

CORPORATE COMMUNICATION REVIEW

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RESEARCH AND INSIGHTS FOR COMMUNICATION LEADERS

VALUE CREATION AND MEASUREMENT

Evaluation frameworks to demonstrate impact
and guide decisions

SUBVERSIVE STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION

Reputational threats through
manipulation and deceptive tactics

WORKPLACE WELL-BEING

The role of function,
leadership, and ethics

SOUTH AFRICA

Corporate communication
in an emerging market

CASE STUDIES

Ahold Delhaize and Coca-Cola
Europacific Partners



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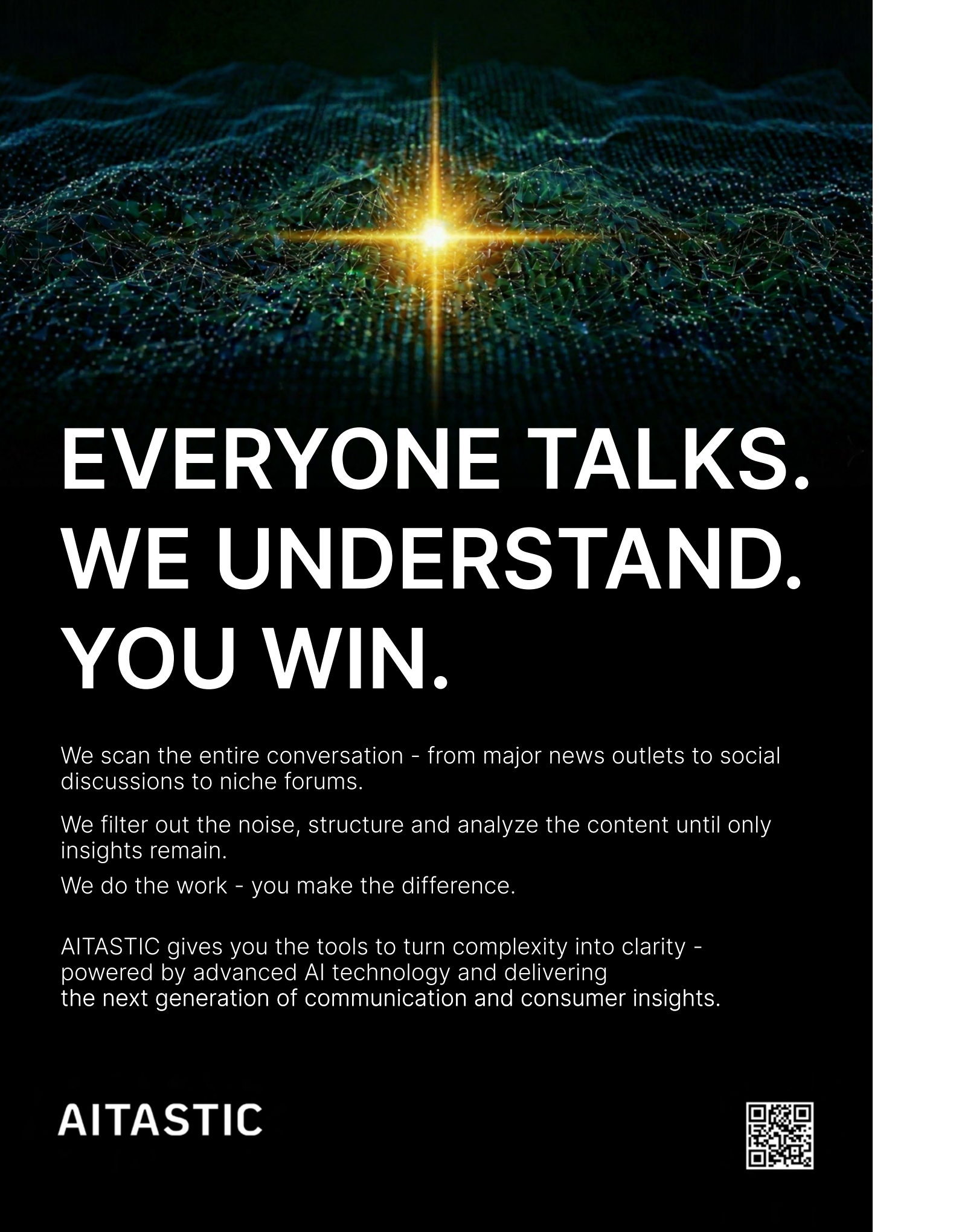
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Welcome to this issue of Corporate Communication Review, the open-access magazine bridging the gap between academic research and professional practice in corporate communication, strategic communication, and corporate affairs.

Our mission is to provide communication leaders with quality-proven insights from international research and cutting-edge academic knowledge – guided by an editorial board of renowned academics, chief communication officers, and industry experts (see p. 70). Twice a year, Corporate Communication Review provides practitioners with valuable guidance and inspiration for their daily work, strategic decisions, and discussions with top executives.

This issue explores value creation and measurement in corporate communication. Despite decades of research and practice producing numerous frameworks and standards, clarity is still lacking and application remains inconsistent. Against this backdrop, we highlight research on key evaluation methods and common implementation challenges – and explore how communication can demonstrate its value and guide organizational decision-making.

From this issue onwards, we are also introducing a new section, which highlights the state of corporate communication in relevant but internationally less well-known markets, starting with South Africa.

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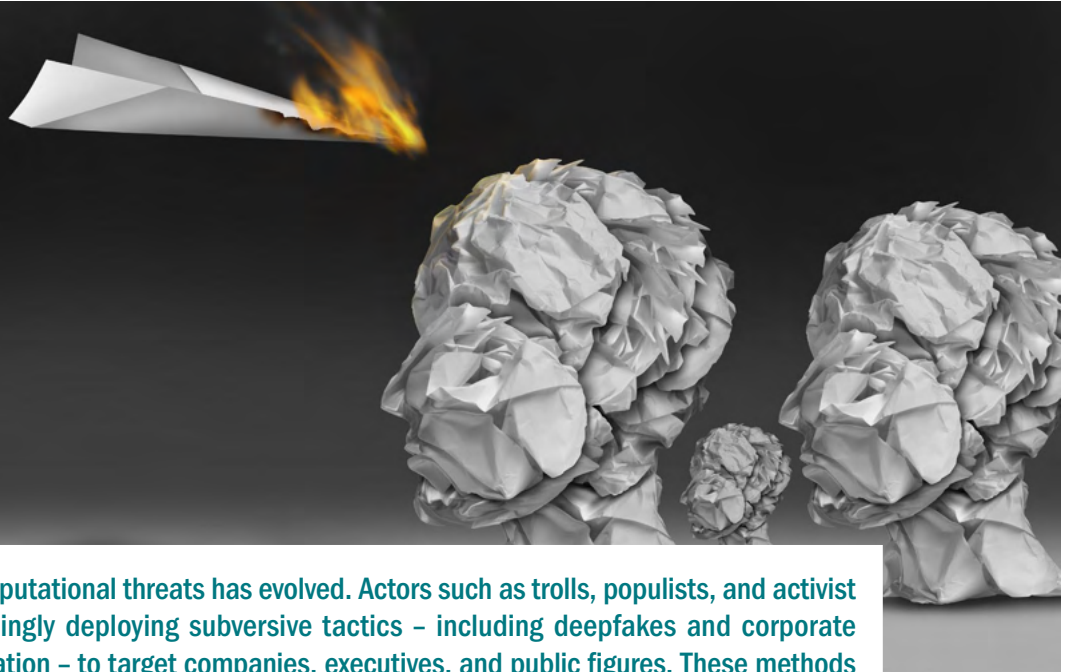
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THE RISE OF SUBVERSIVE STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION

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The landscape of reputational threats has evolved. Actors such as trolls, populists, and activist groups are increasingly deploying subversive tactics – including deepfakes and corporate character assassination – to target companies, executives, and public figures. These methods amplify the speed, sophistication, and impact of reputational crises, making them more difficult to manage. This article examines the implications of these tactics for reputational risk management and explores strategies such as inoculation approaches to help communication professionals strengthen their pre-crisis planning and respond to emerging digital threats.

CORPORATE CHARACTER ASSASSINATION AS SUBVERSIVE STRATEGY

In the United States, corporate negative campaigning has a long history. For example, Coca-Cola and Pepsi have historically been engaged in an intense marketing rivalry known as the “Cola Wars,” which has extended beyond advertising to include lawsuits, rumors, and negative advertising campaigns such as the “Pepsi Challenge.” Legal battles have included accusations of unfair competition and trademark infringement. Claims of ambush marketing and sabotage have also arisen, with each company attempting to disrupt the other’s events (Bhasin, 2013). These practices

have sometimes crossed ethical boundaries, attracting public criticism and calls for fair competition.

Smear campaigns are deliberate attempts to damage reputations, degrade targets, and isolate them. The rhetoric of character attacks – sometimes referred to as “subversive rhetoric,” according to Fisher (1970) – is considered one of the primary purposes of human communication. As Benoit (2025) notes, persuasive attacks in both society and politics are common occurrences because human behavior frequently provokes criticism.

THE META CASE – AN ILLUSTRATIVE EXAMPLE OF SUBVERSIVE EFFORTS

In 2022, Meta, the parent company of Facebook, hired the Republican consulting firm Targeted Victory to orchestrate a nationwide public opinion campaign against its competitor TikTok. The campaign aimed to portray the Chinese-owned app as a danger to American children and society by emphasizing its foreign ownership as a national security risk. It took place at a time when Meta was losing users for the first time in its history to TikTok and other competitors. The campaign was intended to deflect scrutiny from Meta's own problems, including data privacy issues and antitrust concerns.

As reported by The Washington Post, the smear campaign included news stories and op-eds in local U.S. media outlets about dangerous trends allegedly originating on

TikTok (such as the “devious licks” or “slap a teacher” challenges), letters to newspaper editors from citizens presented as concerned parents, and efforts to lobby politicians and the public to put further pressure on TikTok (Lorenz & Harwell, 2022). This was not the first time Facebook had secretly attacked its competitors; according to CBS News (2022), the company hired another PR firm in 2018 to conduct opposition research on its opponents, including billionaire philanthropist George Soros. This case serves as an illustration of subversive efforts that take place in the business world, typically falling under the broad category of “negative” or “stealth influence” campaigns, both of which pose challenges for corporate reputation management.

Attacks on companies and their CEOs, however, are not limited to instances of intercorporate asymmetrical warfare; they also include negative campaigns by external actors, such as journalists, social media influencers, and activist groups. These kinds of attacks can be subsumed under the umbrella term of “corporate character assassination,” which is defined by Coombs and Holladay (2020) as “deliberate destruction of organizational credibility and reputation through character attacks.”

Coombs and Holladay (2020) identify two main forms of corporate character assassination:

1. Actions by activist stakeholders, who seek to change organizational practices by aligning corporate values and behavior with stakeholder expectations; and
2. Actions by angry stakeholders, who seek revenge by deliberately damaging an organization's character or reputation.

Stakeholders can even pressure management to change their organizational behavior by threatening to harm the corporate image of their company.

However, corporate character assassination represents only one example within a wider range of subversive strategies and tactics that have been enabled and accelerated by social media. Social media platforms have created new forms of visibility that, in turn, produce recurring threats to

corporate reputation. These threats may come from various sources, including faux pas, gaffes, or leaked personal data circulated by media outlets that profit from corporate scandals.

Media enterprises, driven by audience expansion, often show little concern for regulating disruptive clickbait content. Negative content naturally attracts attention and therefore carries greater value for media producers. Clickbait content centered on scandalous news, rumors, or character attacks involving politicians and celebrities remains in constant high demand.

Today, media platforms are populated by trickster figures and agents of disruption, including populists, trolls, and pranksters who target politicians and business executives. Cancel culture has brought another surge of public callouts and boycotts targeting companies that fail to articulate their positions on current events or take political stances in a timely manner (Samoilenko & Jasper, 2023). Both the radical left and radical right have turned into agents of disruption and subversion, orchestrating nationwide efforts to shame and cancel prominent public figures.

Eric Dezenhall (2014), founder and CEO of Dezenhall Resources, argues that social media has made reputational crises worse for three primary reasons (the three Vs of social media crisis):

- **Velocity:** The speed with which information can be shared;
- **Volume:** The sheer volume of this information; and
- **Venom:** The hostility behind many allegations.

These factors may combine to create what he calls a “fiasco vortex,” – a runaway crisis in which destructive information accumulates and spreads beyond the point of no return. According to the 2025 Aon Global Risk Management Survey, reputational risk is increasingly driven by digital acceleration; environmental, social, and governance scrutiny; and intense geopolitical volatility, with 65% of organizations naming cyber-attacks as their top reputational risk (Aon, 2025). As risks have become more interconnected, damage to brand reputation now ranks among the top ten global business risks, often exacerbated by AI-enabled misinformation and social media dynamics.

The expansion of alternative online platforms and narratives, along with broader media fragmentation, has created a situation in which news users are confronted with an abundance of outlets with different ideological leanings that distort perceptions of the political public sphere (Habermas, 2022). These digital gated communities often form around particular topics or personalities, allowing users to insulate themselves from disagreement or alternative viewpoints. As seen in the well-known Pizzagate case (Marwick & Lewis, 2017), internet users’ propensity to follow like-minded individuals in echo chambers exacerbates polarization and conspiratorial thinking, which can quickly escalate into real-world violence. Pizzagate is a debunked conspiracy theory that emerged during the 2016 U.S. presidential election, alleging that Hillary Clinton’s campaign chair, John Podesta, had leaked emails containing coded messages that linked Democratic officials to a child sex ring in a Washington, D.C. pizzeria.

Szokolczai (2022) describes the contemporary moment in which these frequent online attacks take place in terms of “permanent liminality”, a condition in which temporary crisis situations become enduring states. This state of affairs is fertile ground for various agents of disruption who produce new liminal situations to attract media attention

and promote their agendas through emerging forms of subversive strategic communication.

WHAT IS SUBVERSIVE STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION?

Botan (2017) defines strategic communication as the deliberate planning of campaigns that originate from an understanding of the public’s thoughts and desires. Unlike traditional models that focus on a sender-receiver relationship or on “crafting” messages to achieve organizational goals, this model places publics – and their ability to cocreate meaning – at the center of the practice. Subversive elements of persuasive communication are crucial for achieving strategic objectives. Subversive attacks often require actors to convince diverse audiences of their own moral superiority – and, by extension, their legitimacy – by undermining the character and integrity of opponents and competitors. The goal is to force the target to expend time, energy, and resources responding to accusations.

Today, subversive campaigns aimed at influencing public opinion are becoming increasingly strategic and collaborative, as they are shaped by the contributions and interactions of various motivated stakeholders, including influencers, activists, and competitors. Even negative campaigns often labeled as “dark” or “dirty” – because their methods contravene societal norms and ethical principles – still operate within strategic and co-creational frameworks across multiple digital platforms. For instance, hashtag cancellation or deepfake prank campaigns often rely on networked audiences to go viral, incite outrage, and provoke controversies.

Subversion can be either transparent and lightning-fast or covert and slow-moving, gradually eroding a reputation by a thousand cuts. Manipulation and deception have long been the centerpiece of information warfare, often relying on the spread of misinformation, rumors, and conspiracy theories. The objective is to introduce an issue about the target into the existing consensus of a community by gradually circulating false or damaging information. Deceptive strategies can be deliberately employed by pragmatic actors seeking to attain their goals within the contemporary

media ecosystem. In corporate conflicts, for instance, identity theft through “brandjacking” is a highly subversive tactic that replaces a brand’s original identity with a fake one, thereby weakening the brand’s operational capacity and value (Samoilenko & Langley, 2023). Impersonators often engage in brand piracy by taking over a brand’s visual identity or social media accounts and then promoting false corporate statements or campaigns.

The rise of synthetic media technologies has transformed visual disinformation campaigns into highly sophisticated operations of deception and influence. These operations are increasingly effective in altering human psychographic profiles and persuading audiences on complex political and social issues. For example, “hacktivists” may use deepfakes to advance political or social objectives by producing altered media that bolster their causes or undermine their opponents (Samoilenko & Suvorova, 2025). The use of AI in this way allows subversive actors to craft targeted, persuasive, and intimidating messages with unprecedented precision. The rise of amateur deepfake creators is particularly alarming, as many AI-generated videos are made for illegal entertainment, deception, or smear campaigns (Sandoval et al., 2024).

EXAMPLES OF SUBVERSIVE COMMUNICATION TACTICS

- **Corporate character assassination:** Targeted smear campaigns to damage a person’s or company’s reputation.
- **Deepfakes:** Creating realistic fake audio or video to misrepresent someone or spread misinformation.
- **Hashtag cancellations:** Coordinated social media attacks using specific hashtags to amplify criticism and mobilize public backlash.
- **Brandjacking:** Typically associated with the disruption of a brand’s narrative and the appropriation of corporate identity by third parties.
- **Astroturfing:** Faking grassroots support or opposition to manipulate public perception.

Subversive strategic campaigns generally consist of three stages that can be implemented sequentially, from communication disruption to complete ideological subversion, or deployed separately, depending on the plans and objectives of the strategists.

THREE STAGES OF SUBVERSION

Disruption

This phase includes strategies and activities that aim to interrupt an event, conversation, or relationship. Typical actors of disruption include trolls, pranksters, and media hijackers who seek to derail ongoing conversations while advancing their own opinions or agendas.

Trolling, once described as playful, ironic, and transgressive identity play (Phillips, 2015), has become increasingly associated with the posting of provocative content, including deliberately misleading or pointless comments intended to provoke and mock other users for the purpose of dragging them into an empty argument or quarrel.

Political activists have also used disruption to challenge dominant narratives. Such tactics have been used, for instance, to protest the tyranny of oil, recast debates over healthcare reform, and question the rituals of organized religions. “Media-jacking” is one popular activist strategy, which involves hijacking an opponent’s media event in order to seize control over the narrative and draw public attention to alternative topics and issues (Boyd, 2012).

Pranks can also serve as powerful tools for disrupting hegemonic narratives, deplatforming political opponents, and promoting alternative viewpoints. In 2020, for instance, TikTok users coordinated a prank by registering hundreds of thousands of tickets for Donald Trump’s campaign rally in Tulsa in an effort to leave seats empty during the event. Similarly, when the Trump campaign set up a hotline for voters to report election fraud, trolls flooded the line with calls mocking him for losing the election (Bugeja, 2022). Political pranksters may also operate as state proxies in information warfare. In recent years, their pranks have targeted several notable politicians, including Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni, and numerous European parliamentarians (Mishra, 2020).

Transgression

During this phase, the aim is not only to disrupt conversations or divert attention but also to scandalize the target's words or actions that appear to violate social norms. The goal is to make the target appear morally or legally at fault, thereby generating a scandal that incites moral outrage. Scandals often reaffirm prevailing norms by publicly sanctioning moral transgressions; at the same time, they may function as social rituals that drive public outrage and encourage broader discussions about values, norms, and their violations (Michael & Haller, 2025). Public callouts and shaming rhetoric are frequently used to amplify ongoing controversies by exposing personal or organizational misdeeds, instigating lawsuits, and prompting activists to launch boycotts or protests (Samoilenko & Prigge, 2026). Cancellation campaigns, often emerging from perceived moral transgressions, may leverage user-generated hashtags to rapidly gather support, shame individuals or brands, and call for their social or professional exclusion.

Political marketing may also incorporate transgressive communication rooted in belligerent and uncivil rhetoric that violates social norms. For example, "intentional self-scandalization" (Haller, 2015) – the use of incivility and offensive attitudes as a calculated strategy – allows populist politicians to entertain voters, boost political ratings, and seize media attention. U.S. President Donald Trump frequently tweets insults and allegations that are efficiently converted into clickbait media content, providing sensational material for headlines. Unsurprisingly, such practices contribute to creating a media environment in which uncivil politics become the norm. Scholars argue that tabloid journalism and television entertainment have normalized personal ridicule and serve as a breeding ground for unjustified personal attacks, social judgment, and the character assassination of political actors (Lichter & Farnsworth, 2020).

Subversion

Subversive strategists use disruptive and transgressive strategies as milestones leading to the concluding stage, in which the goal is to reframe existing narratives, meanings, and cultural codes and replace them with new ones. In foreign affairs scholarship, subversion is understood as an attempt to transform the established social order and

its structures of power, authority, and hierarchy when the values and principles of a system in place are deliberately contradicted or reversed (Blackstock, 1964).

In cultural studies, subversion is often discussed in terms of resistance to political or corporate hegemony. Many activist campaigns and social movements have historically employed subversive tactics, such as "subvertising," to support protests and boycotts. It refers to altering or parodying a well-known corporate logo to critique, satirize, or comment on the company's practices or public image (Lievrouw, 2023). Due to their capacity for creative resistance, social movements seek to dismantle prevailing political and corporate narratives, conventions, and symbols, ultimately attempting to supplant them with a new set of rules and interpretations (Williams, 2011). For example, in March 2026, the appearance of a golden statue depicting Donald Trump and the infamous financier Jeffrey Epstein as sad lovers from the movie *Titanic* sparked a new mystery in Washington, D.C. The almost 12-foot sculpture, displayed on the National Mall, was the third piece of guerrilla art satirizing Trump's past relationship with Epstein, credited to *The Secret Handshake* – an obscure organization whose members remain anonymous (Smith, 2026).

Conspiracy theorists also engage in forms of narrative subversion by hijacking government or corporate narratives and reframing them through creative storytelling, often referred to as "conspiratorial fictioning" (De Zeeuw & Gekker, 2023). This storytelling practice uses the form and logic of conspiracy theories to provoke critical thinking about seemingly plausible narratives regarding hidden organizations controlling world events, blending real historical references with imaginative inventions. The 9/11 Truth movement and the anti-vaccine movement are examples of online communities that promote conspiracy theories as normative positions. For many, belief in such narratives provides a strong sense of identity and belonging. De Zeeuw and Gekker (2023) argue that the QAnon movement developed into an influential example of conspiracy fictioning, in which conspiracy theories are used to disrupt and subvert official accounts of reality. Recent research also suggests that playful fan theories in popular fandoms sometimes mirror the logic of political conspiracies. For instance, Taylor Swift fans, often referred to as "Swifties," have engaged in playful, conspiratorial forms of interpretation by searching for hidden messages and developing elaborate theories,

especially around Swift's queer identity (the so-called "Gaylor" discourse) (Stowell, 2025).

Within the context of digital activism and manipulated media, subversive strategic communication serves as a powerful tool for premediated campaigns that range from personal vendettas to attempts to undermine and reshape political and ideological structures. Given these developments, strategic communication scholars must reevaluate existing theories and models while integrating emerging perspectives that account for shifting sociopolitical dynamics, generational shifts, and rapid technological advancements.

COUNTERING SUBVERSIVE TACTICS

There is currently no consensus among scholars on how best to respond to subversive strategic campaigns since they come in multiple shapes and forms. However, there is agreement among many that the most efficient strategy for companies to protect their reputation is to ensure that they are not compromised in the first place. That is why preparedness and prevention measures are critical for identifying issues and risks, mitigating negative sentiments, and advancing innovative proactive strategies.

In the age of deepfakes and cancel culture, new approaches to issues management must outline proactive steps for identifying and resolving high-priority issues before they escalate into full-scale crises. In cases where crises center on moral judgments or perceived violations of social norms, it is critical to understand the underlying principles that divide stakeholders from the organization involved. When stakeholders believe there is a significant value conflict between themselves and the organization, they may attempt to distance themselves from it publicly. It is therefore of the utmost importance to:

- **Monitor the broader environment** in order to identify the point at which an emerging issue transforms into a larger problem that exceeds the capacity of pre-crisis management.
- **Develop a synergistic relationship with the communities of interest** to anticipate subversive attempts.
- **Recognize early warning signs of dissatisfaction or fatigue with corporate messaging** and respond by acting as proactive agents of change when proposing new initiatives or strategies.

GUIDING FRAMEWORKS FOR COMMUNICATION PROFESSIONALS

1. **Scansis situation for detecting and managing smoldering issues:** Scansis (Coombs & Tachkova, 2019) helps organizations detect potential crises before they escalate. It does so by monitoring media and stakeholder interactions for early warning signs, evaluating whether issues might trigger moral outrage, and predicting how minor problems could develop into full-scale scandals. This allows companies to prioritize emerging concerns and take early action, such as proactive communication or targeted stakeholder engagement. For example, Mylan's decision to increase the price of the EpiPen in the US from \$100 in 2007 to \$600 in 2016 generated intense public backlash. The price hike was widely perceived as exploiting a life-saving medication for profit, triggering moral outrage and long-lasting reputational damage.
2. **Pre-crisis inoculation strategy to prepare stakeholders for potential attacks:** Inoculation theory (McGuire, 1961) provides a way to "pre-arm" stakeholders against reputational attacks (Samoilenko & Compton, 2025). Organizations can anticipate likely threats and expose key audiences to weakened forms of these attacks before they occur. Organizations can anticipate likely threats and expose key audiences to weakened forms of these attacks before they occur. These threats include online astroturfing, where coordinated attacks are carried out by trolls, paid pollsters, or social bots (Boman & Schneider, 2021); misinformation; or challenges to credibility.
3. **Image prepare to design preemptive image protection:** Compton's *Image Prepare* model (2020) adapts reactive image repair strategies for proactive use. By highlighting past responsible actions, anticipating criticism, and transparently addressing potential vulnerabilities, organizations can strengthen stakeholder trust and credibility before a crisis occurs. For instance, showcasing previous effective responses to challenges signals reliability and can act as a preemptive inoculation, reducing the reputational impact of future attacks.

CONCLUSION

Subversive strategic communication has become a defining feature of today's media environment. A wide range of actors – from activists to political and corporate players – use such tactics to disrupt business processes, damage reputations, and challenge corporate identities. For communication professionals, this means that reputational threats are increasingly complex and require continuous attention.

At the same time, this article approaches subversive strategic communication as a set of deliberate strategies employed by pragmatic actors to achieve specific goals. Rather than framing these practices as inherently “evil” or illegitimate, it highlights the ambiguity surrounding what constitutes acceptable communication. Behaviors associated with trolls, hackers, or activists may be perceived as

legitimate or deviant depending on whether they reinforce or challenge existing economic and ideological systems, making it more difficult for organizations to assess risks and respond appropriately.

Subversive communication should therefore be understood as a broader phenomenon shaped by contextual and technological factors. Its forms, acceptance, and impact vary across situations, underscoring the importance of monitoring how such campaigns emerge and gain traction.

For communication practitioners, this reinforces the need to address subversive communication in reputational pre-crisis contexts. As technological developments – particularly AI and deepfakes – advance, such campaigns are likely to increase in scale and sophistication, highlighting the importance of preparedness for effective response strategies.

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MORE INFORMATION

A detailed discussion of the potential of inoculation theory as a strategy against deepfakes can be found in Samoilenko & Suvorova (2025), as listed above.

GLOBAL INSIGHTS: WORKPLACE WELL-BEING IN COMMUNICATIONS

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Public relations professionals are expected to build trust and help organizations navigate complexity. Yet many PR professionals, educators, and academics experience or consider PR work to be undervalued, ethically strained, or disconnected from leadership. This article presents findings from a global Delphi study with nearly 300 participants from 24 countries, suggesting that workplace well-being in public relations depends less on perks and more on alignment with professional PR approaches. The findings show that practitioners thrive when they feel successful, able to act in an ethical way, and connected to leadership. However, they struggle when cut off from management and purpose-relevant decision-making, as well as when professional values clash with commercial priorities.

WHY WORKPLACE WELL-BEING MATTERS IN PR

Workplace well-being is of strategic importance. It shapes performance, retention, and the quality of organizational relationships. It particularly matters in communication functions because public relations (PR) work depends on judgment, trust, and relational capacity (Ihlen & van Ruler, 2007).

PR professionals thrive when practice matches professional purpose.

PR professionals work under dynamic conditions that can easily undermine well-being. They are expected to respond quickly, manage ambiguity, absorb competing

expectations, and often reconcile organizational goals with broader social responsibilities. Recent PR scholarship has started to address these pressures more directly, including organizational support, loneliness, and generational differences in how work is experienced (Anton, 2025; Candello & Mohammadpour, 2024; Chmiel, 2025; Răceanu & Deliu-Pasol, 2023).

Yet workplace well-being in PR is still often discussed mainly in terms of stress, resilience, or work-life balance.

Our study suggests that this is too narrow. In PR, well-being is also shaped by whether professionals feel recognized, whether they can exercise ethical judgment, and whether they can practice in ways that align with their professional values (Garsten et al., 2025).

WHAT THE STUDY REVEALS

This article draws on a secondary analysis of the first round of a global Delphi study on the future, value, and social impact of PR (Adi & Stoeckle, 2023). The original Delphi project was not designed as a well-being study. This makes its data so revealing. Across nearly 1,500 qualitative responses from 293 practitioners, educators, and academics in 24 countries, participants repeatedly raised concerns about recognition, ethical tension, purpose, and professional identity without being asked about well-being directly (Garsten et al., 2025). Rather than asking whether respondents felt stressed, satisfied, or burned out, the study examined how they described PR work in their own terms. This made it possible to identify expressed sentiments, their likely triggers, and deeper indicators of workplace well-being, especially meaning, connection, ethical autonomy, and value alignment (De Neve & Ward, 2023; Garsten et al., 2025).

The clearest empirical pattern was that positive sentiment was associated with a sense of success at work and ethical autonomy. Negative sentiment was closely linked to disconnection from management and to misalignment between personal values and professional roles (Garsten et al., 2025). From this, the study proposes profession-practice alignment as a central condition for sustainable well-being in PR: Professionals do better when the kind of communication they believe in matches the kind of communication they are allowed to practice. For corporate communication, the implications are clear. Well-being shapes more than morale; it also affects retention, judgment, ethical voice, leadership credibility, and the quality of stakeholder relationships. A communication function cannot be strong if its own professionals feel unheard, ethically constrained, or cut off from decision-making.

The study at a glance

- Global Delphi study on the future, value, and social impact of PR
- Nearly 300 participants from 24 countries across six continents
- Around 1,500 qualitative responses analyzed
- Participants included practitioners, educators, and academics
- Well-being emerged indirectly and unprompted
- Analysis examined sentiment, triggers, and workplace conditions
- Positive sentiment was linked especially to success at work and ethical autonomy
- Negative sentiment was linked especially to disconnection from management and value-role misalignment
- The study proposes profession-practice alignment as a core condition for sustainable well-being in PR

When PR work feels meaningful

One of the clearest lessons from the research is that communicators are energized when they experience their work as meaningful and recognized. Meaning here is practical, not abstract. It comes from seeing that communication contributes to strategy, helps a range of stakeholders, and improves decisions.

That insight should resonate with senior leaders. Communication professionals often have a strong service orientation. They want to solve problems, strengthen relationships, and help organizations act responsibly. When leaders bring them in early, listen to their counsel, and acknowledge the strategic importance of their work, the result is not only better communication but also, we suggest, better well-being.

The study also highlights ethical autonomy as a positive driver. This does not mean communicators want to operate outside organizational structures. It means they want room for professional judgment. They want to advise honestly, question weak decisions, and work in ways that reflect the ethical and dialogic aspirations commonly associated with the field.

Where that is possible, practitioners are more likely to feel pride, energy, and commitment. Where it is blocked, they may still perform, but often with less conviction and less trust in the institution around them.

Well-being in PR is not only about whether people feel less stressed. It is also about whether their work feels purposeful, whether they have room for judgment, and whether

Well-being in PR is built through trust, meaning, and ethical room to act.

they can act in ways that align with professional PR approaches. For communication leaders, this means wellness perks or stress-management workshops may help, but they do not solve the deeper problem if the work itself feels ethically compromised or professionally diminished.

Where well-being breaks down

If positive well-being grows from meaningful contribution and ethical agency, negative well-being grows from disconnection and misalignment. The research identifies disconnection from management as one of the strongest predictors of negative sentiment. That is a major warning sign for organizations.

Managerial distance can take many forms. Communication leaders may be invited in too late. Teams may be expected to execute messages without shaping them or to focus only on commercially important stakeholders.

Senior executives may undervalue communication expertise or treat it as cosmetic support. In these conditions, practitioners can feel excluded from the very decisions they are supposed to explain and defend. Over time, this risks weakening both performance and morale.

The study also points to misalignment between professional judgment and roles. This is especially important in today's environment, where communicators are often asked to address ESG issues, social expectations, crises, and internal culture at the same time. If practitioners believe an organization is privileging profit over people, or saying one thing while doing another, the resulting tension can cause cognitive dissonance. It affects identity, not just workload.

This is why some forms of dissatisfaction in PR are hard to fix with surface-level initiatives. A team lunch, a resilience seminar, or a flexible-work policy may improve the atmosphere. However, none of those measures will fully address the problem if communicators lack influence, feel ethically compromised, or cannot see the value of what they are being asked to do.

Drivers of well-being in PR

Drivers of positive well-being

Sense of success at work

Ethical autonomy

Perceived importance of PR work

Connection with colleagues

Drivers of negative well-being

Disconnection from management

Misalignment between desired professional PR approach and actual role

Lack of recognition for strategic communication

Weak professional voice and limited influence

The missing condition: profession-practice alignment

The core contribution of the study is the idea of profession-practice alignment. It gives communication leaders a practical lens for understanding why some teams remain motivated under pressure while others become cynical or disengaged.

Profession-practice alignment describes the degree to which PR professionals can carry out their day-to-day roles in ways that fit their sense of professional identity. That identity may include dialogue, ethics, public value, relationship building, and strategic counsel. Daily practice, however, can be narrower, more instrumental, and often more constrained. The bigger the gap between the two, the greater the risk to well-being. The smaller the gap, the more likely professionals are to feel coherent, useful, and committed.

This concept matters because it connects individual experience and observation with organizational design. Well-being is not only about the person. It is also about corporate culture. Do leaders ask for counsel or just output? Are ethical concerns welcomed or avoided? Is communication positioned as a strategic function or a production service? Are practitioners encouraged to exercise judgment or simply manage reactions?

For chief communication officers, profession-practice alignment can become a management test. If teams are demotivated or emotionally flat, the issue may not be stress alone. It may be that the organization is asking communication professionals to perform a version of PR that conflicts with their professional purpose.

A CLEAR MESSAGE FOR COMMUNICATION LEADERS

For communication leaders, the message is direct: Workplace well-being should not be treated as a narrow HR matter or as an individual coping issue. In communication teams, well-being is closely tied to how the function is positioned, how leadership behaves, and whether ethical judgment is possible in practice (Garsten et al., 2025; Anton, 2025). There are several pathways to achieving this.

First, communication leaders should work to reduce disconnection from management by creating regular strategic access, not just reactive delivery. When PR is involved only after strategic choices are made, communicators are left to defend decisions they did not help shape. The study shows that this weakens both professional meaning and well-being. Disconnection from management emerged as a key driver of negative sentiment. Leaders should therefore review whether communicators feel listened to and included and address this by establishing structured dialogue with senior management, building formal feedback loops, and making sure the communication function is represented earlier in decision-making processes. Visible respect for communication counsel and structured dialogue matter (Garsten et al., 2025).

Second, communication leaders should create team conditions where ethical concerns can be raised without

Recognition, ethical autonomy, and managerial connection are leadership responsibilities.

penalty, where tensions can be discussed, and where communicators are not forced to choose between professional integrity and organizational belonging. The study suggests that well-being is stronger when professionals feel able to exercise ethical autonomy and weaker when they feel forced to act against their values. Therefore, while communication leaders cannot solve every organizational tension, they can make ethical reflection part of everyday practice, strengthening profession-practice alignment rather than leaving ethics to be addressed only in moments of crisis.

Third, communication leaders should support professional identity, not only performance. Mentorship, reflective discussion, peer exchange, and stronger links with professional communities can help practitioners sustain a sense of shared purpose. Recent PR well-being research also points to the value of leadership support and mentoring, especially for younger and more vulnerable groups in the profession (Candello & Mohammadpour, 2025; Chmiel, 2025). Well-being is therefore also shaped by occupational culture in addition to a sense of alignment with professional practice (Garsten et al., 2025). In this context, professional associations also have a role to play by strengthening belonging and reflective professional development across the field.

OUTLOOK

PR has long been described as a relationship profession. This study suggests the profession needs to apply that insight more consistently inward. Communication teams cannot be expected to build trust internally and externally while operating in environments that erode their own trust.

The global findings suggest that workplace well-being in PR is not just about emotional strain. It is about whether communicators can work in ways that feel effective, ethical, and meaningful. That is why profession-practice alignment matters. It offers communication leaders a practical way to understand why capable teams may still feel exhausted,

disengaged, or emotionally distant from their work. In many cases, the issue is not a lack of resilience. It is a mismatch between what the profession claims to value and what practitioners are actually enabled or allowed to do.

For practice, this means that healthier communication teams will not be built through wellness rhetoric alone. They will be built through stronger managerial relationships, earlier strategic inclusion, better recognition of communication expertise, and greater support for ethical judgment. These are structural conditions of good corporate communication, not optional extras.

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MORE INFORMATION

A more detailed discussion of these results can be found in the Garsten et al. (2025) article, as listed above.



VALUE CREATION AND MEASUREMENT

THE STATE AND FUTURE OF EVALUATION IN CORPORATE COMMUNICATION: AN OVERVIEW

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Measurement and evaluation (M&E) is central to demonstrating how corporate communication creates value for organizations. Despite decades of professional and academic efforts to establish standards and frameworks, studies suggest that practitioners continue to apply these inconsistently. This overview outlines key evaluation frameworks, highlights common pitfalls in implementation, and examines how contemporary developments such as digitalization and AI are changing the field. We make the case that evaluation should be a management practice that supports learning, adaptation, and more informed decision-making.

THE IMPORTANCE OF MEASUREMENT AND EVALUATION

Research consistently shows that communication affects value creation through key intangible assets such as reputation, legitimacy, and stakeholder relationships. The objective of M&E is to systematically assess such value creation through communication, which means moving beyond simple outputs to measure effects on knowledge, attitudes, behavioral intentions, and, ultimately, organizational-level impact. Specifically, M&E helps to prove the value of communication by tracking how specific activities contribute to an organization's strategic goals and value dimensions. By measuring communication effects using established

performance indicators and recognized evaluation models, professionals can demonstrate how communication outcomes translate into tangible and intangible assets that create value for the organization.

However, consistently proving the impact of communication using M&E in real-life practice remains challenging (Link et al., 2025), especially since recent years have brought significant changes: audience fragmentation, new digital platforms, GenAI, and data governance concerns – to name a few important markers of this change.

MEASUREMENT AND EVALUATION IN STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION

The need for goal setting in M&E

M&E is not an isolated activity conducted after communication has taken place. It is an integral part of an iterative management cycle, starting with a situation analysis from which goals for communication activities are derived, implemented through planned actions, and then evaluated based on their contribution to predefined objectives.

The cycle implies that evaluation is only meaningful if communication goals are clearly defined in advance. Accordingly, communication objectives must be formulated so that they allow a systematic assessment, following SMART criteria: They should be Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-bound.

Furthermore, three different forms of evaluation can be distinguished:

- **Formative evaluation** is a baseline for strategic decision-making, provided through organizational listening and environmental scanning, for example, using surveys, focus groups, or media content analysis to identify stakeholder attitudes or channel preferences.
- **Process evaluation** (sometimes: monitoring) tracks ongoing activities during strategy implementation and gathers – often in real time – insights on immediate message distribution and reach, audience attention and engagement, or shifts in stakeholder attitudes.

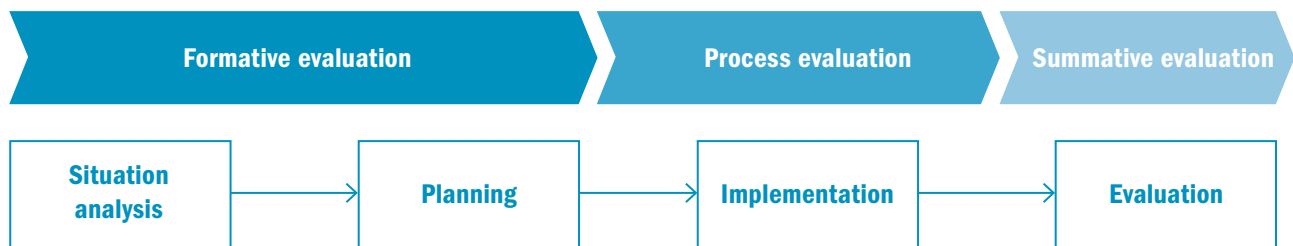
- **Summative evaluation** determines results, looking at how communication activities have met their objectives and contributed to communication and organizational strategy. It supports both accountability and learning.

However, due to increasingly direct and real-time methods of gathering and analyzing data, the three types of evaluation are becoming increasingly intertwined in practice – as seen, for example, in brand-reputation tracking: Formative evaluation (sometimes: formative research) comprises elements of situation analysis and strategic planning and provides intelligence and insight for strategizing.

In practice, various industry standards for M&E have been put forward by professional associations, with AMEC's Barcelona Principles (BPs) being the most widely known. Since their inception in 2010, the BPs have provided a basic best practice compass for practitioners, evaluation vendors and consultants, researchers, and students to guide the evolving communication practice on how to measure and evaluate its work in a meaningful, transparent, and outcome-driven manner. The BPs offer a “helicopter view” providing general guidance, but they need concrete application within a systematic M&E framework.

*Measurement and evaluation delivers
the greatest value when it is embedded
from the outset rather than treated
as an afterthought.*

The basic management cycle and types of evaluation



The Barcelona Principles 4.0

In their latest iteration, the Barcelona Principles 4.0 (published in June 2025) call upon M&E practitioners to:

1. Set clear, measurable objectives as the foundation of M&E;
2. Define and understand all stakeholder audiences;
3. Measure all relevant communication channels to understand and influence audience stakeholders;
4. Use both qualitative and quantitative methods;
5. Reject invalid metrics such as the Advertising Value Equivalency (AVE);
6. Report outputs, outcomes, and organizational impact; and
7. Adhere to ethics, governance, and transparency in data, methods, and technology.

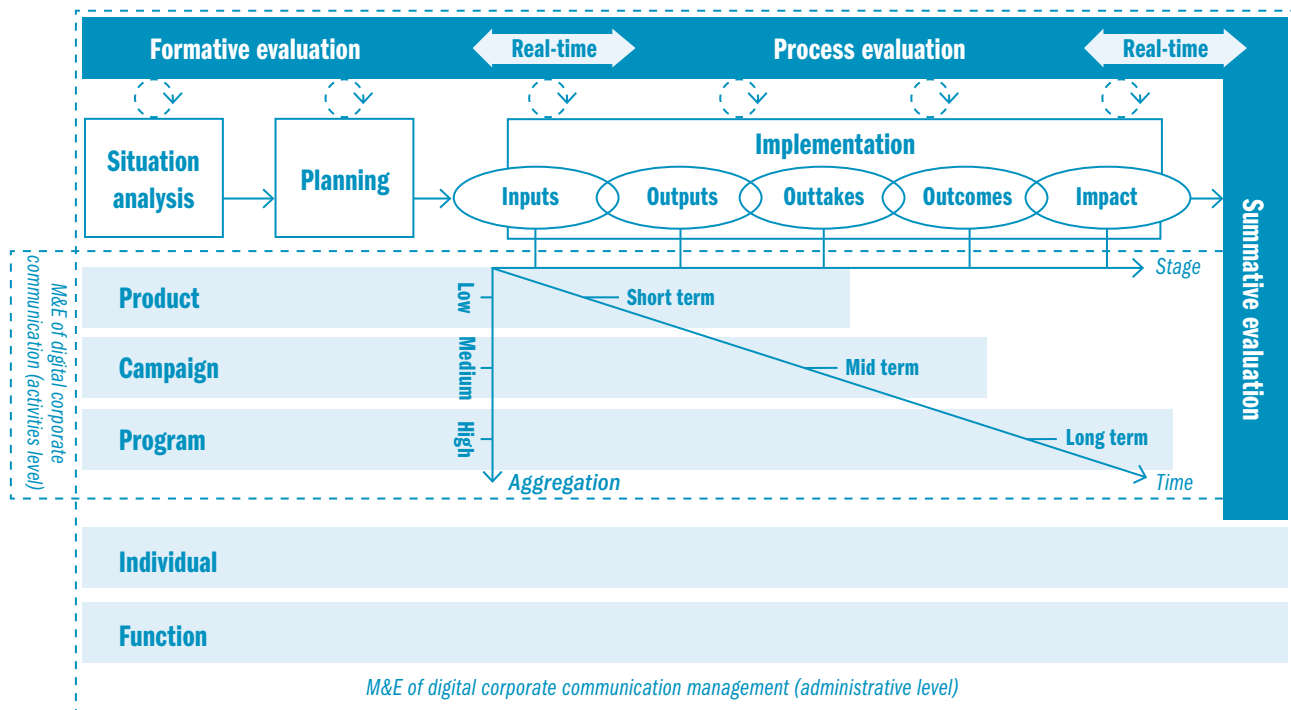
Models of evaluation

Various frameworks exist to guide practice toward implementation (Buhmann & Volk, 2022). All of these assist by defining different stages, establishing causal logic between activities and results, and applying rigorous research designs (e.g., mixed methods merging qualitative and quantitative approaches) to trace and show impact.

Major examples include the *Integrated Evaluation Framework* (IEF) developed by the International Association for the Measurement and Evaluation of Communication (AMEC; exists in more than 20 languages), the British Government Communication Service's *GCS Evaluation Cycle* (updated in 2024), and the German *DPRG/ICV model*.

The academic and practice literature that has developed and discussed these M&E frameworks can be summarized in an integrative model structured along four core dimensions (see figure below).

A unified model of communication M&E



1. The basic management cycle that is at the core of any evaluation, which constitutes its inherent link with situational analysis, planning, and implementation.
2. The basic (and nowadays often overlapping) types or phases of evaluation (formative, process, summative) ordered alongside this cycle.
3. The units or levels of analysis that constitute the object of evaluation efforts (namely: product, project, program, organization, society, individual practitioner, function).
4. The different stages of evaluation during implementation, chosen to structure selected evaluation milestones, measures, and methods, such as:
 - **Inputs:** What resources, planning, research, and content creation you put in.
 - **Outputs:** What reaches or is delivered to the audience – reach, exposure, distribution, impressions, or media coverage.
 - **Outtakes** (sometimes called “short-term” or “direct” outcomes): How the audience receives it – what they think, feel, or intend to do (perceptions, attitudes, awareness, understanding).
 - **Outcomes** (sometimes called “long-term” or “indirect” outcomes): Whether audience behavior changes (e.g., actions, adoption of behaviors, registrations)
 - **Impacts:** The actual contribution to broader and long-term organizational, policy, or societal objectives (e.g., tangible or intangible assets, social outcomes).

The feedback provided by evaluations ideally feed back into planning future communication (continuous improvement), which can take two possible forms: (a) reporting and performance review or, more generally, (b) strategic insights and learning.

Measurement and evaluation is central to demonstrating how corporate communication creates value for organizations.

Barriers to better M&E adoption

Regardless of numerous standardization initiatives driven by researchers and professional associations, most proposed industry standards have not gained significant adoption in practice. The barriers to better M&E adoption have been researched intensively, and several common pitfalls can be identified:

1. Over-reliance on invalid “vanity” metrics (especially AVE).
2. Measuring outputs (e.g., reach, coverage) instead of outcomes (e.g., attitudinal change) and impact (e.g., reputation value).
3. Poor objective-setting and missing baselines (e.g., lack of SMART and evidence-based objectives).
4. Methodological weaknesses and lack of transparency (e.g., unclear metric definitions).
5. Over-dependence on quantitative metrics (e.g., counts, likes, shares) without qualitative insight (e.g., content analysis, interviews).
6. Attribution and causal-inference problems – many evaluations do not use designs that allow plausible attribution.
7. Platform and data quality, opacity, and measurement fragmentation (e.g., inconsistent metric definition).
8. Skills, resourcing, and organizational constraints (e.g., lack of skills, time, or budget).
9. Short time horizons and lack of longitudinal measurement.
10. Ethics, privacy, and governance blind spots.

M&E in a digital environment

While M&E has always been essential to demonstrating the value of communication, the conditions under which it operates have shifted due to digitalization, AI, and audience fragmentation, among others. Accordingly, best practice M&E will need to adapt to these shifts, for example, by:

- Moving from campaign-based M&E to continuous and iterative evaluation. Evaluation needs to be understood as processual, not just summative, allowing for learning, adaptation, and continuous improvement along the way (and not just at select points in time);
- Treating stakeholders not as “audiences” (or passive “endpoints” of communication) but as active participants and co-creators of communication. Listening, feedback, and long-term relationship building are not just ways of communicating – they need to be backed by respective dynamic evaluation and communication management structures that can truly enable these more engaged ways of interacting with stakeholders;
- Recognizing the full complexity of the modern media ecosystem. M&E approaches need to be broadened to account for fragmented attention, new platforms, and technological shifts; and
- Building internal awareness about ethics, data governance, transparency, and methodological integrity, especially where AI is involved in evaluations and data privacy concerns may exist.

PRACTICAL RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SUCCESSFUL M&E IMPLEMENTATION

Research has shown that sophisticated evaluation capabilities and practices are a key characteristic of mature and excellent communication departments. M&E delivers the greatest value when it is used as an integrated part of the communication plan from the outset, rather than treated as an afterthought.

Bringing the BPs and the common ways of conceptualizing M&E frameworks together leads to the following eight main conclusions for facilitating M&E in practice.

1. **Embed evaluation from the start:** Set a budget for evaluation, and plan evaluation goals and designs.
2. **Define SMART objectives and KPIs:** Set a baseline and challenging but realistic communication goals, and align objectives with organizational goals. Define KPIs upfront.
3. **Be flexible and adaptive rather than one-size-fits-all:** Apply the stages and metrics that fit the specific communication activity, and adapt to context, audience, objectives, and resources.
4. **Prioritize inclusivity and audience segmentation:** Consider different audience groups (including hard-to-reach or underserved groups) and ensure communication resonates with different needs and potential barriers.
5. **Use evaluation for real-time learning and optimization:** Monitor and optimize communications while the campaign is still ongoing to make course corrections quickly.
6. **Tie evaluation to corporate objectives and demonstrate value:** Show the value and impact of communications and justify investment and resource allocation.
7. **Make reflection and innovation key goals of evaluation:** Reflect on what worked and what did not – to refine future communication plans and build institutional learning and improvement (including of the M&E approach itself).
8. **Apply a comprehensive evaluation framework:** Measure inputs ➤ outputs ➤ outtakes ➤ outcomes ➤ impacts, combining different quantitative and qualitative methods and KPIs (e.g., methods and KPIs by key stage, see the table below).

Methods and possible categories of KPIs at key evaluation stages

Level	Methods	Digital KPIs
Outputs	> Observation, netnography (e.g., online events) > Online media content analysis > Social media tracking > Website tracking	<i>Primary outputs</i> > Number of activities (e.g., social media posts, digital campaigns, digital press conferences, etc.) <i>Secondary outputs</i> > Online media coverage volume > Online media share of voice > Social media reach > Click-through rate, open rate > Virtual event attendance > Website visits, impressions
Outtakes	> Sentiment analysis > Social media tracking and analysis > Surveys > Website tracking	> Attention > Awareness > Downloads > Online tonality, sentiment > Recall (aided/unaided) > Recognition > Mentions (tags, brand, organization) > Engagement (e.g., likes, shares, comments)
Outcomes	> Focus groups, interviews > Observation, netnography > Online surveys (e.g., customers), public opinion polls > Social media analysis	> Attitude (e.g., trust, acceptance) > Behavior/conversion rate (e.g., buying, donating) > Intention (to buy, to recommend) > Knowledge > Learning > Preference (e.g., brands)

Source: Volk & Buhmann, 2023

OUTLOOK

Artificial intelligence in M&E

AI is not only fundamentally changing communication practice but also the conditions under which M&E operates. While the underlying logic of the frameworks and standards remains stable, AI-based technologies, methods, and tools can significantly advance how M&E is conducted in practice (Zerfass et al., 2024).

At the level of data collection, the growing ecosystem of MarTech and CommTech solutions has expanded the range of available metrics, data sources, and data collection tools (Brinker, 2022; Arthur, 2021). AI-based applications (e.g., AI-powered sentiment analysis, media monitoring) enable organizations to capture outputs, stakeholder interactions, and outcomes across digital platforms in real time and in a

cost- and time-efficient manner (Weiner, 2021). At the level of data analysis, advances in AI technologies for analyzing large volumes of data have created new opportunities for real-time analysis and visualization. At the level of data use, the availability of real-time and automated data streams enables organizations to derive strategic insights and implement them in real time. While AI offers many opportunities for M&E, a significant challenge lies in applying M&E to AI applications themselves (e.g., tracking AI's efficiency, quality improvements, or time savings).

As corporate communication continues to evolve and the technological possibilities expand, the relevance of both M&E with AI and M&E of AI will only increase. The central challenge for practitioners is therefore not simply to measure more, but to measure correctly and efficiently.

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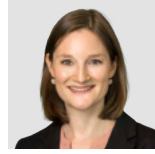
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MORE INFORMATION

This article is based on the handbook chapter Volk & Buhmann (2023), as listed above.

EVALUATION BEYOND MYRIAD MODELS, “SILVER BULLETS,” AND OUTPUTS

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

INTRODUCTION

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

Lack of budget and time are often proposed as barriers to evaluation but are rejected by evaluation specialists because there is a range of low-cost and even no-cost methods available along with outsourced services that make little demand on practitioners' time. A quarter of a

century ago, Walter Lindenmann wrote that research for evaluation “doesn't have to put you in the poorhouse” and listed numerous examples of cost-efficient evaluation methods and tools (Lindenmann, 2001).

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

1. INFORMATION OVERLOAD OF MODELS AND FRAMEWORKS

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

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

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

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

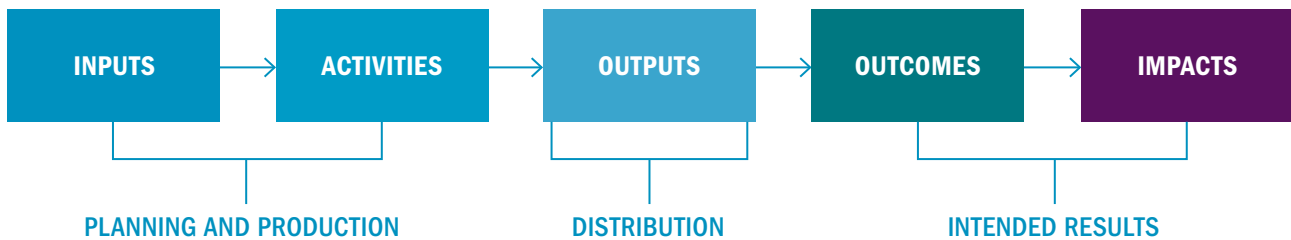
2. THE SEARCH FOR A “SILVER BULLET”

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

3. STOPPING AT OUTPUTS – OUTCOMES AND IMPACT BLIND SPOTS

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

A classic program logic model



Source: Kellogg Foundation, 2004

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

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

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

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

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

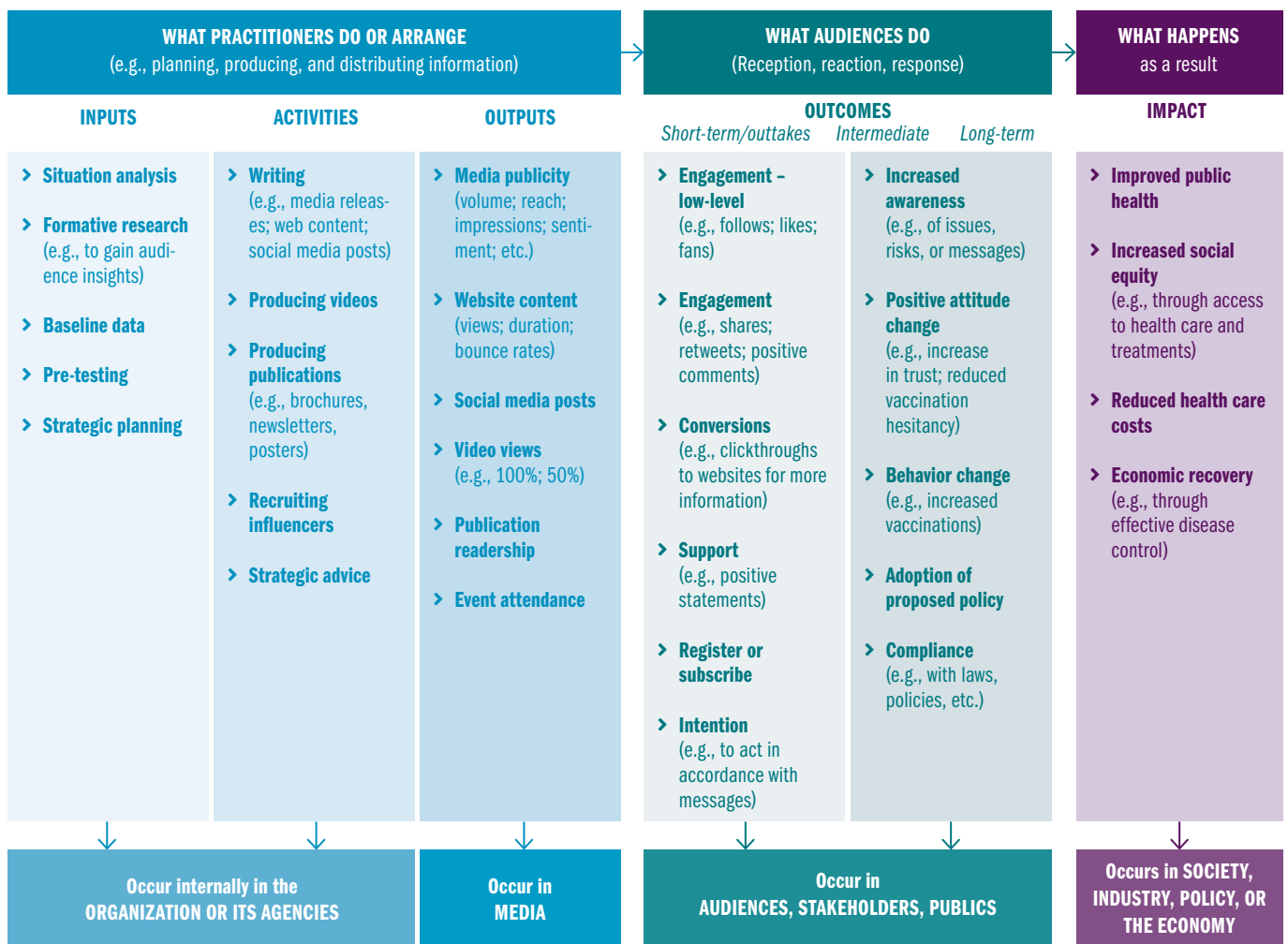
The Dissected Program Logic Model as a practical tool

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

The figure clearly shows that outcomes are what audiences do from reception to reaction and response. Low-level outcomes include likes and shares on social media, clickthroughs for more information online, registering or subscribing, and comments that indicate awareness, support, or intention to act. More advanced outcome

measures, which are desirable, show increased awareness, changed attitudes or behavior, as well as results such as support for a policy or compliance with laws, regulations, or recommendations. Impact is what happens in a business or policy environment, industry, economy, or society wholly or partially as a result of communication outcomes achieved.

Dissected Program Logic Model for planning and evaluating strategic communication



Source: Macnamara, 2025

A LEARNING CASE STUDY

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

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

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

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

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

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

TOWARDS EVALUATION REFORM IN COMMUNICATION

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

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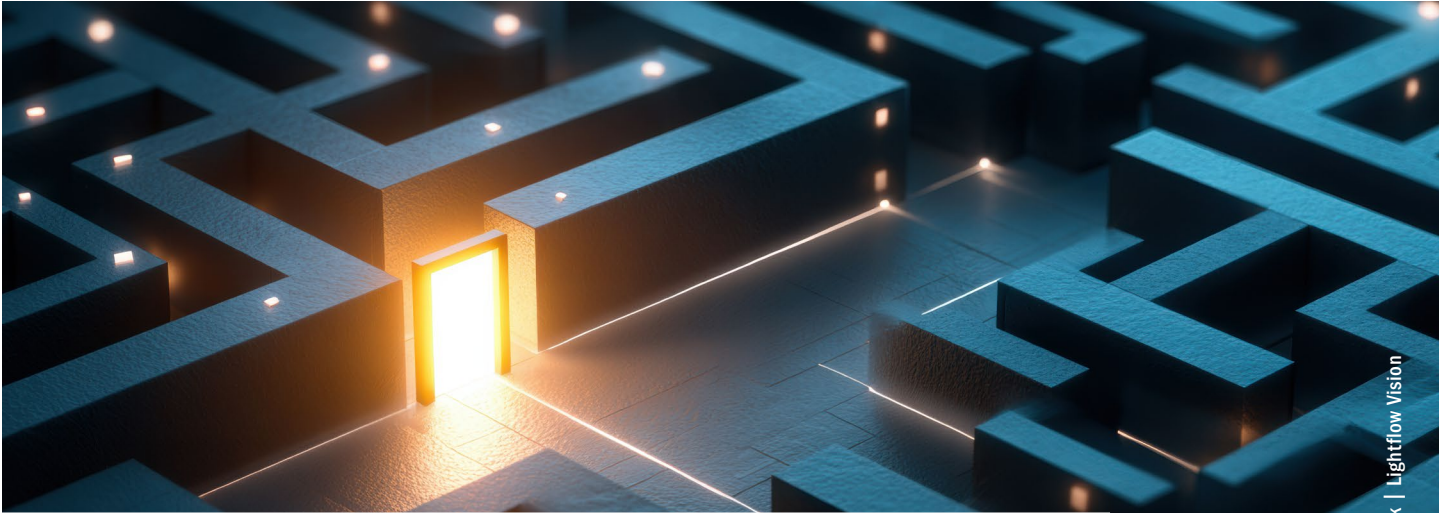
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MORE INFORMATION

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

VALUE FORMATION IN CORPORATE COMMUNICATION

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Executives recognize that communication is essential to organizational performance and value creation, yet corporate communication's specific contribution to value creation remains difficult to articulate. In this article, I introduce a conceptual framework with practical applications that clarifies how value is formed across the corporate communication management process – from identifying stakeholder needs to realizing and capturing value – and pinpoints where value slips away. The framework helps communication managers to determine precisely how and when value is created.

TACKLING THE CHALLENGE

Corporate communication managers are investing increasing effort to demonstrate the value of their work and that of the corporate communication function. This reflects a broader organizational trend in which executives increasingly expect functions and departments to justify their impact and account for their contribution.

However, the specific contribution of corporate communication to organizational performance often remains unclear to managers and employees (e.g., Zerfass et al., 2014; Falkheimer et al., 2017; Brockhaus & Zerfass, 2022). Improving measurement and evaluation (M&E) practices – widely regarded by communication leaders as a key priority –

therefore remains one of the greatest challenges facing communication managers.

In response to this challenge, both national and international professional associations and scholars have invested significant effort to clarify how corporate communication contributes to organizational performance (Zerfass & Viertmann, 2017) and to establish M&E standards (e.g., AMEC, 2025). These efforts have helped to identify the specific ways in which communication supports organizations, such as enabling operations, building intangibles, ensuring flexibility, and adjusting strategy (Zerfass & Viertmann, 2017). Researchers have also underscored

broader societal, industry, policy, and economic impacts (Macnamara, 2023).

What remains less understood is the process through which these outcomes are produced. Mapping the inputs, outputs, outcomes, and impacts of corporate communication activities captures only part of the story. Achieving deeper conceptual clarity about how corporate communication management creates organizational, stakeholder, and societal value requires a more comprehensive conceptual framework – one that depicts the key mechanisms of the value-formation process and their interrelationships. A deeper understanding of these mechanisms enables practitioners to describe and demonstrate their function's contribution with greater precision, and to refine how they think about and discuss value creation.

TOWARDS AN UNDERSTANDING OF VALUE-FORMATION MECHANISMS

Value is defined by stakeholders, not organizations

Despite decades of management research, the nature of “value” remains contested. What is increasingly clear, however, is that value today is shaped less by what organizations produce and more by what stakeholders experience.

The traditional view held that products and services possessed inherent value – an assumption that no longer holds. Contemporary thinking recognizes value as fundamentally subjective: It emerges when individuals use and experience something over time, whether a product, a service, or even a piece of information.

For communication managers, this shift is significant. As communication scholar Jim Macnamara (2015) observes, value is a perception – a judgment formed by customers, employees, investors, community members, and other stakeholders. Rather than passively receiving organizational outputs, stakeholders interpret them through the lens of their own experiences, beliefs, cultural norms, and aspirations. Ultimately, it is stakeholders, not organizations, who determine how valuable corporate activities truly are.

Because value is created in stakeholder experience, organizations cannot fully control it. They can design

touchpoints and manage their communication activities, but the final assessment remains outside their control.

Putting stakeholder and societal needs at the center

The prevailing belief for much of the 20th century was that a company's primary moral obligation was to maximize profits, with shareholder interests prioritized above all others. This belief has gradually shifted since the 1960s, when the Stanford Research Institute introduced the concept of stakeholders – the groups on which an organization depends for its survival. Stakeholder theory, later advanced by R. Edward Freeman (1984), further redefined the purpose of business. Stakeholder theory posits that economic value and ethical leadership are inseparable, and that organizations must serve not only shareholders, but also employees, customers, and the wider community.

Today, this stakeholder centric view underpins much of modern corporate strategy, significantly shaping how communication managers understand their contribution at the executive level.

A growing body of research in both management and corporate communication reaches similar conclusions: Organizations must place stakeholder and societal needs at the center of how they understand and demonstrate their value. This reflects a broader shift in accountability – one in which executives, managers, and employees see themselves as answerable not only to investors but to the entire socio-ecological system in which their organizations operate.

At the societal level, it is also relevant to discuss collective needs embedded in the functioning of societies. Concepts such as shared value, introduced by Porter and Kramer (2011), highlight how organizations can create business benefits by addressing societal challenges – from infrastructure and public services to issues that demand cross-sector collaboration.

Creating societal value often requires coordinated efforts across corporate, public, and nonprofit actors, adding a further dimension to an already complex process.

A process view of how value forms in corporate communication

A deeper understanding of value creation in corporate communication requires recognizing that it is not a static outcome. Rather, it is shaped by multiple actors who interpret the value of organizational inputs, throughputs, and outputs through their own expectations, needs, and perspectives. Thus, value forms in experiences unfolding over time. Communication managers play a vital role in this formation process, but they do not control it entirely.

*Value forms in experiences
unfolding over time.*

Why value formation matters more than value creation

Value is not formed in a single moment or by a single actor. Instead, it takes shape through a sequence of interconnected phases and mechanisms. Adopting the broader concept of value formation gives communication managers a conceptual framework that acknowledges the entire process – not just the endpoint at which value is captured by the organization. This process-based perspective enables organizations to examine how they think and talk about value, and where and how it is created and captured.

Opportunities to create value emerge in social and cultural contexts

Organizations operate within complex socio-ecological systems shaped by shared norms, values, expectations, and planetary boundaries. They also operate within cultural contexts defined by shared symbols, meanings, and interpretive frameworks that shape how people understand and evaluate organizational activities.

These contexts exert a powerful influence on how stakeholders perceive organizational actions and whether they regard them as legitimate. As organizational theorist Mark Suchman (1995) argues, legitimacy depends on stakeholders viewing an organization's behavior as appropriate within the social and cultural (and ecological) frameworks in which it operates. For communication managers, this has an important implication: Value is always co created,

shaped not only by the organization's output, but also by the meanings stakeholders construct from it.

In a global society and economy, value formation unfolds across multiple social and cultural contexts simultaneously, each influencing how outcomes are interpreted and assessed. Navigating this complexity is therefore a central challenge for communication managers.

A PROCESS FRAMEWORK FOR HOW VALUE IS FORMED

To simplify this complexity, I introduce a process-based conceptual framework of value formation in corporate communication management. The framework integrates several established ideas, including:

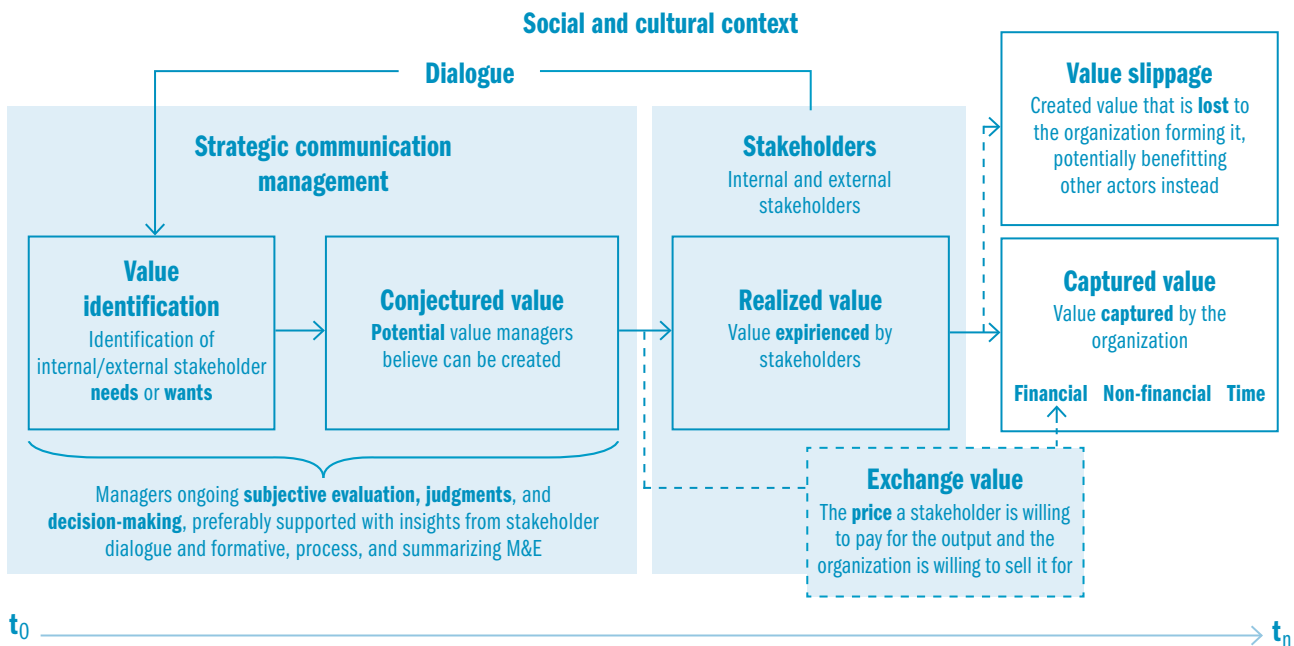
- Conjectured value (the value organizations expect to create);
- Realized value (the value stakeholders actually experience);
- Value slippage (the value that flows to others);
- Value capture (the value the organization retains); and
- Different forms of value (financial, non-financial, and time-based).

Unlike traditional frameworks, which typically treat value as a static output of organizational activity, this approach builds on process theorizing. Process theorizing provides a narrative account of how value actually comes into being and highlights the sequence of events through which it is formed. Given that value is created through stakeholders' experiences – and that managers' experiences also contribute to its formation – this narrative orientation helps outline the key mechanisms of value formation and their interrelationships, providing a more precise understanding of how corporate communication contributes to organizational and societal value creation.

Why a linear presentation despite real world complexity?

The framework is linear, illustrating a sequence that begins with the identification of stakeholder or societal needs, followed by the creation of outputs and the stakeholder experience of those outputs, and concluding with the value the organization captures and the value that slips away. In practice,

A process view of how value is formed in corporate communication



Source: Andersson, 2025

however, this process is anything but linear. Instead, value formation often evolves in unpredictable and nonlinear ways.

Yet a linear representation offers an important advantage. It helps managers see the essential phases and mechanisms at work. By simplifying the process, it becomes easier to identify:

- What drives value perception;
- Where value slippage occurs; and
- How organizations can increase the value they capture.

This simplified representation is particularly useful for communication managers who must manage complexity without being paralyzed by it.

In an ideal scenario, organizations consistently produce outputs that meet important societal and stakeholder needs, stakeholders respond positively, and the organization captures most of the value created with minimal slippage. However, real-world value formation is rarely this tidy, since:

- Stakeholders often have competing interests.
- People interpret value differently based on their own norms and experiences.

- Organizations struggle to measure intangible value such as trust, legitimacy, or reputation.
- Value may be created at one point in the social system but captured at a later point.

These dynamics make value formation inherently complex.

Key mechanisms in value formation

Value identification. From a communication manager's viewpoint, value identification is the first step in any value formation process. Managers need to determine which stakeholder or societal needs (and wants) the organization can meaningfully address. Because value formation is socially and culturally embedded, these choices must reflect external expectations and states rather than simply organizational priorities. Corporate communication departments play a central role by monitoring stakeholder dialogue and environmental signals, providing insight into both expressed and emerging needs and wants.

At the same time, opportunities for value creation often arise from unmet needs that stakeholders cannot yet

articulate, requiring forward looking analysis and interpretation. Successful value identification also requires a clear understanding of internal capabilities and resources within the organization and the corporate communication department to ensure that the organization is positioned to create – and ultimately capture – value as the process unfolds.

Conjectured value. Once a stakeholder or societal need is identified, communication managers work with conjectured value – the value they believe their actions can create. While real value only materializes when stakeholders experience it, managers’ expectations shape strategic choices about communication.

Building strong internal capability through skilled communication managers is essential, but managers’ expectations alone are insufficient. Continuous stakeholder dialogue and robust measurement and evaluation (M&E) are also required. Effective M&E helps identify appropriate communication goals and ensures that both the organization’s and the corporate communication department’s activities align with what stakeholders truly find valuable. Without this grounding, decision-making becomes uninformed, and communication efforts risk missing both stakeholder needs and opportunities for meaningful value creation.

Realized value. Value is realized, that is, created, when stakeholders engage with an organization’s outputs over time – whether information, a service, a product, or a brand – and evaluate their relevance or usefulness. This evaluation, whether conscious or unconscious, determines whether the stakeholder perceives the organizational actions as having a positive or negative impact on themselves and the wider society. For example, clearer service information from a municipality can make daily life easier for citizens, producing substantial practical value for them. Under normal circumstances, these evaluations often occur unconsciously, as stakeholders often do not intentionally consider the value of an organization’s performance. Under more exceptional circumstances, however, the presence or absence of value becomes far more apparent – and stakeholders may discuss it with colleagues, friends, and family.

Captured value. Organizations can capture three forms of value, but only after stakeholders have experienced organizational outputs as valuable.

- **Financial value**, such as revenue from sales or share gains, is often the most straightforward indication of how valuable stakeholders experience organizational outputs to be. Yet corporate communication activities rarely operate in isolation, making it difficult to attribute specific financial outcomes to them.
- Organizations also capture **non-financial value**, such as trust, brand equity, legitimacy, and relationships. These non-financial values are crucial for long-term success, but are far harder to measure and evaluate because they primarily reside in stakeholder perceptions and fluctuate over time. Communication can influence these perceptions, but stakeholders ultimately determine the value they assign. Although tools such as surveys, interviews, and triangulation of multiple techniques can aid understanding, they always remain imperfect proxies.
- Organizations may also capture **time-based value**, such as efficiency gains from improved internal communication or improved stakeholder dialogue. Over time, these time savings often translate into additional financial and non-financial value.

Value slippage. Value slippage occurs when organizations are unable to capture all the value created through their activities, whether in the form of financial, non financial, or time based value. Because realized value primarily resides in stakeholder experience and is often difficult to measure or make tangible, organizations rarely capture the exact value that materializes in stakeholders’ experience.

Understanding value slippage is essential, but focusing solely on maximizing value capture risks narrowing the organization’s perspective to an organization-centric one, prioritizing organizational gains alone. Equal attention must be given to conjectured value – the potential value organizations expect to create – and the realized value stakeholders actually experience, as well as to building the internal capabilities, such as knowledge, competencies, and skills, that enable sustainable value creation over time.

PRACTICAL RECOMMENDATIONS

The shift from value creation to value formation has significant implications for how corporate communication managers should think about and discuss value creation. Because value is ultimately determined by stakeholders – not organizations – communication managers must view value as a dynamic, experiential, and socially and culturally embedded process rather than as a fixed output.

1. **Communication managers need to strengthen their role as organizational sensemakers.** Value identification depends on understanding stakeholder expectations, wants and needs, societal needs, and cultural shifts. This requires corporate communication departments to prioritize and develop their listening capabilities and resources, engage in continuous dialogue with internal and external stakeholders, and build more advanced analytical capabilities, such as environmental scanning, qualitative insight generation, and early- and weak-signal detection.
2. **Measurement and evaluation must consider the entire value-formation process.** Traditional output-oriented metrics – visibility, impressions, or activity volume – are not sufficient. Communication managers need to implement the full range of formative, process, and summative M&E practices (Buhmann & Volk, 2022) that evaluate the corporate communication department's ability to identify value creating activities; make strategic and operational decisions based on conjectured value (internal analysis); analyze realized value in stakeholder experience (stakeholder analysis); capture financial, non-financial, and time-based forms of value; and turn these into actionable insights for the corporate communication department and organizational executives. This requires combining quantitative measures with qualitative evaluation and analysis methods that provide insights into how stakeholders interpret organizational activities and derive meaning from them.
3. **Communication managers should champion a broader understanding of value inside the organization.** By emphasizing how trust, legitimacy, and societal contribution strengthen long-term competitiveness, they can help shift executives' attention from short-term value capture to sustainable, socially and culturally embedded value formation.

Together, these recommendations position communication leaders as enablers of organizational relevance, legitimacy, and long term impact.

OUTLOOK

As the value organizations create is increasingly understood to reside in stakeholder perception and experience, corporate communication will be one of the most decisive drivers of organizational success.

Today's organizations face growing stakeholder expectations, increased societal scrutiny, and rapid cultural change. In this environment, communication managers face a strategic challenge. They must consider not only the management of communication activities and the production of outputs, but also the entire process through which organizational, wider stakeholder, and societal value is formed. The shift from a production-focused to an experience-focused view of value fundamentally expands the communication function's scope and responsibilities. Value is no longer something organizations deliver – it is something stakeholders co-create through experiencing organizational outputs over time.

This broader perspective positions communication managers at the center of organizational value creation. They are uniquely equipped to identify emerging expectations, needs and wants, and translate them into meaningful organizational activities. But this expanded role also underscores the need for communication departments to develop their capabilities. These capabilities – organizational listening, formative, process, and summative M&E, and the ability to interpret cultural tendencies and shifts – are no longer optional. They are the foundation of strategic relevance.

Looking ahead, organizations that excel at value creation will be those that balance performance with purpose. They will recognize that financial returns, trust, legitimacy, and societal contribution are interdependent, not competing, outcomes. Communication managers have a critical role in steering this evolution – clarifying stakeholder needs, facilitating cross sector collaboration, and ensuring that the corporate communication department contributes to the formation of value that is meaningful not only for the organization but also for the socio-ecological systems in which it operates – and ultimately serves.

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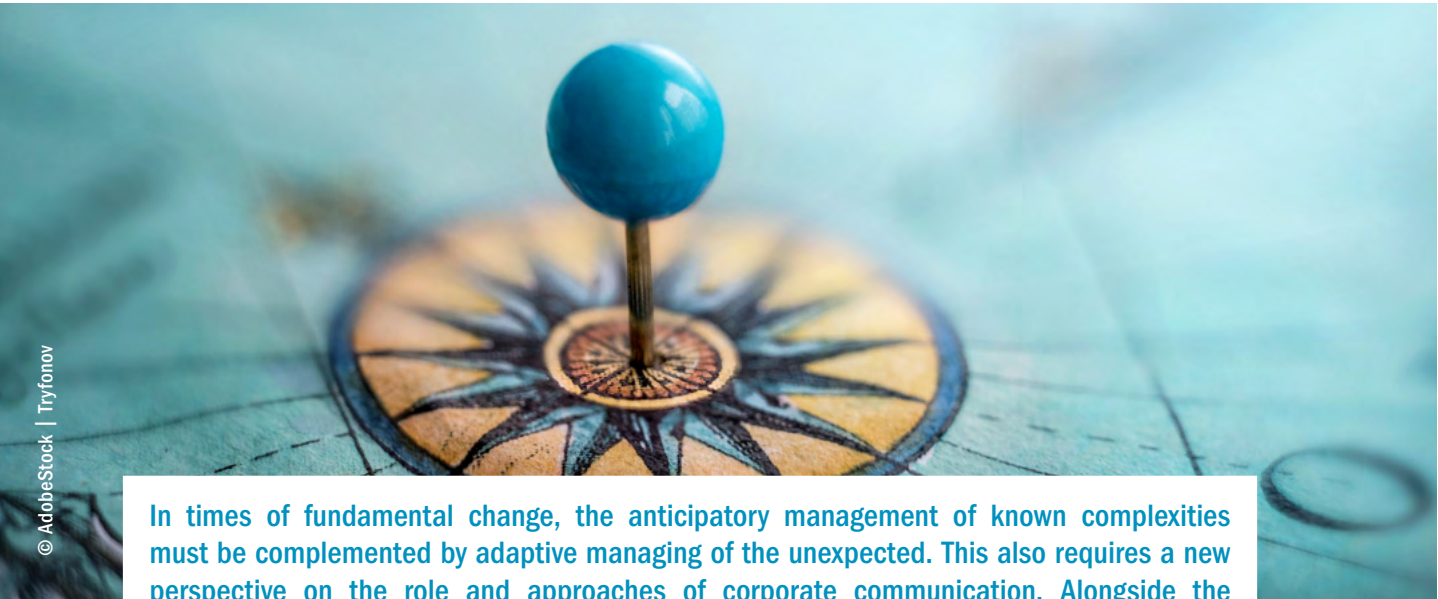
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MORE INFORMATION

A more detailed discussion of the process framework can be found in Andersson (2025), as listed above.

RETHINKING CORPORATE COMMUNICATION: PROVIDING ORIENTATION IN TIMES OF RADICAL UNCERTAINTY

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In times of fundamental change, the anticipatory management of known complexities must be complemented by adaptive managing of the unexpected. This also requires a new perspective on the role and approaches of corporate communication. Alongside the well-established strategic-instrumental task of achieving predefined communicative goals, a more strategic-orienting role in guiding fundamental business decision-making becomes crucial. This article highlights three key competencies for corporate communication as an orientation function: validation through communicative relationality, calibration through contextual leadership, and interpretation through perceptual organization.

FUNDAMENTAL CHANGE IN THREE WAYS

In the current decade, the understanding of effective management within companies is undergoing a fundamental shift, driven by radical new opportunities and challenges for the economy. Increased expectations for value creation from diverse stakeholders extending beyond purely economic success, intensifying national and international resource allocation conflicts, and revolutionary technologies – particularly GenAI – are creating a new environment for corporate communication.

Above all, internationally active companies today

typically operate amid social and political legitimacy dilemmas that require the continuous review of business decisions – especially since widely accepted principles such as market economy, free trade, and political multilateralism no longer carry the same normative weight.

At the same time, companies today face significantly increased demands to demonstrate their social contributions beyond economic success, alongside new expectations regarding their positioning in public debates (Ehrhart, 2019). In the third decade of the 21st century, the term

“stakeholder capitalism” has become established for this new economic paradigm – one that sits between economic competitiveness and social acceptance.

In parallel, algorithms and GenAI are giving rise to a “new structural transformation of the public sphere” (Habermas, 2022). This lends convincing evidence to Marshall McLuhan’s thesis that the real effect of media revolutions lies in their social consequences (McLuhan, 1994). Having displaced traditional notions of the public and produced hyper-transparent, fragmented, and fluid publics (Habermas, 2022; Herbers, 2024), digitalization and networking have now been joined by GenAI as an independent communication actor in this new public complexity – appearing alongside humans in the form of bots, avatars, and virtual agents.

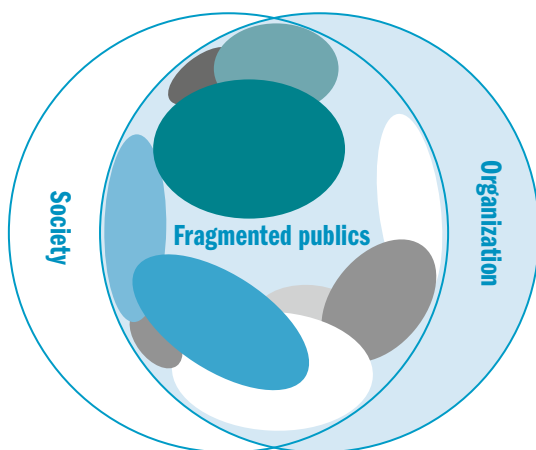
As a result, corporate communication currently faces fundamental changes and increased expectations in three ways – it is:

1. Clarifying its role within the company amidst social, economic, and political upheaval;
2. Contributing beyond traditional message delivery to help navigate “radical uncertainty” (Gigerenzer, 2023); and
3. Making effective and ethical use of new communication instruments in the age of algorithms and GenAI.

Yet these changes also bring significant potential – communication management’s specific skill profile positions it well to meet demands in times of fundamental change. The decisive success factor for companies will now be the ability to identify and address the critical junctures of external and internal perception where economic imperatives, diverging stakeholder interests, and increasingly fragmented publics converge.

The question of whether corporate communication can provide orientation at these “trigger points for consensus and conflict” (Mau, Lux, & Westheuser, 2023) will determine whether the discipline establishes itself as a genuine orientation function in times of fundamental change – or whether it continues to be relegated to the role of an auxiliary discipline within the canon of management disciplines, not least in view of the considerable new capabilities that GenAI brings to the analysis and creation of content of all kinds.

From public to publics – hyper-transparency and liquid reality



- High communicative permeability between the organization and society creates hyper-transparency.
- Fragmentation of the public sphere produces multiple publics in the organization’s environment.
- A growing mix of human and artificial actors creates the impression of a liquid reality – who or what is communicating becomes difficult to establish.

CORPORATE COMMUNICATION REVISITED

While public relations was among the first applied disciplines to be systematically introduced into corporate practice in the early 20th century, the theoretical foundations and specific methods of corporate communication remain controversial to this day (Nothhaft & Zeffass, 2023; Waisbord, 2019). Despite a century of professionalization, corporate communication today presents a picture of a management sub-function that, compared to other management disciplines, lacks conceptual self-confidence, is increasingly exposed to the risk of overload in its traditional areas of responsibility, and faces increasing competition.

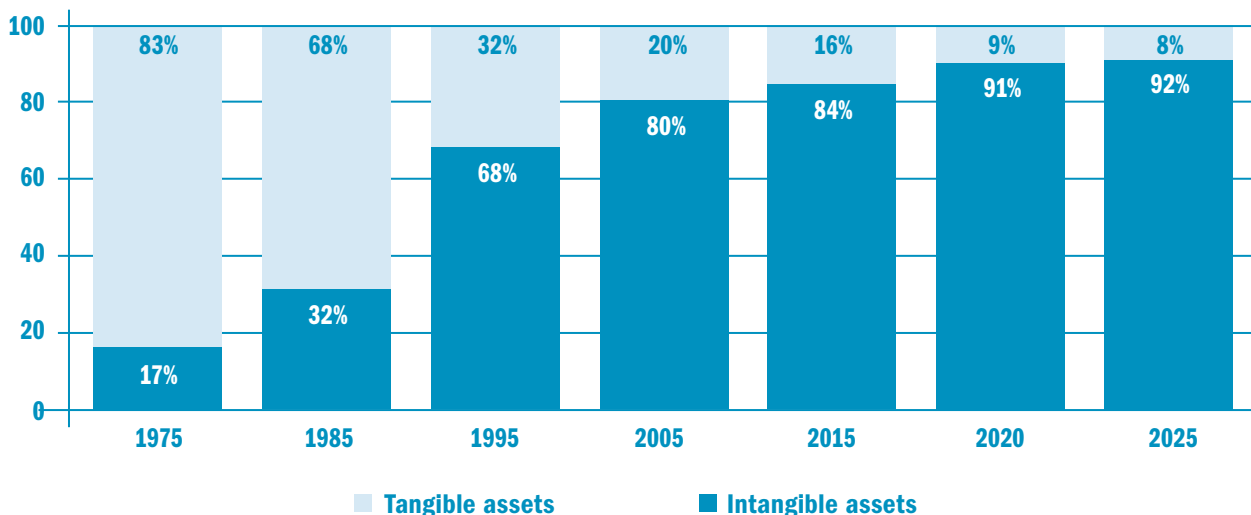
At the same time, expectations for the reliable performance of corporate communication have significantly increased. Since the mid-1970s, the ratio of tangible to intangible assets of companies has reversed. Today, intangible assets – including the company’s reputation – dominate with 80% (Ocean Tomo, 2025). Given this new importance of intangible assets such as societal trust and acceptance, the strategic impact of corporate communication has become an imperative.

The regularly cited dimensions of strategic corporate communication management – situation analysis, strategy formulation, measure implementation, and evaluation – reflect a “rational-analytical approach” of management (Frandsen & Johansen, 2022), which developed between 1950 and 1970 and was described in the 1980s by authors such as Peter Drucker and Michael Porter in detailed case studies (Drucker, 1986; Porter, 1985). On this basis, strategic communication management presents itself as the task of “managing and shaping communication activities and processes that influence value creation in organizational contexts through planning, organizing, leading, and controlling” (Zeffass & Link, 2022).

However, the results of a survey conducted in Germany in November 2023 – involving 1,147 participants from companies with more than 1,000 employees – paint a markedly different picture. When top and middle management, as well as employees, were asked about their perception of corporate communication, their responses deviated significantly from the discipline’s self-image as a strategically aligned function that systematically manages its contribution to corporate success (Zeffass et al., 2024):

- While 100% of surveyed top management and 80% of middle management executives were fundamentally

Intangible assets on the rise



Source: Ocean Tomo LLC, 2025, measured against S&P 500

familiar with the work of corporate communication, only 58% of middle management knew its goals.

- Only half of top executives and just over a third of middle management stated that “the work of the communication function facilitates the achievement of their own goals.”
- Only 57% of respondents in the top management and 54% in the middle management attributed a high level of competence to corporate communication.
- Among top executives, the operational task “formulation and evaluation of mission statements, linguistic regulations, and design guidelines” received the highest approval rating at 73%, while the strategic performance contribution “consulting top management and executives on strategic decisions” received the lowest approval at 57%.

FACING UNCERTAINTY WITH A COMMUNICATIVE PERSPECTIVE

In phases of “radical uncertainty,” where the future unfolds differently than the past “stable world” would have suggested, the anticipatory management of known complexities is replaced by “adaptive managing of the unexpected” (Gigerenzer, 2023; Weick & Sutcliffe, 2016). For corporate communication, this presents considerable challenges but also unique opportunities. If critical discourse with stakeholders can no longer be reduced to the precise transmission of messages to passive target groups, and if legitimacy in an increasingly fragmented public sphere can no longer serve as a consistently reliable standard for action, then corporate communication is required as an orientation function. To fulfill this task, its self-conception must be rethought and its approaches supplemented.

New approaches to the fundamental understanding of management goals and procedures, already discussed at the end of the 20th century, can show the way here, having rapidly gained prominence in the past two decades, driven by the increasing complexity of the corporate environment. The COVID-19 pandemic and its effects on markets and supply chains, global tensions and regional wars with worldwide implications, and far-reaching state interventions to align the economy and society along sustainable lines have

recently acted as catalysts for this reorientation. Three new perspectives are at the forefront:

- A stakeholder-oriented perspective as opposed to the previous primarily inside-out approach (Freeman, 1984);
- Strategic management “more as the result of an informal learning process than a formal planning process” (Mintzberg, 2011); and
- Management as the process of organizing through “sensemaking,” rather than as a purely decision-making process (Weick, 2021; Weick & Sutcliffe, 2016).

At first glance, the considerations mentioned above share a common thread: They largely draw on genuinely communicative competencies such as empathy and dialogue competency, opinion formation as well as perception and relevance management. Applying this new fundamental understanding of management to corporate communication, it becomes clear that in dealing with the new complexity and contradictions in the age of stakeholder capitalism, the fundamental communicative perspective is just as important as the explicit communicative contributions. This goes significantly beyond the recognition that organizations always have a communicative dimension that simply needs to be consistently advocated in everyday business. Rather, it is about a new understanding of corporate communication as a resource for management decisions under conditions of fundamental uncertainty and contradiction.

In this context, alongside the strategic-instrumental contribution of the function to achieve communicative goals, a strategic-orienting role for the company manifests – primarily delivered across three competencies:

1. **Validation**, mainly through systematic “communicative relationality” inwards and outwards (Kuhn et al. 2017);
2. **Calibration**, mainly through “contextual leadership” (Hamrefors, 2009); and
3. **Interpretation**, mainly through active “perception organization” (Weick & Sutcliffe 2016).

These competencies will be outlined below in terms of their perspective, method, and effect.

Validation competence – thinking in the future perfect

In the debate about the future of corporate communication, digital tools and GenAI currently occupy a prominent place. Beyond the hope for increased efficiency with GenAI – in particular for content analysis and generation – the question of the most valid practical orientation in times of great complexity also regularly arises. However, the field of corporate communication is strongly influenced by human dynamics, and a contingency problem exists that structurally limits predictive capability: “If the future is different from the past, then collecting and analyzing big data – which always comes from the past – can lead to false conclusions” (Gigerenzer, 2023). Although GenAI tools with their algorithmic logic can help in understanding reality, their inherent tendency towards certainty simultaneously limits their effectiveness. The true validation competence of corporate communication lies in professionally justified doubt. AI-based data analysis can increase effectiveness here, but genuine orientation performance consists in the ability to find probable statements or practicable solutions with limited knowledge (about the future) based on varied experiences and careful conclusions.

The communicative validation of corporate decisions requires a new understanding of the company’s internal and external world. Given increasing, sometimes contradictory stakeholder demands and the simultaneously growing complexity of the public sphere, it is no longer sufficient to merely introduce the communicative perspective or to name the communicative effects and accompanying phenomena of individual approaches. Rather, a holistic communicative understanding is required – one that combines the targeted and unintended internal and external communicative impacts of the company, its actors, and its offerings (Kuhn et al., 2017). Ultimately, this is not just about intentionally employed corporate communication, but about the entire resulting communication of the company.

Communicative validation requires the selection and interpretation of relevant information to enable a retrospective and, even more importantly, a prospective view of the communicative impact of business decisions. Two tasks are central to this selection process:

1. Specific segments of reality must be purposefully selected and presented from the company’s “stream of experience” (Weick, 2021).
2. A binding interpretative offer must be made regarding the meaning of these segments of reality (Weick, 2021).

Both tasks require a process of “active exploration” that combines “perception-driven processes” for gathering practical, detailed observations with “concept-driven processes” that relate collected observations to known categories and concepts (Weick & Sutcliffe, 2016). At the end of the exploration, there is no fixed situational picture or definitive decision proposal, but rather a “design” for reviewing communicative impact from a current or – for a prognosis – future perspective (Mintzberg, 2011; Weick, 2021).

Placing current events or business decisions into a communicative future perspective is one of the key tasks of corporate communication as an orientation function in a time of fundamental change. Neither free speculation based on selected assumptions nor pure extrapolation by projecting past trends is effective. Rather, it is necessary to “treat a future event as if it has already passed” (Weick, 2021) – that is, to look ahead by looking back at the future as if it were already history. Thinking in the future perfect (Weick, 2021) allows – based on selected measures, assumptions of impact, and framework conditions – to describe alternative future projections, explain their emergence, and assign probabilities (Ehrhart, 2022).

Key competencies for corporate communication as an orientation function

Key competence	Validation	Calibration	Interpretation
Delivered through	Communicative relationality	Communicative contextual leadership	Perception organization
Perspective	Holistic view on all communications of the company	Confronting business assumptions with stakeholder expectations	Interpreting liquid reality
Methods	Free exploration and systematic design	Gathering significance and defining relevance	Collecting small and big numbers data
Effect	Alternative future projections	Providing peripheral vision	Communicative weather report
Illustrative examples from Bosch	Future projections are condensed into short texts or presentations with suitable illustrations, and are often used as table documents with a short expiry date.	In 2025, Corporate Communications has provided the top management with more than 330 situation pictures with focus either on time periods, relevant issues, or specific events, combining data and impressions from published and – on the basis of dedicated online polling – public opinion. In doing so, established parameters such as quantity and sentiment of coverage were combined with the dimension sovereignty of interpretation in the public environment.	Corporate Communications follows the fundamental logic of “reputation plus bonding creates stakeholder capital” as return-on-invest. Since 2020 more than 4,000 participants from civil society, science, politics, culture, and NGOs were involved in respective stakeholder interactions.

Calibration competence – bringing the devil's advocate to the table

Targeted business action is only possible if, at the end of a decision-making process, one option is selected from several and resources are provided for implementation. In this process – the actual management of the business task – there is a threefold alignment with reality: during problem definition, in the development of approaches, and at the moment of decision-making (Mintzberg, 2011). To prevent the necessary complexity reduction from leading to black-and-white thinking, especially regarding stakeholder expectations, corporate communication can provide continuous calibration. The resulting orientation performance constructively questions accepted assumptions to avoid the impression that no alternatives exist.

For corporate communication to contribute to the calibration of business decision-making in an environment of ambiguous reality, a selection must be made from the available information and observations. This requires a perspective of communicative relevance – that is, the utility for assessing possible impacts on publics and stakeholders. Communicative relevance usually arises whenever change within the company meets continuity in the social environment, and vice versa. Calibration performance then primarily results from referring to corresponding changes or continuities as an alternative to the established opinion in decision-making.

Critical orientation in particular requires a targeted approach to complexity. When complexity reduction is repeatedly mentioned in this context, it applies at best to the process of describing reality in ways that simplify communication. However, the actual perception of the increasingly complex social reality for companies in the age of stakeholder capitalism simultaneously requires “complex observers” who “anticipate significant environmental changes” and “see patterns” (Weick, 2021). To avoid undercomplex observation – such as blindly trusting one's own data on published and public opinion inside and outside the company – a shifting perspective is essential. Peripheral vision of debates, events, and developments not currently in the spotlight, including “non-rational personal upheavals” (Weick, 2021), proves particularly valuable here. So too does the continuous input of an outside perspective through a well-informed but independently minded devil's advocate.

The calibration of assumptions and perceptions regarding publics and stakeholders enables corporate communication to provide orientation in specific decision-making situations. This claim goes beyond classical communication consulting aimed at increasing opportunities or reducing risks, as it involves interpreting essential foundations for decision-making. Just as a ship's captain in narrow waters or when entering harbors is advised by a local and experienced pilot without giving up command on the bridge, responsible management receives targeted “contextual” leadership support through hints on perception patterns, hot-button issues, and changes in values (Hamrefors, 2009). The shoals, reefs, and sandbanks of navigation become, in this analogy, the ambiguities, dilemmas, and uncertainties that management must navigate in extreme situations.

Interpretation competence – nowcasting

Strategic business decision-making in the age of stakeholder capitalism takes place not only under conditions of an increasingly accelerated and fragmented public sphere – due to digitalization and the use of GenAI – but is simultaneously confronted with “postmodern meta-discourses” (Lyotard, 2012) on legitimacy issues, within which meaning and responsibility as a starting point for economic action occupy at least as much space as prosperity and growth as desired outcomes (Ehrhart, 2019). The resulting experience of a liquid reality creates a rapidly growing need for continuous interpretation of internal and external publics and stakeholder relationships in corporate decision-making. While empiricism can provide the basis for this, the actual orientation performance is inherently interpretive.

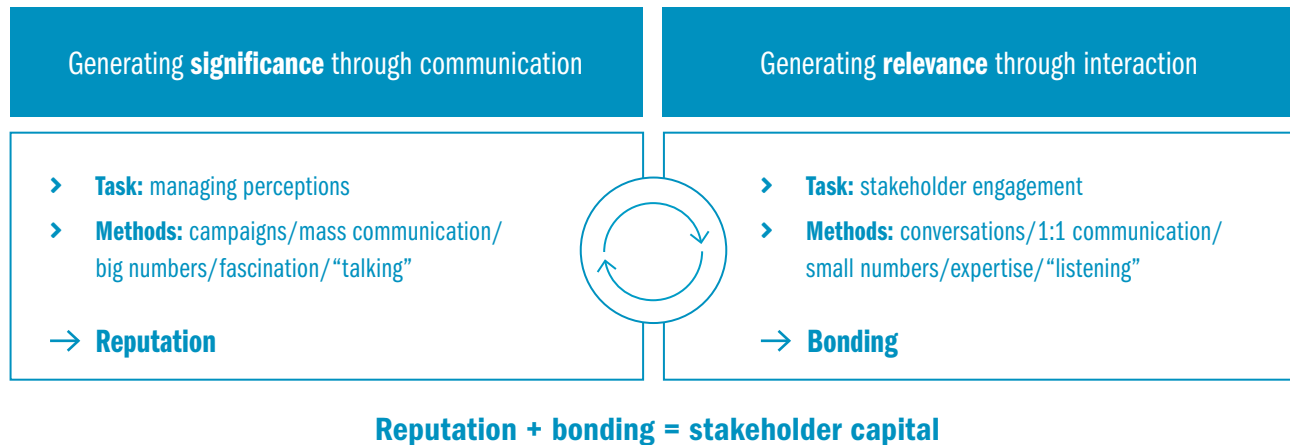
To achieve the necessary interpretation of the company's communicative environment, an explanatory model is required that structures this interpretative process and makes its results understandable to actors outside corporate communication. By pointing to the effects and interdependencies of communicative factors, such a paradigm simultaneously creates the basis for a business model for corporate communication – one that provides information about the function's perspective and goal-oriented contribution. A communicative paradigm that aims to meet the demands of stakeholder capitalism must combine classical aspects of perception management – such as instruments for increasing awareness, image, and

reputation – with measures of relations management aimed at building and maintaining relationships (or bonding) with stakeholders from the social environment. The interpretive competence of corporate communication can only be effective beyond the function itself if assessments and results are introduced promptly and in a guiding manner. Signals from the field of perception management – typically big numbers derived from quantitative or qualitative analysis of published and public opinion – must be combined with insights from the field of relations management – typically

combined with clear instructions for action and the respective paradigm of corporate communication as expressed in strategic communication planning, form the methodological backbone of effective interpretive performance.

In practice, interpretive performance is less often found in large strategic designs, where it is at most the starting point for long-term positioning and action planning, than in the routine of daily situation analysis, which also regularly transitions into ad hoc consulting for short-term management decisions. Given the new requirements for orientation

A new business model for corporate communication



Source: Christof Ehrhart

small numbers based on physical, virtual, and sometimes AI-supported dialogues and exchanges with stakeholders in small groups – and distilled into decision-relevant scenarios and complexity-reduced situational pictures.

When preparing these representations – usually short texts or presentations with catchy language and a few relevant data and observations – timeliness (even anticipation) is more important than completeness, especially since such documents usually only serve as a starting point for further strategic discussion. Daily situational pictures,

in the face of the unknown, clarifying what is currently the case in the company’s environment becomes an act of present forecasting. As with nowcasting in meteorology, for example, this involves assessing the current situation based on available (incomplete) data and an established mental model. Communicative present forecasts are regularly conveyed rhetorically – in dedicated briefing meetings, in short-term requests for orientation, and in written formats such as table documents or board presentations – using highly condensed language.

WHEN FACING RADICAL UNCERTAINTY, ONE NEEDS MORE THAN GENAI IN COMMUNICATIONS

Companies in the age of stakeholder capitalism operate amid fragmented publics, contested value-based maxims of action, new national and international conflict constellations, and technological revolutions, navigating a complex mix of opportunities and challenges of the known, the unknown, and the unexpected. Corporate communication is therefore required to provide an orientation service for management that, while intrinsically present in the skill profile of corporate communication, has hitherto lagged behind the traditional focus on communicative steering and impact – both in the self-perception and competence development of the discipline.

By supplementing the strategically instrumental viewpoint on corporate communication, which has previously understood “communicative value creation” primarily in terms of creating intangible assets such as reputation and trust (Zerfass & Link, 2022), with that of a strategically orienting management function, an escape route also opens from the narrow self- and external perception of the discipline as an overwhelmed, underwhelmed, or simply misunderstood second-rate function (Nothaft, 2010) or auxiliary discipline of management.

For this to truly succeed, communicators cannot solely rely on algorithm-based data evaluations, including the use of GenAI, going forward. While these technologies are primarily helpful in increasing the efficiency of orientation in times of radical uncertainty, past data says little about what lies ahead and can itself become a perception trap. To function effectively as an orientation function, corporate communication must expose its specific communicative perspective, sharpen its sensors for communicative relevance, and present a convincing business case for corporate communication.

OUTLOOK

For corporate communication in times of fundamental change, the question of what the actual state of affairs is and what should (or should not) be communicated is of utmost relevance. This requires not only sensitive use of language but also a highly developed sensitivity to the backgrounds and origins of the interpretative offers and language games in circulation. Many of these are contentiously nuanced; some highly value-driven or even interest-driven.

Professional communicators themselves have learned to make themselves heard with meaningful narratives. This is effective as long as a sense of reality is maintained, but it carries risks if that sense is lost. The American science fiction author Philip K. Dick – known for the literary originals of iconic film adaptations such as *Blade Runner*, *Minority Report*, and *Total Recall* – answered the question “What is reality?” in a text with the apt title “How to Build a Universe That Doesn’t Fall Apart Two Days Later?": “Reality is that which, when you stop believing in it, doesn’t go away” (Dick, 1978). That may serve also as guidance for a communications discipline increasingly confronted with the task of providing orientation in times of fundamental change. There’s a lot to win and much to lose.

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MORE INFORMATION

The article is based on the German publication Ehrhart, 2025, as listed above. More related content can be found at www.futureproofingpr.de

LESSONS ON VALUE CREATION FROM AHOLD DELHAIZE AND COCA-COLA EUROPACIFIC PARTNERS

CONTRIBUTORS: ELVIRA BOS, AHOLD DELHAIZE; SHANNA WENDT, COCA-COLA EUROPACIFIC PARTNERS



Measuring the impact of communication is central to business strategy. How do communication leaders pinpoint where their efforts deliver the greatest return, set meaningful objectives, and prove their contribution to the business? And in what ways does AI support or complicate the measurement of success? Elvira Bos (Ahold Delhaize) and Shanna Wendt (Coca-Cola Europacific Partners) share their experiences in turning strategy, data, and technology into demonstrable business impact.

WHAT SUCCESS IN CORPORATE COMMUNICATION REALLY MEANS TODAY

Success in corporate communication is no longer defined by outputs alone – it is about creating the conditions for impact. For Elvira Bos and Shanna Wendt, that shift has fundamentally changed how they approach their roles. “The expectations from stakeholders have shifted significantly in recent years,” Bos notes. She has been leading corporate communication at Ahold Delhaize, one of the world’s largest food retail groups, for more than five years. “Understanding different viewpoints and being able to place yourself in someone else’s shoes is crucial to help the company navigate its license to operate with clarity.”

For Bos, success rests on three core elements:

- **Awareness** means deeply understanding the world around the company, its sector, financial context, operational pressures, and the broader societal forces shaping stakeholder expectations.
- **Preparedness** is about building credibility, strong positioning, and trust before a crisis hits; about “fixing the roof while the sun is shining;” and using scenario planning and proactive engagement to ensure informed decision-making.
- **Relationships** involve identifying opinion leaders inside and outside the organization, balancing perspectives, and fostering bottom-up internal communications within

the company to complement external engagement.

Wendt frames success as creating conditions for growth. She leads global communications at Coca-Cola Europacific Partners (CCEP), one of the world's leading consumer goods companies. "We achieve this by being audience-centric, balancing both human and brand focus, and ensuring digital excellence underpins everything we do," she explains. Every interaction, intentional or not, is a moment of communication. This shift from a business-centric view to an audience-driven perspective changes how success is measured and what communications priorities look like.

Measurement brings this audience-driven perspective to life, for example in how CCEP understands and positions itself as a business. "We've always seen ourselves as an inherently local business with a global brand, with manufacturing sites and employees across our markets. But we took for granted that this was widely understood", Wendt says. Research and measurement told a different story. "It showed us that this wasn't clear to our audiences," she explains. As a result, the company has shifted both its communications and resources to better reflect its local presence across markets such as Germany, France, and the UK – demonstrating how measurement and research can directly influence positioning and strategic focus.

Earning a seat and being heard early enough

Communications has a stronger position in organizations than ever before, but early involvement remains a challenge. Bos reflects, "We are well positioned and supported by our CEO, to whom we report directly, yet, and I'm sure more professionals will recognize this, we're not

*Much of what we do is invisible
when it works well.*

always involved as early as we would like. Sometimes, we're brought in when something is already underway, whereas ideally, we'd have been part of the discussion weeks or even months earlier. One important contribution our function can have," she notes, "is helping the organization think more 'reputationally' when making decisions. Reputation is often seen as something owned by communications, but in reality, it's shaped by countless interactions and decisions across the business, from customer experiences to hiring

processes. That's why it's so important for communications to be involved early, helping to shape key business decisions rather than being asked to 'fix' issues after the fact."

To make impact visible and bring the outside world in, her team created a two-page quarterly overview for the executive committee. It summarizes results, upcoming opportunities, and emerging retail and societal trends. Making communications more visible and valued is something she and her team are continuously working on: "I think we'll probably never reach a phase where we feel like, 'Okay, now they fully see the scope of what we're doing.' But I also look at it the other way around. I do not have full visibility on everything they do, and I trust them on it. That's just how companies work."

Wendt highlights that those visible moments – campaigns, leadership updates, or business performance announcements – represent only a fraction of the work.

Ahold Delhaize is one of the world's largest food retail groups, serving over 77 million customers



each week across Europe, the United States and Indonesia. Its family of 17 local brands – including Albert Heijn, Food Lion, Stop & Shop, Delhaize and bol – operates more than 9,500 stores and employs 384,000 associates. Headquartered in Zaandam, the Netherlands, Ahold Delhaize is listed on Euronext Amsterdam and Brussels (ticker: AD).

Coca-Cola Europacific Partners (CCEP) is one of the world's leading consumer goods companies. It produces, moves, and sells some



of the world's most loved brands, serving nearly 600 million consumers and supporting over four million customers across 31 countries. CCEP combines the strength and scale of a multinational business with deep local knowledge of the markets, customers, and communities it serves. The company is listed on Euronext Amsterdam, NASDAQ, the London Stock Exchange, and the Spanish Stock Exchanges, and is a constituent of both the NASDAQ 100 and FTSE 100 indices.

Much of communications' contribution is quiet but essential. "Is our value always fully understood across the organization? Honestly, no. Our board and executive leadership recognize it, which is vital, but much of what we do is invisible when it works well. The great tragedy for our profession sometimes is that when we do our job really well, it looks simple, almost invisible."

ALIGNING STRATEGY WITH IMPACT

Successful corporate communication relies on ensuring that every initiative, project, and campaign creates value, aligns with the company strategy, and adapts to changing circumstances. For Bos and Wendt, this means balancing long-term strategic priorities with the flexibility to respond to emerging issues, while keeping audiences and business outcomes front and center. "One of the things I really love about our setup is that communications is fully integrated

Communication goals are defined alongside commercial objectives – never as an afterthought.

into the business planning process," Wendt explains. "At the same time that we define our commercial objectives, we are setting goals for communications. It's never an afterthought and I think that's really key." Her team follows an annual planning cycle, with mini sprints throughout the year to check progress and make adjustments. What success looks like for each initiative is defined upfront and, depending on scale and scope, it is either measured and evaluated after completion or interim assessments are conducted to make adjustments along the way.

Bos adds that her team's work is guided by a multi-year strategy aligned with the overall company strategy, with a four-year horizon and a yearly planning cycle. "It defines where we can create the most value, both proactively and defensively." Proactively, her team uses a topical calendar to ensure balanced storytelling across business-linked themes such as sustainability, innovation, and AI. Defensively, real-time monitoring, reputation tracking, and structured stakeholder engagement allow them to respond effectively to emerging issues, ensuring that the strategy remains relevant and actionable throughout the year. The OGSM framework (objectives, goals, strategies, measures) helps to stay

focused on where the most value beyond core responsibilities can be added, such as corporate reporting, financial communication, and business announcements.

Beyond the numbers

Bos emphasizes: "Every project starts with the goal in mind, but flexibility is critical. KPIs shouldn't be followed at any cost." Measurement, they both underline, is a journey with metrics ranging from broader business indicators with indirect influence to areas such as channel performance and campaign effectiveness, where influence can be more directly managed. The ultimate goal is linking those indicators to business outcomes: "We would like to show how reputation affects purchase intent and, ultimately, sales," Wendt adds, "but measurement can't be about quantity over quality. Tracking coverage or follower numbers alone doesn't tell the full story. And today, we're surrounded by data. The real challenge is not access, but making that data meaningful."

Their approach to measurement is underpinned by fundamental principles such as credibility, transparency, and relevance, with frameworks like AMEC's Barcelona Principles serving as a foundation. "Measurement cannot feel like a 'dark art' or some kind of magic. If we want to use measurement meaningfully within organizations, people need to understand where the data comes from,

KPIs shouldn't be followed at any cost.

what exactly is being measured, and how to interpret it." For Wendt, that starts with a simple question: are we asking the right questions? "You can have all the data in the world, but if you're not framing the right questions, you won't get clear or useful answers. If we stay disciplined in applying these principles and thoughtful in how we use data, we can ensure that our measurement is both robust and genuinely valuable for decision-making."

WHAT HAMBURGERS TEACH US ABOUT AI-DRIVEN PRACTICE

Today, conversations about corporate communication almost always touch on AI. "Sometimes I feel like it's a game

of whether you can have any conversation without ending up discussing AI. Chances are, no,” Wendt admits. She notes that AI plays a growing role not just across communications in general, but also in measurement and evaluation. “I look at it in two ways,” she explains. “First, we use it to make measuring the impact and effectiveness of communications easier. Second, it helps us interpret the insights we gather. Sometimes we feel awash in data, and AI lets us ask: What does this mean, and what should we do next?”

Yet context, judgment, and relationships remain irreplaceable. “Every AI application has a human in the loop,” Wendt emphasizes. A recent process mapping identified which tasks are purely human, which are tech-driven, and which are hybrid, allowing the team to deploy AI effectively while keeping control and accuracy.

Bos adds, “We use AI for media monitoring, social listening, stakeholder mapping, summarizing information, and structuring reports provided by external vendors. I personally use a company-licensed LLM daily. It simplifies my work, sharpens my writing, and helps me test ideas. Experimentation is crucial to see where AI adds real value, not just

improving what we already do, but enabling what we couldn’t do before.” She stresses that AI cannot replace human judgment, intuition, or moment-to-moment perception. To illustrate, Bos shares her “hamburger method”: “The foundation – the lower bun – is your strategy, context, and data. AI adds the patty: insights, refinements, and alternative perspectives. The top bun is human judgment: reviewing, interpreting, and applying insights. Humans and AI together reduce risks, like bias or misinterpretation, while maximizing the value AI can provide.”

Overall, Wendt’s key recommendation is to have a thorough understanding of the commercial aspects of one’s own business or organization. “This has to guide what you measure and how you measure it,” she stresses. “You could bring all sorts of data to the CEO, but your impact will be far greater if you can explain why each metric matters. Not for reputation’s sake alone, but because of the tangible impact it has on the business. I can’t stress this enough: Understanding the business context is essential for meaningful measurement and communication.”

CONTRIBUTORS



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BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Based on interviews conducted and edited by Managing Editor Dr. Michelle Wloka.

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

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



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

THE CURRENT STATE OF CORPORATE COMMUNICATION

South Africa at a glance

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

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

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

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

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

The King Reports on Corporate Governance

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

Media and information challenge

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

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

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

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

Challenges in stakeholder engagement

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

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

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

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

PROFESSIONALISATION, EDUCATION, AND SKILLS

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

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

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

Towards professional success

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

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

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

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

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

LOOKING AHEAD: AI, TRUST, AND SOCIAL IMPACT

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

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

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

Key do’s and don’ts for corporate communication

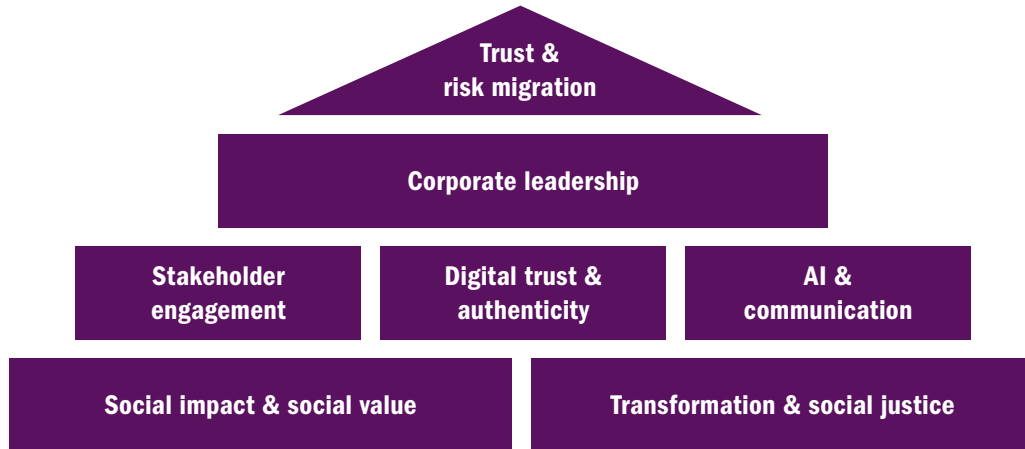
Do’s

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

Don’ts

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

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



Source: Corne Meintjes & Thabisile Phumo

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

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

CONTRIBUTORS



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BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Based on interviews conducted and edited by Managing Editor Dr. Michelle Wloka, coordinated by Prof. Dr. Dalien Rene Benecke of the University of Johannesburg.

STUDY HIGHLIGHTS: AI, REPUTATION, AND THE CHANGING COMMUNICATION LANDSCAPE

AUTHOR: MICHELLE WLOKA, MANAGING EDITOR



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Technology, reputation, and human behavior are all in flux – and they are changing faster than most organizations can keep up. Recent studies point to mounting pressure on organizations, a widening gap between AI capability and governance, and shifting expectations among employees and audiences alike. The reports gathered here cover AI developments, reputation, corporate affairs, media habits, and workforce trends, offering insights for shaping strategy, storytelling, and influence in an environment that is growing more fragmented and harder to control.



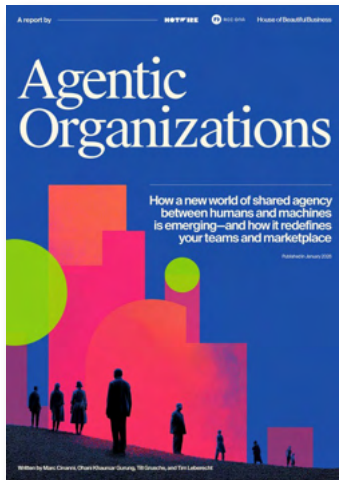
AI-DRIVEN TRANSFORMATION OF ORGANIZATIONS AND COMMUNICATION

Artificial Intelligence Index Report

The *Artificial Intelligence Index Report* by Stanford University compiles a comprehensive range of global data on AI development, tracking technological progress, industry adoption, and societal impact. The 2026 report highlights the widening gap between AI capability and preparedness of managing it. The most capable models are now the least transparent and safety measurement is lagging behind performance: Hallucination rates across leading models range from 22% to 94%, and reporting on responsible AI benchmarks remains inconsistent despite extensive capability tracking.

At the organizational level, governance structures are gradually emerging, with AI-specific roles increasing by 17% in 2025 and the share of organizations without formal responsible AI policies falling to 11%. Significant barriers remain, however, including limited expertise, budget constraints, and regulatory uncertainty. The report also points to growing ambivalence around AI: The share of respondents who believe AI delivers more benefits than drawbacks has increased to 59%, while 52% now say that the technology makes them feel nervous.

Read the full report: Sajadieh, S., Fattorini, L., Perrault, R., Gil, Y., Parli, V., Santarlaschi, L., Pava, J., Maslej, N., Altman, E., Brynjolfsson, E., Brodley, C., Clark, J., Dignum, V., Kumar, V., Landay, J., Lyons, T., Manyika, J., Niebles, J. C., Shoham, Y., Tabassi, E., Wald, R., Walsh, T., & Weld, D. (2026). The AI Index 2026 Annual Report. AI Index Steering Committee, Institute for Human-Centered AI, Stanford University. <https://www.aiindex.stanford.edu/report/>



Read the full report: Cinanni, M., Gurung, O. K., Grusche, T., & Leberecht, T. (2026). *Agentic Organizations*. Hotwire Global. <https://www.hotwireglobal.com/agentic-organizations>

Agentic Organizations Report 2026

“In thousands of organizations, AI is now acting on its own by shaping outcomes long before anyone realizes,” states the *Agentic Organizations Report 2026* by Hotwire. It explores how AI is reshaping organizations into agentic systems, where humans and AI jointly influence decisions, workflows, and brand interactions. Based on a mixed-method approach, including a survey of around 900 business and marketing professionals across North America, Europe, and Asia, as well as in-depth expert interviews, the study examines how this shift unfolds both inside organizations and in the wider marketplace.

At its core, the report highlights a dual transformation: Within companies, AI is increasingly sharing tasks and redefining what it means to contribute, lead, and make decisions; externally, algorithms are becoming active intermediaries in how customers discover, evaluate, and engage with brands.

For instance, while 69% of respondents report feeling more empowered by AI, many also point to growing tensions around agency, with over half believing AI could perform most of their job within five years. Strikingly, 21% already describe AI as a colleague, and 14% even as a decision-maker, underscoring how quickly the boundaries between human and machine roles are dissolving.



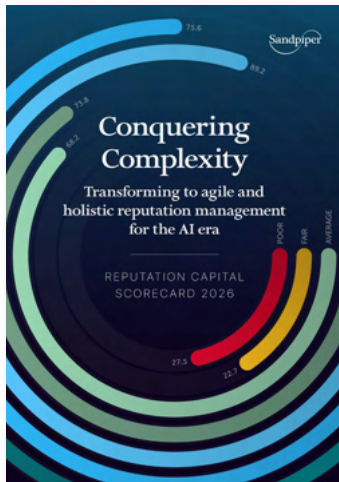
Read the full report: Fajardo, O. K. (2026). *The Communicator's Role in Driving Generative AI Adoption*. Institute for Public Relations. <https://instituteforpr.org/the-communicators-role-in-driving-generative-ai-adoption/>

The Communicator's Role in Driving Generative AI Adoption

The Communicator's Role in Driving Generative AI Adoption by the Institute for Public Relations examines how communication leaders are helping organizations implement GenAI. Based on interviews with more than 30 communication and technology leaders, the report outlines different stages of AI maturity and identifies practical strategies for scaling adoption.

The report highlights a shift in the role of communicators, who increasingly act as connectors between technical teams and the broader organization. While IT often leads implementation, communicators help translate complexity and build trust. Productivity and efficiency are the primary drivers of adoption, yet success depends on strong leadership involvement, as well as clear governance, communication, and training.

At the same time, organizations are still navigating risks such as inaccuracies, misinformation, bias, and overreliance on AI. Many lack measurement frameworks, and human oversight remains essential, particularly in external communications, where AI should primarily be used for ideation and drafting rather than final output.



Read the full report: Sandpiper (2026). *Conquering Complexity: Transforming to agile and holistic reputation management for the AI era. Reputation Capital Scorecard*. <https://sandpipercomms.com/research/sandpiper-reputation-capital-scorecard-launches-in-davos/>

Reputation Capital Scorecard 2026: Conquering Complexity

The *Reputation Capital Scorecard 2026* by Sandpiper explores how organizations are managing reputation in an increasingly complex, AI-driven global environment. Based on a survey of more than 3,000 CEOs, C-suite executives, and corporate affairs leaders across 27 markets, the report shows that reputation has firmly moved to the top of the executive agenda. Nearly all aspects of reputation management have increased in importance over the past year, with 72% of CEOs saying reputation is critical to commercial success. Yet despite this recognition, many organizations remain unprepared for the implications of AI on reputation management, with fewer than half describing their approach as effective, agile, or adaptable. Beyond AI, significant gaps in preparedness are also evident in other key reputational risk areas, including ESG and sustainability pressures and employee activism.

The report also points to growing strain in stakeholder relationships and a widening perception gap within the C-suite. CEOs and communications leaders often disagree on how strong reputation really is and how well it is being managed, revealing a disconnect between strategic intent and communications reality.



Read the full report: DHR Global (2025). *Workforce Trends Report 2026*. <https://www.dhrglobal.com/insights/workforce-trends-report-2026/>

WORKFORCE, AUDIENCE, AND VALUE SHIFT

Workforce Trends Report 2026

Employee engagement is under increasing pressure as organizations navigate rapid shifts in work models, technology, and expectations. The *Workforce Trends Report 2026* by DHR Global draws on a survey of 1,500 corporate professionals across North America, Europe, and Asia to explore how AI, hybrid work, and cultural change are reshaping the employee experience.

Across regions, engagement has fallen sharply year over year, with only 64% of workers describing themselves as highly engaged, down from 88% in 2025. At the same time, 83% report experiencing at least some level of burnout, driven primarily by heavy workloads and long working hours.

While workplace culture remains a key factor in the employee experience, only 36% of respondents say it is clearly defined and translates into performance. Employees highlight recognition, flexibility, and professional development as the most important levers for improving workplace culture and engagement.



Read the full report: CASA (2026). Chief Communications / Corporate Affairs Officer Turnover Study 2026. <https://casa-partners.com/news/casa-uk-2026-report/>

Chief Communications/Corporate Affairs Officer Turnover Study 2026

The study by the Corporate Affairs Search Alliance (CASA) measures turnover trends among senior communications leaders globally, based on data from 1,102 companies. The report indicates that, while the overall turnover in the US and in Europe has stabilized, significant national variations persist. Most notably, there is a high churn in the UK, where nearly one in six CCO positions is affected. At the same time, companies are rethinking how they fill top communications roles – external hires are gaining ground in Europe, whereas US firms are increasingly promoting from within. Despite these differences, demand for highly capable CCOs remains strong. The role is defined by the ability to navigate complex stakeholder environments with speed and confidence, while translating external developments into strategic insight at the highest level of management.



Read the full report: FTI Strategic Communications (2026). Corporate Affairs in a World Without Narrative Slack. <https://fticomunications.com/corporate-affairs-in-a-world-without-narrative-slack/>

Corporate Affairs in a World Without Narrative Slack

The report by FTI Consulting examines how corporate storytelling operates in a context where there is little to no room for narrative slack. Based on a survey of corporate affairs and reputation leaders and board-level interviews, it highlights that statements around strategy, technology, AI, sustainability, or corporate values are no longer seen as statements of intent, but as immediate commitments that are quickly measured against actual performance. As much of reputation-building now unfolds outside direct corporate control, gaps between claims and reality can quickly erode trust, both internally and with regulators and policymakers.

The findings also point to growing pressure on corporate affairs functions, which are often brought in too late in decision-making processes despite rising expectations from boards to manage trust and exposure. While the remit of corporate affairs has expanded to include reputation, regulation, investors, employees, and license to operate, many organizational structures and ways of working have yet to fully adapt.

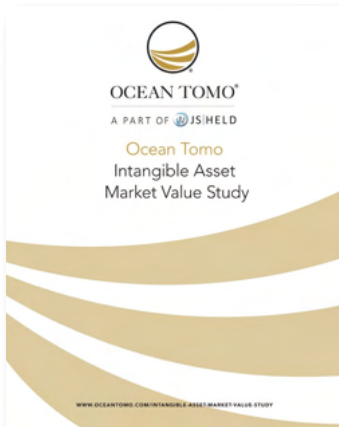


Read the full report: Robertson, C. T., Ross Arguedas, A., Mukherjee, M., & Fletcher, R. (2026). Understanding young news audiences at a time of rapid change. <http://reuters-institute.politics.ox.ac.uk/understanding-young-news-audiences-time-rapid-change>

Understanding Young News Audiences at a Time of Rapid Change

Younger audiences are not turning away from news – they are redefining how they access and engage with it. The report by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism highlights a mismatch between journalistic output and the expectations of young audiences, with some describing traditional news as irrelevant, difficult to understand, or unfairly biased against their demographic.

Drawing on a decade of research combining longitudinal audience data, surveys, and qualitative insights, the report shows how younger audiences consume news in a fragmented, platform-driven environment. Key findings include the fact that 18–24-year-olds are gravitating towards audiovisual platforms and turning to TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube as key sources of news. On these platforms, 51% say they pay more attention to individual creators than to traditional news brands (39%). At the same time, younger audiences also show greater openness to AI, using it to navigate and simplify complex topics. Around 15% access news via AI tools weekly, compared to just 3% of those aged 55+.



Read the full report: Ocean Tomo (2026). Intangible Asset Market Value Study <https://oceantomo.com/intangible-asset-market-value-study>

Intangible Asset Market Value Study

Over the past five decades, the sources of corporate value in global capital markets have shifted dramatically from physical to intangible assets. The *Ocean Tomo Intangible Asset Market Value Study* examines this evolution using long-term financial data from global indices, including 50 years of U.S. market data and 20 years of data from international markets.

In 1975, tangible assets such as property, plant, and equipment accounted for 83% of the S&P 500's market value, with intangible assets making up just 17%. By 2025, this relationship had fully inverted: Intangibles now represent around 92% of total market capitalization, while physical assets have fallen to just 8%. The study describes this shift as an “economic inversion,” reflecting a structural move in value creation from physical assets toward knowledge, innovation, brand, and other intangible drivers.

AUTHOR



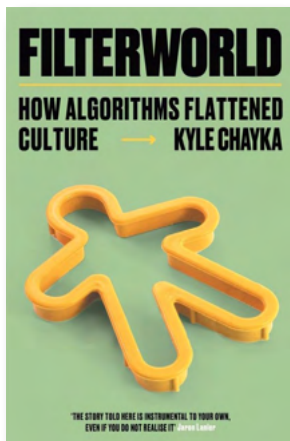
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ESSENTIAL READS: ALGORITHMS, POSITIVITY, AND THE WORK OF CCOS

REVIEWERS: SWARAN SANDHU, HOCHSCHULE DER MEDIEN STUTTGART; STEPHEN WADDINGTON, LEEDS BECKETT UNIVERSITY; DANIEL WOLFGRUBER, UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN DENMARK



Professors Swaran Sandhu (Hochschule der Medien Stuttgart) and Daniel Wolfgruber (University of Southern Denmark), along with editorial board member Stephen Waddington, take a closer look at three notable books. In this article, they share their key insights and takeaways, highlighting the ideas that resonated most from their reading.



Chayka, K. (2024).
Filterworld: How algorithms flattened culture. 304 pages.
ISBN 978-1788706971

FILTERWORLD. HOW ALGORITHMS FLATTENED CULTURE BY KYLE CHAYKA (SWARAN SANDHU)

When were you surprised the last time you read a book, saw a movie, listened to a new album, or tried a new meal? I mean really surprised – the kind of surprise you cannot stop thinking about for days. Has it been a while? You are not alone. In *Filterworld*, Kyle Chayka argues that algorithms are quietly standardizing culture. Platforms like Spotify, TikTok, Netflix, and Instagram do not just recommend content – they shape taste itself.

Chayka describes a cultural environment where recommendation systems steer millions of users toward similar aesthetics, formats, and narratives. The result is a subtle but powerful convergence. Cafés around the world start looking alike, playlists revolve around the same moods, and travel feeds serve up identical sceneries. There goes my matcha latte.

This argument echoes the cultural critique of Theodor W. Adorno from the mid-20th century. In his theory of the culture industry, Adorno argued that mass

media standardizes cultural production to maximize consumption. Chayka updates that idea for the algorithmic age. Instead of radio and film studios producing sameness, recommendation systems now steer both audiences and creators toward predictable formats. The more we rely on and feed these engines, the more difficult it is to game the system and create something truly surprising.

Most useful insights

For communicators, this matters because messages increasingly circulate inside these algorithmic ecosystems. Visibility depends less on editorial gatekeepers and more on systems optimized for engagement – and familiarity. One of Chayka's insights is that algorithms amplify similarity. Content that resembles what people already engage with is more likely to be recommended (if you want to dig deeper, check out the concept of homophily which surprisingly does not get any coverage in the book).

For corporate communication, this explains why digital content often converges toward the same formats. Think about the standard LinkedIn post: a short personal anecdote, then a management lesson, and an inspirational takeaway. Are you also already tired of reading those? This structure spreads because it performs well within the recommendation algorithm.

Chayka's argument therefore complements research on algorithmic gatekeeping in strategic communication. Platforms influence not only distribution but also the form of corporate messaging. The risk is what Adorno would call standardization: If every organization optimizes perfectly for algorithmic visibility, communication strategies become interchangeable.

Who will benefit most from this book

Chayka knows his trade as a journalist and storyteller: It is an easy read on the train, loaded with anecdotes and a bit light on the scientific side. *Filterworld* is valuable for senior communication strategists navigating platform-driven media environments and decision makers. If you oversee thought leadership, corporate storytelling, or social media strategy, Chayka offers a helpful lens for understanding why so much digital communication increasingly looks the same. The book connects technological infrastructure (algorithms) with cultural outcomes (homogenization).

It also raises an uncomfortable question in the age of GenAI. If everyone uses AI tools to produce brand narratives, or LinkedIn posts, the same dynamic appears again: Language becomes polished, competent – and strikingly similar. In other words, AI risks accelerating the very cultural flattening Chayka describes.

For communication leaders, the takeaway is almost paradoxical: The more powerful algorithmic and AI tools become, the more valuable distinctly human judgment, voice, and perspective will be. For CCOs, the strategic challenge is clear: Understand the logic of the feed – but maintain enough editorial voice and creative friction to avoid disappearing into the algorithmic sea of sameness.

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.



Andersson, T. (2025).
Chief Communications Officers at work.
296 pages. ISBN 979-8868818554

CHIEF COMMUNICATIONS OFFICERS AT WORK BY TABITA ANDERSSON (STEPHEN WADDINGTON)

There is no shortage of books arguing that communications practitioners deserve a seat at the management table. Tabita Andersson's *Chief Communications Officers at Work* does something more useful. It makes visible a role that, despite its strategic significance, remains largely unknown.

Chief communications officers shape corporate reputation, manage crises, and advise CEOs, yet few people outside the profession could name one. The book sets out to change that, drawing on interviews with 23 CCOs from organizations including Honeywell, Forbes, Intel, HPE, and the International Paralympic Committee.

Andersson is a CCO herself and conceived the project to help others navigate a journey she knows from her own experience to be opaque. The result speaks to two audiences: practitioners aspiring to senior roles, and C-level executives who need to understand the strategic potential of a high-functioning communications function.

The book's promise is practical clarity about a career path that, despite growing institutional interest in communications leadership, remains poorly understood and underserved by existing literature.

Most useful insights

The observation that lands hardest is that few of the CCOs interviewed set out to work in communications. Many describe falling into corporate communication and public relations rather than choosing it deliberately.

This insight connects directly to Andersson's broader argument about visibility: If the role is unknown to outsiders, it is also underspecified as a career destination for insiders. The absence of structured entry routes and deliberate talent pipelines into communications leadership is a persistent structural problem.

Accidental career paths bring diverse perspectives, which is a genuine strength. But they also reflect a discipline that has not yet established the formal professional infrastructure needed to consistently produce strategically capable leaders.

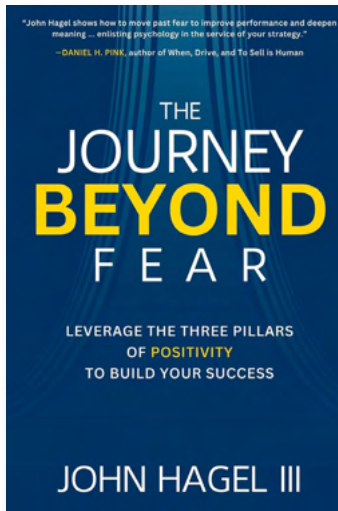
The pattern Andersson surfaces, namely practitioners proving value through relationships and intuition as much as through data, reflects a wider debate in corporate communication research about legitimacy and strategic recognition. The tension between quantifiable metrics and unquantifiable reputation is a sign of a discipline still working through foundational questions about its own identity and standing within organizations.

Who will benefit most from this book

Mid-career practitioners who can see senior leadership on the horizon but lack a clear map of what it requires will get the most from this book. The CCOs interviewed are candid about career paths, CEO relationships, and the messy reality of proving value in organizations that often treat communications as operational rather than strategic. That candor is the book's primary gift.

CEOs, board members, and chief operating officers are the book's secondary audience and arguably just as important. Andersson's visibility argument cuts both ways: The CCO role is obscure not only to the public but often to the colleagues and leaders these practitioners serve. Many organizations still underutilize their communications function precisely because senior leaders lack a working model of what a high-performing CCO actually does. This book provides one.

Researchers and educators working in corporate communication will also find it valuable. The book functions as a snapshot of practice at a pivotal moment. The questions running through these interviews about proving value, building trust, and balancing data with intuition are all signs of a discipline in active transition. That makes it a timely primary source as much as a practical guide.



Hagel, J. (2024).

The Journey beyond fear: Leverage the three pillars of positivity to build your success.
ISBN 979-8990495906

THE JOURNEY BEYOND FEAR. LEVERAGE THE THREE PILLARS OF POSITIVITY TO BUILD YOUR SUCCESS BY JOHN HAGEL III (DANIEL WOLFGRUBER)

The Journey Beyond Fear argues that individuals and institutions can move from defensive, fear-based thought and behavior toward opportunity-driven growth by embracing three interconnected pillars: narratives, passion, and platforms. Hagel defines “opportunity-based narratives” as open-ended, future-oriented calls to action that mobilize other like-minded people. Unlike closed stories, such narratives focus on what is yet to be achieved and exist at multiple levels – personal, institutional, geographic, and movement-based. They help people develop clarity, enthusiasm, and agency; build community; and navigate accelerating societal change.

The second pillar is the “passion of the explorer,” a disposition marked by intrinsic motivation, curiosity, and commitment to increasing impact. Hagel contrasts this with obsession or ambition driven by external rewards. Passion, when paired with reason, fuels experimentation and resilient relationships, enabling people to approach uncertainty with excitement rather than fear.

The third pillar, “learning platforms,” provides the structural support for scalable, fast, and collaborative learning. Hagel distinguishes them from aggregation, social, and mobilization platforms. Learning platforms allow people to share experiences, reflect publicly, and develop new practices together. Across these pillars, the book blends personal development, organizational strategy, and social commentary, ultimately arguing that overcoming fear requires collective learning, aligned narratives, and emotionally grounded engagement.

Most useful insights

A particularly valuable insight is Hagel’s differentiation between platform types, especially the distinct role of learning platforms. By emphasizing action-based learning, shared reflection, and diverse interaction, he highlights why digital ecosystems can accelerate capability-building in ways traditional institutions cannot. The notion of “second-order” network effects, where more participants increase not only access but also the potential for achievement, offers a meaningful contribution to the platform economy discussion.

Another useful insight is the argument that narratives and passion are prerequisites for meaningful learning. Hagel reframes lifelong learning as something people embrace only when emotionally engaged, a point often overlooked. His criteria for opportunity-based narratives – open participation, realistic optimism, and emotional resonance – guide leaders seeking to inspire constructive and impactful action rather than amplify threats and fear.

The book also usefully addresses narrative alignment, suggesting that mismatches between different kinds of narratives often lead to fragmentation. His recommendation that individuals “scan” their own, as well as surrounding narratives, to find or foster alignment offers a practical diagnostic approach.

Who will benefit most from this book

The book will be particularly valuable for entrepreneurs, innovators, and change-oriented professionals who operate in environments where experimentation and continuous learning are essential. Hagel's emphasis on opportunity-based narratives, intrinsic passion, and learning platforms aligns closely with entrepreneurial mindsets and start-up cultures. Readers who are building initiatives or seeking to mobilize others toward a shared vision will find the frameworks especially relevant.

Activists and movement organizers may also benefit, as the book provides a language for constructing decentralized, opportunity-driven narratives and for coordinating "creation spaces" that foster peer learning and agency.

For communication professionals, the sections about institutional narratives are highly pertinent. Communication leaders, brand strategists, HR professionals, and especially CEOs can draw value from Hagel's argument that institutional narratives should not be self-referential but should speak to the meaningful opportunities an organization enables for its stakeholders. Hagel's insistence that such narratives must be lived, rather than crafted solely by communication departments, offers an important reminder of the strategic role leadership plays in narrative credibility.

Although the book's strongest appeal lies with those comfortable with Silicon Valley optimism, which views tech as the sine qua non for our survival, its frameworks for narrative construction, passion-driven engagement, and lifelong learning offer practical value across sectors.

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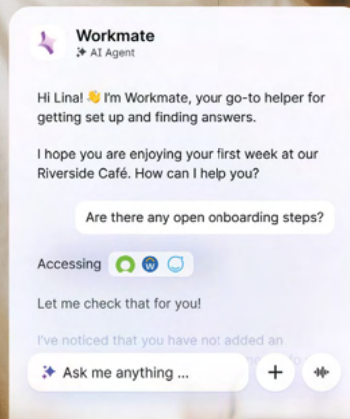
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