excluded and alienated. Instead of building bridges, CSR risks becoming yet another driver of conflict, mistrust, and fragmentation in society.

Second, it reshapes responsibility to fit business interests. Traditionally, CSR has worked as society's corrective mechanism: Citizens set expectations – on issues such as sustainability, labor rights, and ethical sourcing – and companies adjust their practices to meet them. Responsibility, in this view, is defined by society and then integrated into business. In polarized contexts, however, companies may flip this logic. Rather than adapting their practices to external demands, they redefine responsibility in a way that matches what they already do. CSR becomes less about transforming the business, and more about reframing the business as inherently responsible. In the telecom case, digitalization was reframed as a societal need and hence elevated to the status of a CSR issue on par with environmental and inclusion issues and thus presented as a contribution to national development. This move is powerful: It turns core business into responsibility. But it also shifts the balance of CSR away from society's expectations and toward business-driven definitions. Over time, CSR risks becoming less about societal well-being and more about corporate self-justification.

Together, these two implications jeopardize the very essence of CSR. On the one hand, by engaging only with selected stakeholders, companies risk reducing CSR to what Barnett (2019) termed “critical stakeholder responsiveness”: responding to strategically relevant groups while disregarding society at large. On the other hand, by stretching the concept of responsibility to fit their business model, companies risk making CSR so malleable that almost any activity can be branded as “responsible”.

Partisan CSR may transform responsibility from a bridge between business and society into a fault line that separates them.

The growing tendency to instrumentalize corporate responsibility risks undermining both its ethical meaning and managerial value. When CSR becomes a vehicle for partisan positioning, it may offer short-term validation from supportive audiences but corrodes the trust on which sustainable legitimacy rests. In this sense, partisan CSR may transform responsibility from a bridge between business and society into a fault line that separates them.

A CALL FOR A DEEPER UNDERSTANDING OF STAKEHOLDERS' PERSPECTIVES

For managers, the central takeaway is that corporate responsibility loses its strategic value when it is reduced to a tool for image management. In polarized environments, the temptation to use CSR to strengthen the core business and mobilize supportive audiences is strong, yet such partisan strategies can backfire. What appears as reputational capital in the short term often becomes a source of distrust in the long run, eroding the credibility of both the company and the idea of responsibility itself.

Communication and sustainability leaders should therefore cultivate awareness of the different strategic options available when navigating contested issues: from partisan advocacy to dialogical engagement, selective silence, or participation in broader discursive struggles. Each of these choices entails distinct ethical and managerial implications. Understanding them helps organizations anticipate how different publics interpret their actions and how these interpretations affect trust, identification, and legitimacy over time.

From a practical perspective, this calls for embedding reflexivity into CSR decision-making: asking not only what to communicate, but why, to whom, and with what long-term effects. Building internal capacities for open dialogue and constructive dissent within the regular issue mapping and scenario analysis can help prevent responsibility from being instrumentalized for short-term advantage. It is in this spirit that we recently developed a stakeholder analytical framework that provides managers with practical guidance on how to embed reflexivity and dialogue into their CSR processes (see Gualtieri & Lurati, 2025).

THE NARRATIVE-BASED FRAMEWORK FOR UNDERSTANDING STAKEHOLDERS

1. **Collect stakeholders' voices:** Gather data to capture diverse opinions and arguments about the issue. Explore different arenas (traditional and digital media) to identify key social actors who actively engage in discussions. Collect all texts authored by these stakeholders and, through a snowball approach, include other actors they mention.
2. **Identify the narratives:** Analyze the collected texts to detect the different narratives surrounding the issue and determine which one each stakeholder adopts. Identify three key elements in each narrative:
 - How the issue is defined;
 - The characters and their identities; and
 - Their goals and intended actions.
3. **Derive insights from narratives:** Extract insights about stakeholders' perspectives from the narratives. Identify their underlying assumptions, sentiments, goals, and expectations toward others, as well as the relationship and alliances among them. Understanding stakeholders' perspectives helps managers characterize them more accurately, as it allows managers to move beyond biases that can arise from focusing only on the organization's own viewpoint.

Importantly, we need researchers to shed further light on the contextual and organizational factors that favor one approach over another and their respective outcomes for reputation, trust, and stakeholder relationships. Only by aligning moral intent with strategic awareness can managers safeguard both the meaning and the effectiveness of CSR.

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MORE INFORMATION

Additional details about the study and the framework are available in Gualtieri & Lurati, 2024 and Gualtieri & Lurati, 2025, as listed above.

DO CALLS TO ACTION ENDANGER CORPORATE REPUTATION?

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Corporations face increasing pressure to take a stand on sociopolitical issues, with gender equality being a prominent example. This study examines the impact of calls to action in corporate social media posts on reputation. The findings show these messages can backfire, triggering negative reactions even among supporters of the cause. In today's polarized climate, a company's reputation depends not just on the issues it advocates for, but also on how it communicates them. Thoughtful and careful message strategies are key to protecting and enhancing corporate reputation while addressing relevant sociopolitical issues.

CORPORATE SOCIAL ADVOCACY: CALLS TO ACTION AS A MESSAGE STRATEGY

Corporations today face growing pressure to take a stand on social issues, and many respond by engaging in corporate social advocacy (CSA), making their values visible to the public. CSA has been described as the taking of a public stance on a controversial social political issue by corporations (Dodd & Supa, 2014). Some studies suggest that CSA enhances a company's reputation when it is perceived as authentic and aligns with the company's

identity (Lim & Young, 2021), while others warn that CSA can backfire, leading to negative news coverage, boycotts, and damage to public perception (Abitbol et al., 2018).

Previous research has examined factors such as how the issue a company advocates (Dood & Supa, 2014) or how the alignment between company values and customer expectations affect consumer responses to CSA (Lim & Young, 2021). However, less attention has been paid to the role of the message strategy itself. Companies such as Ben & Jerry's and Patagonia mobilize stakeholders through petitions and calls to action, inviting them to support causes and demonstrate shared values. Calls to action are increasingly common in CSA messages, yet their effect on

reputation remains uncertain. To explore this, we conducted an experimental survey with 172 individuals in Switzerland that focused on gender equality, which is a pressing societal challenge and one of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals. Drawing on reactance theory (Brehm, 1966) and prior CSA research (Hong & Li, 2020), we tested the impact of CSA messages with or without a call to action. The objective was to provide a close examination of how different CSA message strategies shape individuals' perceptions and responses and influence corporate reputation.

Reactance theory (Brehm, 1966)

The theory posits that individuals value their freedom of choice and autonomy. When they perceive a message as limiting, controlling, or pressuring, they experience psychological reactance – a motivational state aimed at restoring freedom.

- It can explain negative reactions to persuasive CSA messages, such as resistance, anger, or rejection of the message.
- Reactance can reduce message effectiveness, damage attitudes toward the company, and even lead to doing the opposite of what is advocated.
- This is stronger when messages are forceful, directive, or lack options and weaker when communication emphasizes choice or personal relevance.

Application to CSA messaging

- Stakeholders often suspect persuasion intent in corporate communications, especially in social advocacy.
- CSA messages with a call to action may increase cognitive engagement (Suchman, 1995), heightening the perception of persuasion and triggering reactance.
- Such reactance can reduce identification with the company and subsequently damage reputation.

FROM CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY TO CORPORATE SOCIAL ADVOCACY

For several decades, companies have been expected to go beyond their purely economic responsibilities, which has traditionally been described as corporate social responsibility (CSR). While CSA shares similarities with CSR in that both involve companies taking social responsibility and aiming to contribute to society, CSA and CSR differ significantly. Traditional CSR often involves philanthropy or non-controversial activities. CSA, by contrast, tackles divisive, politically charged, and emotionally charged topics to express societal values and norms (Dodd & Supa, 2014; Hong & Li, 2020). By making their values explicit, companies can not only shape public perceptions about the company but also contribute to debates on justice and equality. In this view, CSA is both a reputational strategy and a tool for societal change. To achieve societal change, CSA messages include a call to action, urging the public to engage (Troy et al., 2023). This makes CSA inherently political. It is less about operational responsibility and more about value-driven engagement.

Scholars have linked the shift from traditional CSR to political and social advocacy to mediatization, i.e., society's adaption of media logic, and rising polarization, which both make companies more visible in public debates on sociopolitical issues (van der Meer & Jonkman, 2021). Companies are increasingly expected to speak out on moral and social issues to maintain their reputation and legitimacy, but face constant scrutiny, which is also related to recurring scandals and accusations of genderwashing, i.e., claims that companies make towards supporting gender equality are unsubstantiated and thus do not align with their actual actions. By engaging in CSA, companies can respond to these growing expectations, but can also risk backlash or boycotts if their advocacy does not resonate with stakeholders (Rim et al., 2020). Thus, it is essential to understand how message strategies can help companies mitigate the risk of backlash and its potentially negative impact on reputation.

BETWEEN TRIGGERING RESISTANCE AND MOBILIZING SUPPORT

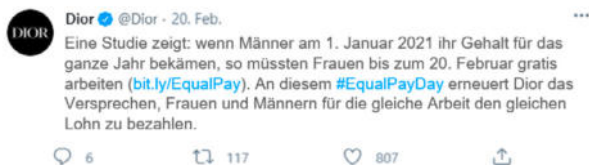
Calls to action in CSA messages can be powerful because they can mobilize people beyond awareness, turning shared values into concrete support and collective action for social change. However, when organizations seek active public support through a call to action in their CSA messages, the stakes for reputation are higher. Audiences pay closer attention and process the message more carefully, evaluating both the company's motives and its procedures (Suchman, 1995). This heightened scrutiny can increase perceptions of persuasion intent, i.e., the sense that the company is primarily acting in its own interest to convince people to follow its cause. Such perceptions often trigger psychological reactance, a defensive reaction in which

individuals resist perceived pressure and push back against the message (see Brehm, 1966).

This defensive stance can also lower identification with the company that advocates for a sociopolitical issue, reducing the emotional and cognitive bond that typically supports positive evaluations. People may view the company's CSA message as intrusive or manipulative, which can damage trust and weaken reputation. The more a CSA message calls for active engagement, such as signing a petition, sharing content, or taking other concrete actions, the more likely audiences might question the company's intentions or feel pressured. This tension creates a delicate balance for communicators: Calls to action can mobilize support and amplify social impact, but they also carry the risk of increasing skepticism, resistance, and negative reactions that ultimately affect corporate reputation.

About the study

The online study conducted in the German-speaking region of Switzerland presented participants with manipulated tweets and measured various metrics, including identification with the company, reactance, and reputation.



Tweet in the control group with no call to action.

Translation: "A study shows: If men received their year pay on 1st January 2021, women would have to work for free until 20th February (bit.ly/EqualPay). On this #EqualPayDay, Dior renews its commitment to give men equal pay for equal work."



Tweet in the call-to-action group. Translation: "To take a stand against the gender pay gap, all female employees of Dior will receive a #FeminismBonus to mark this year's #EqualPayDay. Join us and sign the petition on bit.ly/FeminismusBonus to encourage other companies to do the same!"

THE EFFECTS OF CALL-TO-ACTION MESSAGES ON REPUTATION

The study found that CSA messages with a call to action consistently triggered higher levels of psychological reactance among participants. This suggests that individuals

may feel a higher persuasive intent in call-to-action messages, i.e., they perceive that the company is trying to influence them, which makes them more resistant to the message. This heightened reactance was found to reduce identification with the company, ultimately weakening corporate reputation. By contrast, messages without a call to action, which simply inform about the company's support

for gender equality, are processed with less cognitive effort and elicit lower reactance. This, in turn, leads to higher identification with the company, thereby enhancing corporate reputation. Taken together, a CSA message with a call to action leads to a lower and more negative reputation compared to the CSA message without a call to action.

Notably, participants' gender and their alignment with the gender equality issue did not affect these patterns. That means that even when participants agreed with the underlying social issue, regardless of whether they identified as female or male, the direct push to act in the CSA message seems to have prompted scrutiny and defensive responses, suggesting that reactance and decreased identification occurred broadly across the audience. Right-leaning participants showed stronger reactance, although this tendency was independent of the specific message type. Indeed, individuals with conservative political views have been found to be more resistant to advocacy messages, including those encouraging climate change awareness (Zhou, 2016).

CHOOSE CSA MESSAGES AND AUDIENCE CAREFULLY

The study demonstrates that CSA message strategy matters. CSA messages with a call to action can drive societal impact by mobilizing behavior, but also invite scrutiny and defensive reactions. This highlights a key tension for companies. On the one hand, CSA allows firms to take a stand on socially relevant issues and promote change. On the other hand, the strategy itself can backfire if audiences feel pressured or manipulated. If audiences perceive the company as self-interested or persuasive, they may respond with reactance and disidentify from the company, lowering corporate reputation. Skepticism toward companies, due to past scandals, misconduct, or genderwashing, can intensify this effect.

Social issues are often polarizing and connected to political ideology, so companies must craft messages that appear authentic and compelling to avoid triggering defensive reactions. For corporate communicators, there are three main takeaways from the study:

1. Companies aiming to communicate their values effectively must strike a balance between encouraging societal

participation and maintaining individuals' identification with the company and corporate reputation.

2. CSA messages should be transparent and align with the company's values, while adopting a less overtly persuasive tone. Instead of focusing on convincing the audience, messages should simply communicate the social issue the company supports, along with the reasons and methods behind this support.

3. Companies need to consider the audience's political context and the social context, i.e., how the issue itself is discussed in the public sphere. Right-leaning participants showed stronger reactance than left-leaning participants, regardless of message type.

In an increasingly polarized and globalized society, the insights from this study underscore the importance of considering both the content and the structure of corporate messaging when studying the societal and reputational impact of CSA.

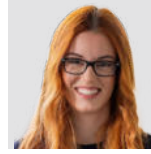
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MORE INFORMATION

A more detailed discussion of the study can be found in Marschlich and Bernet (2024), on which this article is based.

CASA (the Corporate Affairs Search Alliance) is the leading group of like-minded Corporate Affairs search firms in Europe and the USA. The core of what binds us together is our deep commitment to the pursuit of excellence in Corporate Affairs and Communications. We are excited to be supporting Corporate Communication Review in recognition of that.

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WHEN CEOS SPEAK OUT: INSIGHTS FROM CITIZENS FINANCIAL GROUP, GODREJ, AND KEYCORP

CONTRIBUTORS: SUSAN DONLAN, KEYCORP; PETER LUCHT, CITIZENS FINANCIAL GROUP & SUJIT PATIL, GODREJ INDUSTRIES GROUP

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Deciding whether to speak out or stay silent on political and social issues is one of the most challenging communication decisions for CEOs. What factors influence their decisions, and how do they determine when to speak out? How are their approaches shaped by stakeholder expectations, organizational values, and expertise? Seasoned Chief Communication Officers Susan Donlan (KeyCorp), Peter Lucht (Citizens Financial Group), and Sujit Patil (Godrej Industries Group) share their insights on decision-making, communication channels, and lessons learned, offering a window into how CEOs balance stakeholder expectations, values, and impact when taking a stance.

THE DECISION-MAKING PROCESS

What criteria guide a CEO's decision to take a political or social stance?

DONLAN: We've developed a structured framework to guide our decision-making in these situations. This framework is built around a series of key questions designed to assess the potential impact of taking a public stance. In particular, we consider whether the issue has a significant geographic relevance in areas where we have a strong presence, and whether it falls within a domain where we possess specific expertise that allows us to contribute meaningfully.

This approach ensures that our decisions are both deliberate and aligned with our capabilities and responsibilities.

LUCHT: For public companies, especially those that serve multiple consumer and corporate customer bases and industry sectors, it's a complex undertaking. Every stakeholder's point of view must be carefully considered. And there can be added complexity depending on factors such as the geography served and whether the company is operating in a regulated industry. Because of this, Citizens has been very measured in terms of situations where we thought a public statement would be helpful in serving

stakeholder interests broadly. In any such consideration, the CEO and the rest of the senior team look closely at the opinions and needs of each stakeholder group, often soliciting feedback, to make an appropriately balanced decision.

PATIL: There are multiple factors one can consider before deciding whether a CEO or an organization should take a public stance. It must be a disciplined process rather than ad hoc or influenced by any popular prevailing narrative. One must certainly check whether the issue connects with the organization's purpose and values. If not, it's probably not the right space. Second, one should map stakeholders, namely employees, customers, investors, and regulators, to understand expectations and risks. Timing and context matter too. The same stance or statement can resonate in one market and backfire in another. Credibility is non-negotiable. If the organization or CEO doesn't have a record of action around the issue or the stance they're taking then the words will sound hollow. In today's world, public scrutiny and risk of being called out is very high. The process itself should be collaborative. Functions like communications, legal, public affairs, and the CEO's office should sit together, model scenarios, and test language. Ultimately, the decision boils down to whether speaking up builds more trust than silence. If the answer is yes, and one can back it with action, we move forward.

To what extent do stakeholders influence the decision to speak out or remain silent?

LUCHT: Any decision to speak out on an issue is considered very carefully and only after understanding the unique positions of each stakeholder group – customers, colleagues, communities, and shareholders. I think it's fair to say that the collective needs of stakeholders really drive decision making at the company, a guiding principle that

is reflected in Citizens' mission and values. To ensure we keep an appropriate balance across stakeholder interests, the appropriate decision about speaking out may well be to forgo a broad public position and work with each group to better understand their individual needs and concerns.

PATIL: I think each stakeholder group influences the decision, though in different ways. Employees, I reckon, want to feel proud that their company and their CEO stand for something that matters. Customers influence through expectations that they have from the brand. The younger audiences especially reward authenticity. It's been well proven that Gen Z has a soft spot for companies that are driven by values and have a strong purpose. Investors look at it through a risk lens. Increasingly, institutional investors expect leadership on ESG and resilience.

The challenge I feel is that these stakeholder groups seldom align – employees may push, customers may be split, investors may advise caution. A CCO's role is to find a balanced path, anchored in purpose, and backed by proof while ensuring the CEO's voice is not reactive but principled. It is less about pleasing everyone and more about demonstrating consistency, courage, clarity, and sometimes developing resilience to withstand criticism around how one navigates issues that affect society at large. In the end, as a guardrail, one must prioritize authenticity over popularity. In the long run, audiences respect a leader who is clear and principled.

DONLAN: We are, of course, always attentive to the perspectives and needs of our various stakeholder groups. However, we've found that by applying the framework described above, we're able to make more consistent and deliberate decisions regarding when it is appropriate to share a view or perspective. This approach helps ensure that our communications are both thoughtful and aligned with our organizational priorities.

APPROPRIATE CHANNELS & NECESSARY QUALITIES

Which communication channels do you prioritize for CEO statements?

PATIL: Channel selection, I feel, is as strategic as the message itself. For politically or socially sensitive topics, one must prioritize controlled, direct channels where context can be fully provided. For me, internal communication comes first. Employees should never learn about their CEO's or organization's position from the news or social media platforms. Town halls, videos, and intranet communication allow for a good two-way dialogue. For external audiences, I see LinkedIn emerging as a trusted space for thoughtful CEO commentary. It allows for depth, tone, and personal authenticity, while reaching both professional and public audiences. Traditional media that includes op-eds or media interviews are effective when a stance needs broader societal framing. We're cautious with the erstwhile Twitter (X) or other rapid-fire platforms as brevity can distort sensitive issues.

Importantly, the chosen channel must fit the CEO's natural style. Some are compelling in long-form essays, others shine in spoken words. Finally, one must ensure multichannel reinforcement. A speech, a blog post, and employee engagement all working in harmony. The priority is always clarity, authenticity, and reach, not just speed. In an era of amplified scrutiny, a CEO's words must not only be heard, but they must also be understood in their full context.

DONLAN: In the relatively rare occasion where referencing our decision framework does result in our CEO making a statement, we would typically send an internal email to our teammates and in some cases, post that statement to the CEOs LinkedIn account.

LUCHT: In the cases where we have chosen to speak out on social issues, we've taken an integrated approach that customarily has included a release, social posts, and internal communications – all of which are designed to advance a consistent set of messages.

What qualities make a CEO effective when communicating about sensitive political or social topics?

LUCHT: Some qualities help a CEO communicate effectively regarding any topic – authenticity, clarity, transparency.

Of course, sensitive social topics also call for a strong degree of empathy, openness to engage with stakeholders, and a degree of vulnerability, which can help foster trust.

PATIL: My observation has been that effective leaders and CEOs balance and combine empathy with courage.

A CLOSER LOOK AT:

CITIZENS FINANCIAL GROUP is one of the oldest and largest retail bank holding companies in the United States, headquartered in Providence, Rhode Island. It serves both individual and business clients across approximately 1,000 branches and 3,100 ATMs in 14 states and Washington, D.C. With around 17,000 employees, Citizens offers a broad range of banking products and services – from consumer deposits and lending to commercial banking and treasury management.

GODREJ was founded in 1897 to support economic independence in India. Serving over 1.1 billion consumers globally, the Godrej Industries Group employs thousands of people across a wide range of industries, including consumer goods, real estate, financial services, oleochemicals, agriculture, and facilities management. Its businesses operate under several listed companies, including Godrej Industries, Godrej Consumer Products, Godrej Properties, Godrej Agrovet, and Astec Lifesciences. The group is committed to innovation and sustainability, balancing people and planet alongside profit.

KEYCORP is one of the largest bank-based financial services companies in the United States. Headquartered in Cleveland, Ohio, it employs thousands of people and serves clients across 15 states through the KeyBank brand, with around 1,000 branches and 1,200 ATMs. KeyCorp offers a wide range of financial services for individuals and businesses, and through KeyBanc Capital Markets provides corporate and investment banking solutions, including mergers and acquisitions, debt and equity financing, and derivatives.

Case: Citizens Financial Group – CEO communication addressing underserved communities

Following the tragic events in Minneapolis in 2020, when the death of George Floyd sparked worldwide protests against racial injustice, the bank announced a \$10 million investment to promote social equity and advance economic opportunity in underserved communities. Our CEO, Bruce Van Saun, clearly positioned this commitment as an “important step forward to promote social and economic equity, to help eradicate racism and discrimination, and to work towards a world where all people and communities thrive.”

In addition to grants and charitable support initiatives aimed at supporting minority-owned small businesses and increasing awareness of racial disparities, this commitment included more than \$500 million in incremental financing and capital for small businesses, housing, and other development in predominately minority communities, as well as new internal programs aimed at increasing diversity and awareness.

I believe the multifaceted nature of the commitment worked well, being aimed at driving meaningful and sustainable progress in both promoting economic opportunity and strengthening communities. Were such an issue to unfortunately emerge in the future I believe we would execute in a similarly multi-stakeholder manner, building on our experience to move even more quickly.

Empathy allows them to genuinely acknowledge the hopes and expectations of diverse stakeholders. Courage enables them to take a stance even when the issue is sensitive and/or the outcome uncertain. Beyond these, authenticity is critical. Stakeholders quickly sense when a statement is crafted for optics rather than conviction. An effective CEO also needs to demonstrate listening skills. This can help understand employee concerns, societal sentiment, and expert perspectives before speaking.

Clarity is another vital quality. Sensitive issues are often laced with ambiguity, and a leader who communicates with precision and simplicity can cut through the noise. Humility plays a role too. Sometimes admitting the company doesn't have all the answers, but is willing to learn and act, builds credibility. Most importantly, resilience is essential. Once a

stance is taken, criticism is inevitable, and the CEO must stay steady, consistent, and driven by values. Communicating in this domain is not about mastering soundbites. It's about demonstrating leadership under scrutiny. In essence, effective leaders and CEOs are those who show humanity in their words, integrity in their choices, and resolve in standing by their commitments even in turbulent times.

DONLAN: When making public statements, our CEO emphasizes clear and direct language, deliberately avoiding corporate jargon. At the same time, he ensures that different perspectives are acknowledged, while grounding his views in the company's core values. This approach allows for transparent, principled, and respectful communication.

Case: Godrej Industries Group – Taking social stances linked to corporate values

There are many examples of social stances that our leaders have taken. As a stated policy, we do not tolerate any form of discrimination because of nationality, race, color, religion, gender identity or expression, sexual orientation, disability, age, or marital status and allow for equal opportunities for all our team members. Through our policies, our public communications, and our social responsibility endeavors, we strive to uphold our organizational values of trust and respect at all our workplaces. An op-ed in a major newspaper by the chairperson of one of our largest companies resonated widely, positioning the company firmly as inclusive and equal employer. This was in solidarity with LGBTQIA marriage equality petitions in the Supreme Court of India.

Of course, there have been instances where we underestimated the intensity of backlash when associating with certain narratives. It haunts us even now periodically as the narrative gets refreshed on social media and trolling starts. As a learning, we now engage more deeply in scenario planning and understanding the potential issues. Understanding of local market and cultural nuances has become necessary today and a lot of consideration is given to this aspect before any communication. I strongly feel that speaking out is powerful, but preparation, localization, and sustained action are what ultimately build trust and reputation.

Case: Keycorp – Reaching out to employees and neighbors through CEO communication

Following the tragic shooting at the Tops Supermarket in Buffalo, NY, our CEO reached out to employees via email and also shared his reflections on LinkedIn. In making this decision, we applied the decision-making framework mentioned above. Buffalo is our second-largest employee location, and several of our team members had family members directly affected by the incident. Additionally, Key had recently opened a branch in the same neighborhood, which had previously been both a food desert and largely underserved by banking services. This context informed our decision to communicate thoughtfully and promptly with our employees and the broader community.

CHANGING EXPECTATIONS

Have stakeholder expectations or your CEO’s stance changed in recent years?

DONLAN: In recent years, there seemed to be a growing expectation from stakeholders for corporations to take a stand on social and political issues. However, this trend appears to be stabilizing, as companies are increasingly cautious about commenting on matters that fall outside their areas of expertise or geographic presence.

LUCHT: Our CEO’s position has remained highly consistent around the need to carefully understand varied points of view across stakeholder groups when considering whether or not to speak out. Given the highly dynamic environment in which we operate there is always a wide range of expectations, but we’ve remained disciplined in this area, as we have in other aspects of communications and in our execution more generally.

PATIL: Multiple changes have happened over the past many years. Earlier, stakeholders largely accepted that companies would focus on business fundamentals and only occasionally comment on societal issues. Today, even silence is interpreted as a statement. Employees, especially Gen Z, expect their company to be a moral actor, not just an economic one. I have seen consumers rewarding or punishing brands based on their stances. A clear indicator is investors increasingly assessing ESG and reputational resilience as indicators of long-term performance. In the meantime, polarization has grown, making advocacy riskier. This dual pressure – heightened expectations alongside delicate reputational risks – has changed the organizational approach towards advocacy or taking a stance. I see that the approach has become more cautious. Leaders no longer speak out on every issue but focus on those deeply connected to purpose, values, or industry relevance.

Our leader’s journey mirrors this. Initially cautious, preferring quiet philanthropy over public advocacy, they now recognize that leadership requires visible, vocal engagement on issues that matter to our business, people, and society. The preference has evolved from silence or reactive commentary toward proactive, principled positioning, always backed by tangible action. The bar has been raised – fewer words, more weight, fewer causes, more commitment. Today, advocacy isn’t about speaking more, it’s about speaking meaningfully, and always matching words with deeds.

The six key principles of effective CEO communication



Source: Susan Donlan, Peter Lucht, & Sujit Patil

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BACKGROUND INFORMATION

This article is based on interviews conducted by the managing editor Dr. Michelle Wloka.

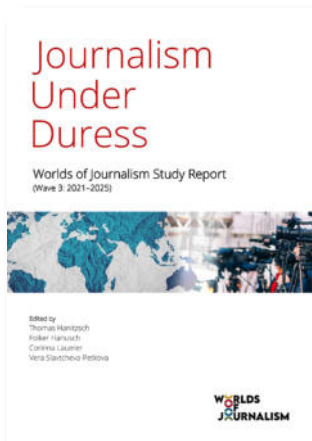
STUDY HIGHLIGHTS: NEW INSIGHTS ON AI, TRUST, JOURNALISM, AND INTERNAL COMMUNICATION

AUTHOR: MICHELLE WLOKA, MANAGING EDITOR



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New research from the fields of corporate communication, media, journalism, and technology sheds light on how organizations, audiences, and industries are adapting to digital transformation. The following reports track the developments in AI adoption, media markets, public trust, and workplace communication. Together, they offer a cross-disciplinary view of today's communication landscape.



Read the full report: Hanitzsch, T., Hanusch, F., Lauerer, C., & Slavtcheva-Petkova, V. (Eds.) (2025). *Journalism under duress: Worlds of journalism study report (Wave 3: 2021-2025)*. Munich: WJS Center. <https://doi.org/10.5282/ubm/epub.128812>

JOURNALISM & MEDIA

Journalism under duress: worlds of journalism study report

The *Worlds of Journalism Study* explores how journalists around the world navigate risk, uncertainty, and transformation in today's media landscape. The study includes responses from over 32,000 journalists in 75 countries. The research reveals:

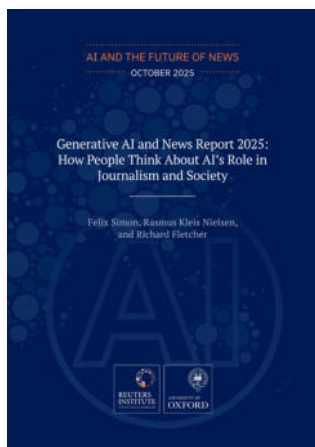
- Journalists, particularly in the Global South, face mounting psychological and digital threats – including intimidation and pervasive surveillance – which contribute to widespread self-censorship.
- The profession places the highest value on accountability and watchdog functions, emphasizing fact-checking and scrutiny of those in power. In authoritarian or transitional contexts, however, journalists frequently adopt collaborative and interventionist approaches.
- There is a shift in journalistic epistemologies: Many professionals now acknowledge that complete objectivity is unattainable and that facts are context-dependent. Nevertheless, verification and transparency remain central values.
- Although traditional media still play a vital role, technology and social media have transformed newsrooms by speeding up production and expanding distribution.

The European media industry outlook

The second edition of the *European Media Industry Outlook*, published by the European Union, is based on independent research conducted in 2024 and 2025. The report examines consumer and industry trends across audiovisual media, video games and extended reality (XR), and news media, focusing on market revenues, investment, technology adoption, AI usage, and skills gaps.

- The **EU audiovisual sector** remains the world's second-largest market, yet it faces strong competition from video-sharing platforms and non-European streaming services. While European content production is substantial, audience reach remains limited.
- The **EU video games and XR industries** hold a relatively small share of the global market and rely heavily on non-European technologies and distribution platforms. The sector is highly fragmented, with numerous developers but comparatively few publishers. XR technologies show growth potential, especially in high-end hardware and immersive media, though small European actors struggle to scale.
- **European news media** continue to face declining traditional revenues and growing competition from digital platforms and AI-generated content. Social media attracts expanding audiences, particularly among younger users, yet traditional outlets remain trusted. Many news organizations are adapting by expanding their online presence, integrating AI tools, and exploring alternative revenue streams. Local and small-scale media remain most vulnerable.

Read the full report: European Commission: Directorate-General for Communications Networks, Content and Technology (2025). The European media industry outlook – September 2025. Publications Office of the European Union. <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2759/0606593>



Read the full report: Simon, F., Kleis Nielsen, R., & Fletcher, R. (2025). *Generative AI and news report 2025: How people think about AI's role in journalism and society*. Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism. <https://doi.org/10.60625/risj-5bjv-yt69>

Generative AI and news report 2025: How people think about AI's role in journalism and society

The *2025 Reuters Institute Report* is based on nationally representative YouGov surveys of approximately 2,000 people in six countries: Argentina, Denmark, France, Japan, the United Kingdom, and the United States. The study examines public awareness of, use of, and attitudes toward generative AI in society and the news industry.

- The findings show that searching for information is now the leading use of AI, with weekly usage increasing to 24% – more than doubling since last year – and surpassing media creation. More specialized uses, such as news consumption, remain low at 6%.
- Engagement with AI-generated search results is mixed: Only one-third of respondents consistently click through to source links, while 28% rarely or never do. However, younger users are more likely to engage further.
- Trust in AI outputs is moderate, at 50%. Speed, convenience, and information aggregation are cited as reasons for confidence. However, a significant “comfort gap” exists between AI- and human-led news: Only 12% are comfortable with fully AI-generated news, compared to 62% for entirely human-produced content. Acceptance increases when humans supervise or guide AI.
- Opinions about AI's role in journalism are mixed. While respondents recognize potential benefits, such as lower production costs and faster updates, they remain concerned about reduced transparency and trustworthiness. Only a third believe that journalists routinely verify AI outputs before publication.

News integrity in AI assistants

The BBC and the European Broadcasting Union (EBU) conducted one of the largest cross-market evaluations of how AI assistants handle news and current affairs. The study involved 22 public service media organizations from 18 countries and covered 14 languages. The 2025 report assessed the accuracy and reliability of AI-generated responses from tools such as ChatGPT, Copilot, Perplexity, and Gemini.

The results show partial improvement but persistent flaws. Although the percentage of responses with significant errors decreased, nearly half of all AI-generated responses across markets still contained errors, primarily related to sourcing. Gemini had the highest error rate, with sourcing issues in 72% of its outputs. Despite these shortcomings, public trust in AI assistants remains high. Over one-third of UK adults say they fully trust AI summaries, a figure that rises to nearly half among younger users. The report also notes a growing concern that “answer-first” AI experiences may divert audiences away from trusted publishers, further challenging the visibility of reliable journalism.

Read the full report: Archer, P., & de Tender, J.P. (2025). News integrity in AI assistants. An international PSM study. European Broadcasting Union. <https://www.ebu.ch/research/open/report/news-integrity-in-ai-assistants>

COMMUNICATIONS

2025 International Employee Communication Impact Study

The *2025 International Employee Communication Impact Study*, conducted by YouGov and Staffbase, examined how employees in Australia, Austria, Germany, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, and the United States experienced internal communication during periods of change, crisis, and uncertainty. The study collected 3,574 responses from a variety of industries and focused on employee experience, the impact of communication, change communication, crisis communication, and leadership communication.

The findings reveal that internal communication remains challenging for many employees. Only 9% of non-desk workers report being very satisfied with communication, while 38% rate its quality as “only fair” or “poor.” Direct supervisors emerged as the most trusted source of information across all employee groups, highlighting the importance of frontline leadership in communication strategies.

The study also shows that digital tools, particularly employee apps, can significantly improve change and crisis communication when used as primary channels. Clear leadership communication is strongly associated with employee satisfaction. Those who report receiving very clear leadership messages are three times more likely to be satisfied in their roles than those who perceive communication as unclear.

Read the full report: Scherber, P., & Grover, R. (2025). 2025 international employee communication impact study. Staffbase. <https://staffbase.com/blog/employee-communication-impact-study-2025>



Read the full report: Tench, R., Moreno, A., Romenti, S., Buhmann, A., Laborde, A., & Zerfass, A. (2025). European Communication Monitor 2025/26. EUPRERA. <https://communicationmonitor.eu>

European Communication Monitor 2025/26

The 2025/26 edition of the *European Communication Monitor*, the world's longest-running and largest academic study of corporate communications, surveyed 30 chief communications officers from 300 of Europe's largest companies. The report focuses on strategic communication challenges through the lens of intergenerational diversity and highlights three critical areas:

- › **Values-based corporate positioning:** Values are increasingly viewed as “living constructs” rather than static mission statements. Values-based positioning is becoming a critical tool for maintaining trust and cohesion across generational divides. CCOs emphasize the need to align internal and external narratives, adopt flexible messaging frameworks, practice continuous listening, and leverage generational diversity.
- › **Strategic talent management:** Attracting and retaining high-potential communicators, particularly Millennials and Gen Z, remains a central challenge. Effective talent management goes beyond recruitment to focus on inclusive cultures, cross-functional experiences, personalized career paths, and hybrid profiles combining creativity and business acumen. Leadership strategies need to link communication roles to measurable business outcomes and position internal talent as a competitive advantage.
- › **Coaching as a leadership imperative:** Coaching has emerged as a core leadership philosophy, not just a performance tool. CCOs serve as strategic coaches for teams, peers, and executives, fostering cross-generational learning, innovation, and organizational resilience. Success factors include long-term coaching strategies, situational and adaptive approaches, peer and reverse coaching, alignment with corporate values, and robust evaluation metrics that demonstrate impact.

The impact of generative relations and communications

The Purposeful Relations' white paper summarizes research on the impact of AI on reputation and visibility, identifying 12 strategic imperatives for communication leaders. The report emphasizes that AI language models now influence public perception and demand content that is optimized for discoverability and authority. Both earned and owned media remain critical, and content must be accurate and optimized for AI readability. Engaging with online communities, proactively managing crises, and communicating transparently and credibly are essential. The framework for safeguarding influence and credibility in a rapidly evolving AI landscape includes monitoring AI outputs, integrating reputation management across corporate functions, and maintaining adaptable strategies independent of specific platforms.

Read the full report: Bruce, S., & Bailey, T. (2025). The impact of generative relations and communications. Purposeful Relations Ltd. <https://purposefulrelations.com/GEO-Report-2025>

TECHNOLOGY & DIGITALIZATION

How people around the world view AI

The Pew Research Center's report examines public attitudes towards AI in 25 countries, based on surveys of 36,961 adults. It reveals that – although awareness of AI is high worldwide – public opinion remains divided. In many countries, people express both excitement and concern about AI's increasing presence. While respondents recognize its potential to drive innovation, enhance services, and empower individuals, widespread apprehension persists regarding job displacement, privacy risks, bias, and potential impacts on creativity and decision-making.

Trust in regulation varies notably across regions and institutions. While most people express moderate confidence in their own government's ability to manage AI, many trust the European Union. Trust in the United States or China, however, is generally lower. There are clear differences between countries: Citizens in emerging economies tend to be more optimistic and open to adopting AI, whereas those in advanced economies are more cautious and skeptical.

Read the full report: Poushter, J., Fagan, M., & Corichi, M. (2025). How people around the world view AI. Pew Research Center. <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2025/10/15/how-people-around-the-world-view-ai>

The state of AI in 2025

The *2025 McKinsey Global Survey on AI* gathered insights from almost 2,000 participants spanning diverse industries, company sizes, and professional roles across 105 countries. Three years after the emergence of generative AI, almost nine in ten organizations report using AI in some capacity; however, full integration remains limited. Most companies are still experimenting with or piloting AI, with deployment of agents concentrated in IT and knowledge management for tasks such as automated service desks and research support. The highest adoption rates are found in technology, media, telecommunications, and healthcare, while the most common measurable financial benefits are found in marketing, sales, strategy, corporate finance, and product development.

Organizations that use AI to drive growth and innovation, rather than just efficiency, tend to achieve broader outcomes, including increased revenue, improved customer satisfaction, greater competitiveness and higher profitability. Success is closely tied to agile, enterprise-wide processes that support rapid deployment and adaptability. The impact on the workforce is mixed: While AI has not yet led to widespread job losses, many companies anticipate changes in the year ahead and are continuing to hire for AI-related roles. There is an increasing focus on risk management, particularly with regard to privacy, regulatory compliance, and reputational issues, although AI inaccuracy remains the most frequently reported negative consequence.

Read the full report: Singla, A., Sukharevsky, A., Yee, L., Chui, M., Hall, B., & Balakrishnan, T. (2025). The state of AI in 2025. Agents, innovation, and transformation. QuantumBlack, AI by McKinsey. <https://www.mckinsey.com/capabilities/quantumblack/our-insights/the-state-of-ai>

Digital Trust Index – understanding how digital experiences affect consumer trust

The 2025 THALES Digital Trust Index reveals a worldwide erosion of confidence in digital services. The study, based on responses from over 14,000 consumers in 14 countries, reveals that no sector exceeds a 50% trust rating. Only banking, insurance, and government institutions have maintained stable levels of trust. Consumers are increasingly responsible for managing digital trust, including navigating consent forms, protecting their data, and monitoring for breaches. Meanwhile, brands are lagging in transparency and accountability. The primary reason for abandoning a brand is excessive data requests, closely followed by poor online support. Notably, only 3% of respondents trust news media organizations with their personal data.

Read the full report: THALES (2025). 2025 Thales Digital Trust Index. <https://cpl.thalesgroup.com/digital-trust-index>

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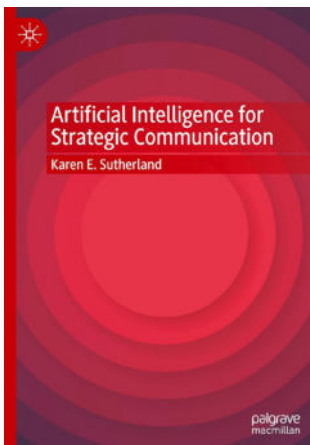
WHAT TO READ NEXT: FROM AI TO PERSUASION

REVIEWERS: BERND PÜTTER, HOCHTIEF; MATT RAGAS, DEPAUL UNIVERSITY & LAURENT TURPAULT, ESSENDI



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Two Chief Communication Officers of global companies (Bernd Pütter, Hochtief, and Laurent Turpault, Essendi) and a renowned professor (Matt Ragas, DePaul University) review a selection of inspiring books. They share their key insights and takeaways, as well as who they think would benefit most from reading them.



Sutherland, K. (2025). Artificial intelligence for strategic communication. Springer nature singapore. 486 pages. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-96-2575-8>

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE FOR STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION BY KAREN SUTHERLAND (BERND PÜTTER)

Karen Sutherland teaches public relations at the University of the Sunshine Coast in Queensland, Australia. In her book, she brings together different perspectives on the topic of AI: those of academics, practitioners, and developers, while also reflecting international diversity. Her goal is to provide a practical, data-driven framework for the use of AI in strategic communication and thus close a research gap.

The book addresses three central research questions that arise from an analysis of AI's historical context and its application in strategic communication, as well as from a comprehensive literature review:

- What are the attitudes and perceptions towards the use and impact of AI in strategic communication?
- How is AI currently used in strategic communication?
- What are the attitudes and perceptions about the future role and impact of AI in strategic communication?

The research is based on a comprehensive literature review, 41 semi-structured interviews with academics and practitioners from eight countries, and an online survey with 400 communication professionals from Australia, the UK, and the US.

The chapter structure is as follows:

- **Part I:** Foundations and theories of AI in strategic communication (definition, history, ethical challenges).
- **Part II:** Integration of AI in practice (strategy development, content creation, text, image, video and audio tools, fact-checking, editing, evaluation).
- **Part III:** Future perspectives, summary of research findings, model for practice, and resource list.

Most useful insights

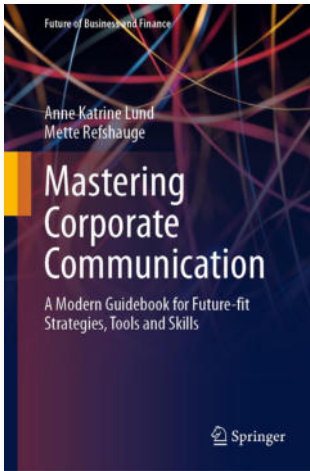
The chapters are clearly written and accessible. The interviewees articulate a wide range of issues – including ethical and legal concerns, hate speech, data protection and security, and copyright. The author outlines measures for addressing these challenges, offering a useful guide for practitioners in organizational settings.

The last section of the book deals with the future development of AI in the field of strategic communication. It is emphasized that the rapid development of AI makes predictions difficult, but a structured overview of the expected evolutionary stages of AI is nevertheless provided. AI is seen as a tool that complements, but does not replace, human skills – especially in creative, ethical, and strategic areas.

Who will benefit most from this book

I cannot judge the book's value for the communication science community, having worked in professional communication management for too long. That said, the overview of the research situation and the approach to the topic are conclusive, and the findings are explained clearly and coherently. As a practical textbook for students or as supplemental reading for corporate communicators, the book has limited utility. Detailed information on the pros and cons of specific AI applications can be found quicker elsewhere.

However, I do think that the book's relevance for communication managers in companies and institutions will extend into the future. As operational managers gain the ability to perform many communication tasks themselves using AI, communication departments will face increasing pressure to demonstrate their distinct value and sharpen their strategic focus. The book provides guidance for communication professionals in navigating the various stages of AI development.



Lund, A. K., & Refshauge, M. (2024). Mastering corporate communication: A modern guidebook for future-fit strategies, tools and skills. Springer nature switzerland. 239 pages. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-50232-3>

MASTERING CORPORATE COMMUNICATION BY LUND AND REFSHAUGE (MATT RAGAS)

This timely “pracademic” (practitioner-academic) collaboration provides an important overview of contemporary subjects shaping the future of corporate communication. The themes addressed range from trust building with stakeholders and the demands facing communication today to how professional communicators can help manage change and crises. As the authors deftly explain in the introduction, through the incorporation of case studies, this book provides “real insight into the engine room of a large organization’s communication function.” One of the co-authors, Mette Refshauge, serves as a communications director for Maersk, the shipping and logistics giant with operations spanning 130 countries and more than 100,000 employees. The other co-author, Anne Katrine Lund holds a PhD in rhetoric and is a strategic advisor to organizations.

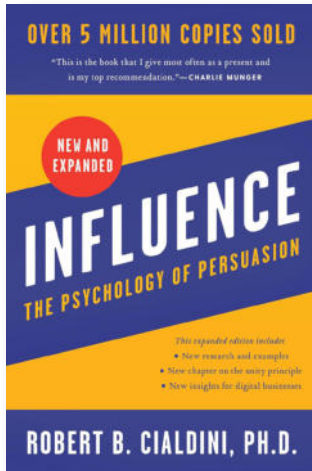
Most useful insights

Interviews with and short profiles of top academic researchers (e.g., Jim Grunig, Bob Heath, Chiara Valentini), which are incorporated into the contents of each chapter, help introduce the work of these scholars to a broader audience. These interviews and profiles also help to show the potential practical application of theoretical findings. The final chapter on “Skills of the Future” provides valuable space for reflection on the future of the profession and the ongoing competency development needed to help elevate the function’s contributions.

I found myself wishing there was a searchable index at the end of the book so I could look up key terms. For example, in the US, the world’s largest economy, there have recently been so-called “DEI rollbacks” and a public de-emphasis on ESG performance by some companies. This book includes a useful chapter on corporate citizenship, and CEO activism is briefly addressed. But I would like to see more nuanced thinking around navigating corporate citizenship in various global markets as the sociopolitical winds sometimes shift notably, such as in the US currently.

Who will benefit most from this book

This book will benefit a range of corporate and professional communication professionals, ranging from recent graduates to mid-career professionals working on the communication teams of large organizations, such as multinational corporations. Educators should consider adopting this book for graduate level courses within corporate communication and related subjects. This book could also be used as a supplement in corporate learning and development programs.



Cialdini, R. B. (2021). Influence: the psychology of persuasion (New and Expanded). Harper Business. 592 pages. ISBN 978-0-06-313689-2

INFLUENCE – THE PSYCHOLOGY OF PERSUASION BY ROBERT B. CIALDINI (LAURENT TURPAULT)

As its title suggests, Influence is about persuasion, but more precisely, about the psychological levers that make people say “yes.” Robert Cialdini’s work lies in decoding the hidden mechanisms behind human behavior, which often guide decisions without our conscious awareness.

Actually, the book itself uses one of the very principles it describes: authority. The cover announces that more than five million copies have been sold. I think this is a classic example of how perceived authority (and social proof) can nudge us into action. After all, how could one not read what five million others have deemed valuable?

What makes Influence powerful is its universality. Cialdini does not specifically refer to communication technologies, algorithms, or even AI (which was not at all at the stage it is today when this book was published for the first time). He roots his analysis in timeless human psychology: behaviors that have shaped our interactions since the dawn of social life. For communications professionals, that perspective is refreshing. It strips persuasion back to its essence: understanding what truly moves people.

Most useful insights

When I closed the book, the first thing that came to mind was the list of the seven principles of influence: reciprocity, liking, social proof, authority, scarcity, commitment and consistency, and unity. Saying that is no spoiler as the value is not in the list itself, but in how Cialdini brings each to life through stories and examples that stick.

I am naturally someone who likes to get the big picture before diving into details. And what struck me most was Cialdini’s gift for illustration. He anchors each principle in human situations, with anecdotes and sometimes humor. For instance, he uses a Dennis the Menace comic strip to explain reciprocity – the idea that when someone gives us something (even something small), we feel an urge to give back more. As he shows, “an individual often agrees to a request for a substantially larger favor than the one he or she received.” You read that and think: Yes, that’s exactly how it works in real life, and often without us realizing it.

For someone working in corporate communication, these insights resonate. Influence is at the heart of what we do: building trust and inspiring action. Cialdini’s principles are not distant academic theories; they are tools, guiding how we craft messages, position leaders, and design campaigns. The book helped me to understand influence not only as something we use, but also as something we must detect. Because being aware of the levers that influence others also means recognizing when they are being used on us.

And I must say, discovering my own “Dennis the Menace” moments along the way was both entertaining and enlightening.

Who will benefit most from this book

Influence has never been a more relevant concept than today. It has evolved from a psychological phenomenon into an industry (think influencers, algorithms, and even AI-generated personalities). Yet, as Cialdini reminds us, influence is far from new. Wherever there is life, there is influence. The author even draws on examples from the animal kingdom to show how social behavior shapes action.

This makes the book valuable reading for a wide audience: negotiators, marketers, public affairs professionals, and anyone seeking to build trust or drive action. For those in corporate communication, it provides a framework for understanding

the emotional and cognitive levers behind reputation, credibility, and engagement. It helps refine both content and channel strategy, reminding us, for instance, that authority and social proof can be powerful tools in digital campaigns where repetition and trust matter.

In that perspective, *Influence* is the right complement to technical guides like *The Art of Negotiation*. One gives you the tools of persuasion; the other teaches you when and why to use them.

In a world of constant notifications, instant content, and shrinking attention spans, reading a book like this feels almost countercultural. It's not a novel, not a business manual, but something in between, a pause for reflection. And that pause, in Cialdini's company, turns out to be an excellent investment.

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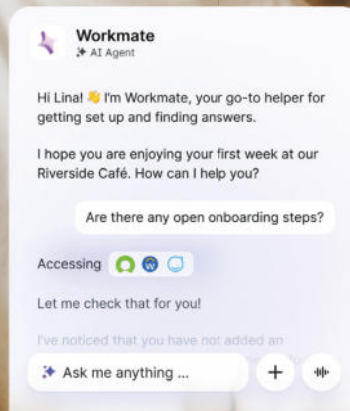
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