CORPORATE COMMUNICATION REVIEW

RESEARCH AND INSIGHTS FOR COMMUNICATION LEADERS

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Welcome to Corporate Communication Review! With this first issue, we introduce a new, open-access magazine designed to bridge 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 esteemed editorial board of renowned academics, chief communication officers and industry experts (see p. 70). Twice a year, Corporate Communication Review will provide practitioners with valuable guidance and inspiration for their daily work, strategic decisions, and discussions with top executives.

Our first issue focuses on redefining communication strategies in the digital age. As the landscape rapidly evolves, we explore the latest research on how organizations can effectively navigate and leverage digital communication to engage stakeholders, build trust, and drive impact. Future articles will be published "online first" on our website – follow us on LinkedIn to stay up to date.

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STRATEGIC IMPROVISATION AND NARRATIVES FOR NAVIGATING COMPLEXITY

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How can the strategic direction for an organization's overall development be supported and communicated if planning, and even strategies, are no longer sufficient options? The answer lies in narratives and strategic improvisation. In this article, new and old ideas about communication and management are integrated into a framework rooted in the humanities and fine arts. The result is a new conceptual mindset for corporate communication which argues that jazz music, narrative theory, and improvisational theatre have more to offer to the development of organizations than traditional managerial models.

CONNECTING NEW AND OLD IDEAS

A premise in this article is that the traditional division between society and business has become obsolete while the growing dependencies between all institutions, actors, and stakeholders are creating increased complexity, paradoxes, ambiguity, and the constant need to adapt. In what sociologist Anthony Giddens (2002) once called a "runaway world", corporate communication is no longer just a function but a core management process. But if corporate communication is to create real value and provide meaningful support, and perhaps even drive an organization's mission, a new mindset is essential. Drawing insights from a forthcoming book –

co-authored by two academics and two communication leaders – we explore the question of what is required to successfully lead and develop an organization.

Over the decades, the answers to this question have evolved both in content and form. From the almost religious conviction in the early nineties regarding the salvational effect of management by objectives to today's situation where certainty has waned and the belief in a one-size-fits-all model has faded. Regardless of the organization, most managers today testify that their environment has become increasingly challenging to interpret and predict,

and experience that they act in an environment that has become volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous. A pattern emerges: the prevalence of uncertainty about a higher purpose, internal conflicts, and objectives that often become counterproductive. By connecting new and old ideas about communication and management we argue that a new framework rooted in the humanities and arts is needed. By combining ideas and knowledge from several fields – some old and wise, others new and creative, this approach will encourage innovative thinking and challenge established managerial concepts, such as the notion of the economic man, organizations as containers, and society as a stable system. Two models illustrating the conceptual ideas are introduced – the *Strategic Improvisation Model* and the *Matrix of Fundamental Management Principles* – both designed to be used by communication practitioners.

STRATEGIC IMPROVISATION: THE CORNERSTONES AND THE CREATION OF A MODEL

We live in an era of increased complexity, but what does this mean and how can corporate communication be a force for organizations to deal with these challenges? In our forthcoming book we argue that sensemaking communication defines contemporary societies and organizations in a world where narrative understanding and the ability to engage in strategic improvisation are crucial. Narratives keep societies together, but can also polarize them. And this particular feature of narratives raises important leadership questions.

> What stories are being told about us and our business? Who is telling them and why?

> The question is: Should we take the lead in shaping and guiding the narrative about us?

Most leaders now recognize that the traditional division between society and business has become obsolete. The dependencies between all institutions, actors, and stakeholders create a constant demand for adaption. On a systemic level, some refer to this as living in VUCA world – one characterized by volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity.

The consequences of this complexity highlight the need for organizations to take a new, communicative approach to organization, leadership, and management. A starting point is the recognition that new ways of creating value are constantly emerging and have been doing so for centuries. Indeed, the history of mankind has been defined by a continuous process of innovation and improvement, promoting the ability to create both financial value and welfare. One of the most significant shifts in this process was industrialization.

A second ongoing transformation is the development of knowledge work and specialist services, which comprise an expanding proportion of the global economy. Management scholars Scherer, Palazzo, and Seidl (2013) conclude that this increased societal complexity must be met with increased corporate complexity. This means that contemporary organizations need to develop and implement diverse strategies to navigate in this interconnected, multi-actor arena.

THE VUCA WORLD

VUCA – an acronym for volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity – originated in the US Army in the late 1980s and was first introduced by Warren Bennis and Burt Nanus (1985) as a new strategic leadership approach to navigate the multilateral global security context following the bilateral dynamics of the Cold War. Over time, VUCA expanded beyond the military and became a framework in general strategy scholarship to address the major corporate challenges of the 21st century.

> On a general level, VUCA refers to our contemporary information and communication environment characterized by overwhelming floods of data and offers ideas of how to use and respond to this situation. This concept is comparable to what social scientists refer to as late modernity or hypermodernity.

> From an overall perspective, VUCA represents a shift towards a less predictable society, where time horizons are shorter. The managerial tool par excellence – the plan with a capital "P" – has therefore become less relevant in a VUCA world.

THE COLLABORATION STRATEGY TO EMBRACE UNCERTAINTY

What about the relationship and interface between social change and organizations? According to our understanding, we need to fly high to grasp the massive transformation that is taking place in contemporary organizations and businesses. We believe that one way of understanding what has happened and what is happening is to use a dichotomy between dominance and collaboration:

› **Dominance strategy:** Using established methods and tools to keep control and dominate. This leads to an increased focus on long-term planning, dividing organizations into functions, documenting, measuring, focusing on information (rather than communication), and evaluating results, as well as creating new administrative tasks and systems for control. Following this approach, different models are applied to assess results at the level of individuals, employees, managers, and entire organizations.

› **Collaboration strategy:** Aligning organizations with the perceived uncertainty and paradoxes while taking strategic initiatives. It is in this strategy that our idea of strategic improvisation takes its starting point. Instead of counteracting the world around us, we embrace it and try to create innovation through new ways of collaboration, organizing, and managing. Instead of focusing on documentation, long-term planning through detailed goals, and centralization, the emphasis shifts to learning from mistakes, decentralization and committed employees who drive development here and now. The idea is not to spend more resources than necessary on the organization's administrative superstructure, but to focus more on actions which directly engage citizens, customers, and other stakeholders.

A consequence of the collaboration strategy thinking is that it enables organizations to act more quickly when something happens – not through randomness, but because there's a good balance between:

› Clear structure (everyone knows what needs to be done and why); and

› Freedom for coworkers to act freely within the existing framework.

NARRATIVE AND COGNITIVE APPROACH AS CORNERSTONES

Taking one's starting point in collaboration strategy thinking also means placing narrative as a cornerstone in the steering of organizations. From our perspective, the ability to create or use strategic narratives is crucial for contemporary organizations. The concept of narrative is as old as humankind itself and is rooted in the fundamental process of human meaning-making:

› Narratives are aligned with storytelling as a practice, yet the concept of narrative is often used without any deep reflection on what it means.

› Most definitions view narrative from a structuralist approach, as a story of events and experiences, true or false, with an internal structure called a plot. Following this logic, one of the most wellknown narratologists, Vladimir Propp (1968), analyzed fairytales and proposed that all narratives build on 31 different narrative functions connected to seven alternative character types.

› More recent research has challenged these ideas and highlighted that we live in a world where long, complete, and fixed-structure narratives are challenged by communication happening in everyday conversations and social media interactions, which often lack links to established narratives and plots (Dayter, 2015). Digital narratives tend to be incomplete, fragmented, and do not follow a linear logic at all.

In our conceptual model, narratives are fundamental for contemporary management and are one of the main contributions corporate communication can bring to organizations. While the managerial approach to narratives mentioned above is not new, it is experiencing a renaissance, often renamed as "strategic narratives". This concept is especially connected to public diplomacy, statecraft, international conflicts, and war. In a world of increasing spread and impact of propaganda and disinformation, the importance of strategic narratives is growing. Ekman and Nilsson (2023) describe, for example, how Ukraine and its president, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, have used strategic narratives in a very efficient way to create resistance towards Russia's aggression.

The idea of a strategic narrative that persuades an opinion or group is fascinating, but overly simplistic since it describes communication as a one-way, linear process:

> Narratives in our VUCA world – in societies as well as in organizations – rarely flow top-down or from the center to a periphery. Instead, narratives are continuously in flux and co-produced by diverse actors in a multi-vocal arena.

> Strategic narratives launched by management in an organization may be embraced by coworkers and stakeholders as well as opposed and rejected.

> If the strategic narratives mirror values and images that are grounded in and outside the organization, the opposition tends to be minor but there's rarely unanimous support from all parties.

The participatory nature of contemporary digital platforms has disrupted the traditional one-way model of mass communication and has the potential to lead to increased openness, participation, and dialogue – or even "multilogue" due to the inherent openness.

The impact of narratives can also be linked to the so-called cognitive turn in management science that began during the 1960s, with the scholar Karl Weick (1969) making a particularly important contribution to this field. We argue that there is a need to revisit early ideas on the cognitive aspects and processes in leadership and organizations. Understanding organizations through this lens is essential for contemporary management. According to this thinking, organizations are the outcome of socially organized processes rather than designed and implemented solutions. Embracing this approach means putting communication (as sensemaking) at the very top of the management system and positioning corporate communication as a core process.
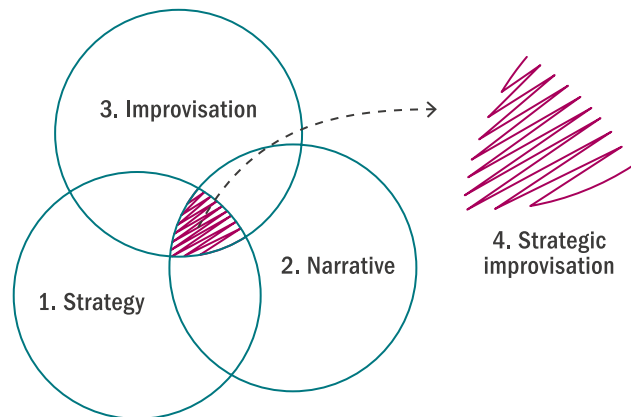
THE STRATEGIC IMPROVISATION MODEL

The narrative and cognitive approach to organizations leads us to a new and communication-based way of understanding and doing management. We have conceptualized this approach into the *Strategic Improvisation Model*. The aim of strategic improvisation is to enable us to navigate the tension between order and chaos, perform the balancing act between complexity and the ever-changing nature of everything, and establish a clear direction. Ultimately, strategic improvisation fulfils the basic needs for stability, security, and shared values. It occurs when three essential components are combined:

> A clear strategy (the framework or composition);

> A professional interpretation and articulation of purpose (the narrative); and

> Situational adaptation based on given opportunities and conditions (improvisation).

The Strategic Improvisation Model

Source: Falkheimer et al., 2025

Strategic improvisation should not be interpreted as a linear process but one where the different parts continuously influence and enhance each other. It involves adapting a narrative to the situation within a defined framework. Strategic improvisation is the intersection of two seemingly contradictory logics. However, in practice, these concepts are not at odds; instead, they are prerequisites for one another. The idea of strategic improvisation has its origin in both the creative and fine arts, crisis management (e.g., Falkheimer & Heide 2022), and management and strategy (e.g., Moss Kanter 2002; Marren 2008; Tyrstrup 2006). Still, the main contributor to the field of improvisation and management is Frank J. Barrett (e.g., 2012) who highlights the im-portance of embracing jazz improvisation in organizations. His connection to this thinking is not so surprising given that, alongside his academic research, he is a skilled jazz musician.

EMBRACING JAZZ IMPROVISATION IN ORGANIZATIONS

In music, the composition is the piece of music to be performed as planned – the choice of key, time signature, dynamics, length, instruments, and more. This is also known as the score. In an organization, this corresponds to the documents that will guide the direction and structure of the business. Narrative is similar to the musician's interpretation of the composer's intention and composition. The musician considers the choice of tempo, phrasing, dynamics, and much more, asking: What does the composer want to convey with the composition?

Improvisation, for a musician, means reusing older material, combining it with new elements, and thereby configuring it in a new way for a certain audience and environment. Improvisation therefore has to do with flexibility, creativity, and innovation.

The process is not completely random: There is a thought, plan, and rhythm to rest upon. A clear direction guides which impulses are acted upon and the oppor-tunities that are exploited. Similarly, improvisation extends beyond the world of music: A party leader must connect to the party's ideological values, a company leader to the business plan, a director general to the authority's directives, and the municiple official to the politicians' decisions.

Improvisation requires boundaries to be meaningful. In music, this delineation involves choosing specific musical material and forms; in theater it involves crafting a story, casting roles, and planning events. An overabundance of ideas or rapid transitions between ideas can make the overall picture incoherent and dull. In strategic improvisation, the framework and narrative provide these necessary boundaries, but also allow for the freedom to move within them.these necessary boundaries, but also allow for the freedom to move within them.

MANAGEMENT PRINCIPLES OF STRATEGIC IMPROVISATION

So how can we apply the concepts of narratives and strategic improvisation in practical corporate communication management and leadership? To make the ideas applicable we've developed three fundamental management principles (see model) and exemplified what we mean with these:

> A well-planned framework (strategy);
> A responsive ability to act (improvisation); and
> An ability to create genuine meaning using powerful images and stories (narrative).

The three principles concretize the application of strategic improvisation, where one principle is about re-creating preparedness for uncertainty and constant change, and the other two principles are about creating direction, context, and shared meaning.

Fundamental management principles

	STRATEGY	IMPROVISATION	NARRATIVE
PRINCIPLE	› A well-planned foundational structure	› Responsive action capability	› Powerful images and stories
ORGANIZATION	› Focus on value creation, predictable and robust › Room for innovation, development, and flexibility	› Rigged for constant change › Iterative processes and learning loops › Room for maneuver	› Co-production with employees and other stakeholders
APPROACHES	› Connects the short and long term › Provides predictability › Reminds of the vision and what creates value › Equips the organization	› Makes functional and intuitive decisions instead of optimal ones › Sees failure as natural and necessary › Cultivates a culture of trust and takes responsibility for mistakes	› Explains, repeats and reminds › Talks the walk › Walks the talk › Is present and accessible

Falkheimer et al., 2025

OUTLOOK

Although many publications address sensemaking, communication, value creation, and leadership, these concepts remain largely confined to academic circles. We hope to contribute to a further developed practice based on an explicit recognition of sensemaking and communication, narratives, and improvisation.

Typically, firms have traditionally engaged communication specialists to produce and disseminate information and develop channels, as well as to manage crises. However, in a changing societal landscape, organizations must act more anticipatory. And to do this for a simple reason – to establish their narratives about who they are and how they are contributing to societal transformation. Given this shift, we argue that communication strategists and agencies will increasingly serve as main advisors to organizations at the executive and board levels. Management consultants, though, will focus more on conducting feasibility studies for proposed strategies and the narratives that support them.

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MORE INFORMATION

An extended discussion of this topic can be found in the forthcoming book *Conducting narratives* by the authors (Falkheimer et al., 2025).
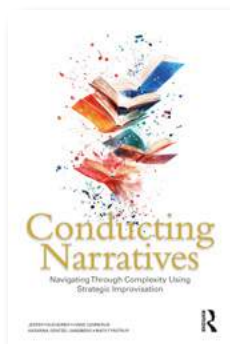
WHY COMMUNICATION DEPARTMENTS NEED TO ENHANCE THEIR POSITIONING

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Corporate communication is an increasingly important success factor for businesses during times of economic challenges and political disruption. But the recognition and resources for the professionals in charge are rarely rising and, in many cases, shrinking. What are the reasons for this? A survey of 1,147 top executives, middle managers, and co-workers without leadership responsibility in large companies provides eye-opening but also disillusioning insights. It highlights a clear need for communication leaders to better position their teams and sharpen their profile.

A TIME TO THRIVE OR TO LOSE

Communication leaders and their teams face a paradoxical situation. While the importance of listening to key stakeholders and engaging in public debates is clearly growing in today's society, reports from practice show that this rarely results in stronger organizational units for corporate communication. Communication departments are seldom granted significantly higher budgets, more staff, or more internal influence.

On the contrary, the economic downturn in many countries is putting them under increasing pressure, forcing them to prove more than ever whether and how they create added value.

How can this be explained? Previous academic studies have shown that every second member of an organization is not fully aware of what their colleagues in communications do (Falkheimer et al., 2017) and that only two out of three top executives view the work of communication departments as critical to business success (Zerfass & Sherzada, 2015). Research has also found that perceptions about the relevance and success of communication activities and the work of those in charge differ between internal stakeholders (e.g., top management versus other members of the organization) and from the self-perception of communicators themselves (Johansson et al., 2019).

The power of communication for business success can only be leveraged if communication departments and professionals are valued by other members of the organization, if their products and services are demanded and used, and if they receive the necessary funding (Zerfass & Link, 2024). Communication departments compete for human and financial resources with other organizational units that may have a better standing. This is why clear and favorable perceptions among internal decision-makers, as well as those who influence them, are a critical prerequisite for communication excellence (Tench et al., 2017).

INVESTIGATING THE STATUS QUO

In view of this challenge from practice, we have developed a scientifically based approach to assess the internal perception and appreciation of communication departments and their work (Zerfass et al., 2024). The method was applied in a large-scale study in Germany, the world's third largest economy. The results provide a baseline for reflection and similar explorations in individual companies. Additionally, they contribute to debates on the future of the profession by incorporating the perspective of those who ultimately decide on the mandate and influence of communicators.

STUDY DESIGN

Our research applied a multi-level perspective across three hierarchical levels to address the research question: What do top executives, middle managers and co-workers think of their company's communication department and its work?

1,147 respondents were interviewed with a pre-tested online questionnaire based on an extensive literature review and established scales. The population included managers and co-workers in large for-profit companies in Germany with at least 1,000 employees and a communication department. The final sample comprised 30 top executives (C-level, board members), 113 middle managers (heads of business units, functional departments, etc.), and 1,004 co-workers without leadership responsibility. The data was collected in

November 2023 using established panels from the market research company YouGov and analyzed using SPSS software and various statistical methods.

The study was conducted with a graduate student team at Leipzig University and supported by the Academic Society for Management & Communication.

SATISFACTION WITH CORPORATE COMMUNICATION ACTIVITIES

The study shows that the satisfaction with corporate communication activities among top executives in large companies is generally high (87% agreement). However, when asked to compare these activities with competing organizations or with the company's own marketing communications, perceptions are less favorable. Despite this, two thirds of the top executives are happy with the work and output of their communication departments in all dimensions. The picture changes when the perspectives of middle managers and other employees are taken into account. Support for all dimensions was lower in both groups. Interestingly, less than half of all middle managers and only one third co-workers believe that their company's external and internal communication is better than that of its competitors.

Assessment of corporate communication activities

I am satisfied with our corporate communication	Our corporate communication is better than ... those of our competitors	... our marketing communication
Top executives 86.7%	73.3%	66.7%
Middle managers 59.3%	46.0%	31.9%
Co-workers 51.4%	37.1%	28.3%

Top executives ■ Middle managers ■ Co-workers
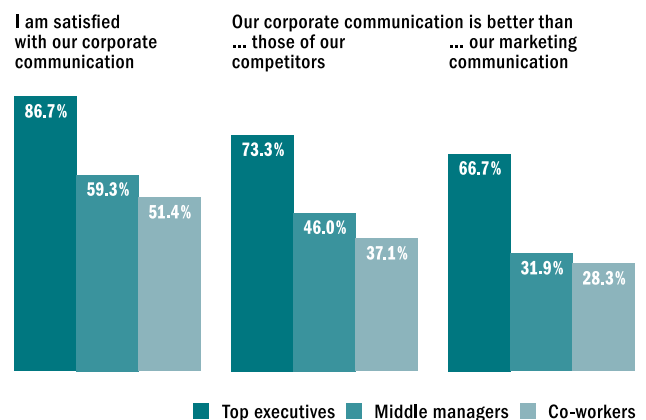
Source: Zerfass et al., 2024 (modified)

According to the data, most internal stakeholders support what is currently accomplished in corporate communication. But why does this not result in a stronger support and funding for their communication departments? A possible reason identified in earlier research is that many voices speak for an organization in the age of digitalization – managers at all levels, employees who act as ambassadors and corporate influencers, and, increasingly, software agents based on artificial intelligence (Zerfass & Viertmann, 2016). This shift challenges the standing of specialized practitioners and departments.
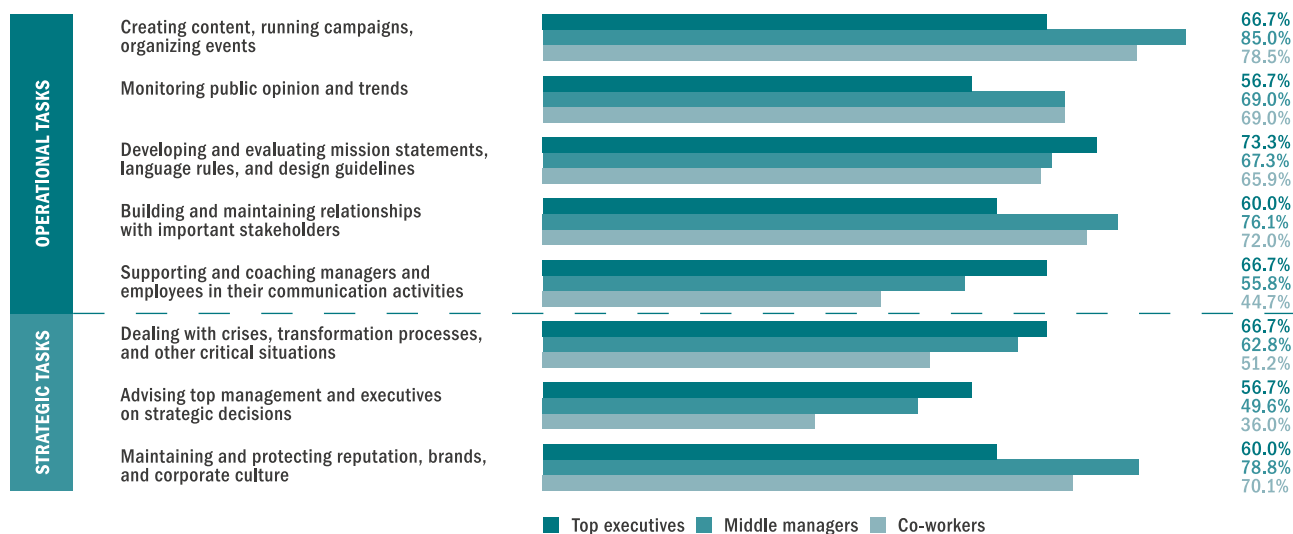
RECOGNITION OF COMMUNICATION DEPARTMENTS

At first sight, data from this study shows that communication units are held in high esteem. Almost all top executives interviewed (97%) believe that the standing of the communication department in their company is high compared to other departments and that they know what the department does. 80% feel confident in their awareness of the department's goals. However, the percentages decrease for middle managers: Only 55 % attribute a high standing to the communication department, while 20% clearly disagree, and only 58% are aware of its goals. Co-workers are even more skeptical and less knowledgeable about the department's tasks. When focusing on the internal influence of the communication department, the data demonstrates another gap between top executives and middle managers. 80% of top executives, but only half of middle managers (51%), state that recommendations from the communication department are taken very seriously by senior and middle management.

A more nuanced look at the tasks attributed to communication departments shows that all hierarchical levels weight operational activities higher than strategic tasks. Communicators are mainly seen as content producers, opinion observers, experts for language and design rules, and relationship managers – roles that are all threatened by the rise of artificial intelligence. Top executives are more aware of strategic tasks like mitigating crises, supporting transformation, and advising for business decisions. But they are less convinced than others in the company that reputation, brands, and corporate culture are cultivated and protected by communication experts – they are probably aware that these immaterial assets are influenced by various functions in many ways. Interestingly, almost one in three co-workers interviewed chose "don't know" as an answer rather than rating the different items. This indicates that most employees in large companies have only very vague ideas about the tasks of communicators.

Perceived tasks of communication departments

OPERATIONAL TASKS		Top executives	Middle managers	Co-workers
Creating content, running campaigns, organizing events		66.7%	85.0%	78.5%
Monitoring public opinion and trends		56.7%	69.0%	69.0%
Developing and evaluating mission statements, language rules, and design guidelines		73.3%	67.3%	65.9%
Building and maintaining relationships with important stakeholders		60.0%	76.1%	72.0%
Supporting and coaching managers and employees in their communication activities		66.7%	55.8%	44.7%
STRATEGIC TASKS	Dealing with crises, transformation processes, and other critical situations	66.7%	62.8%	51.2%
	Advising top management and executives on strategic decisions	56.7%	49.6%	36.0%
	Maintaining and protecting reputation, brands, and corporate culture	60.0%	78.8%	70.1%

■ Top executives ■ Middle managers ■ Co-workers

Source: Zerfass et al., 2024

ASSESSMENT OF COMPETENCE AND VALUE CONTRIBUTION

The predominantly operational view of communication departments goes hand in hand with a low evaluation of their competence. This is the only part of the study where respondents across all hierarchical levels are in agreement: Only 57% of the top executives, 54% of middle managers, and 52% of co-workers rate the department's competence as high.

A particularly disturbing finding is that only one in two top executives (50%) and one in three middle managers (36%) agree that the work of their communication department makes it easier for them to fulfill their own tasks. Clearly, many internal decision-makers are not only skeptical about the knowledge, skills, and attitudes of communicators, but they also do not see how they benefit from their activities.

This leads to another disillusioning insight: Only 53% of top executives and 59% of middle managers believe that the current allocation of personnel and financial resources to their company's communication department is justified. A large number of those responsible for overall budgets or projects that may require communicative expertise are not fully convinced that resources allocated to these internal units are appropriate. It's not surprising that in such circumstances, budget cuts are easily made.

"The work of the communication department makes it easier for me to fulfill my tasks."

50.0% Top executives
36.3% Middle managers
30.0% Co-workers

EXPECTATIONS OF INTERNAL STAKEHOLDERS

The ambivalent perception of communication departments and their work among internal stakeholders is mirrored by clear expectations. The majority of all study respondents (67% of top executives and 57% of middle managers and co-workers) state that communication units should clarify their tasks and their contribution to the overall success of the organization. Top executives are particularly demanding here, which can be explained by the discrepancy between their general appreciation of corporate communication and the experts in charge on the one hand and their doubts about competences and value contribution on the other.

WHAT INFLUENCES INTERNAL PERCEPTIONS?

The research used statistical analyses (ANOVA and chi-square tests) to identify the factors that influence the internal perceptions of communication departments in large companies. This knowledge can help to develop positioning strategies.

> **Frequency of contact:** The more often members of an organization are in contact with the communication department, the greater their knowledge of the department's responsibilities, tasks, and goals, and the higher their assessment of the department's standing, influence, and competence.

> **Perceived relevance of communications in general:** The more important communications is seen as key to business success, the greater the expectation that the communication department clarifies its role, and the more likely it is that the resources allocated to it are seen as justified.

> **Assessment of corporate communication activities:** Internal stakeholders that rate their company's corporate communication positively conclude that their communication department is competent and resources allocated to it are spent well. There's also a very strong correlation the other way around: Those who believe that the communication department is competent and/or worth the money are more likely to conclude that their company's corporate communication is good.
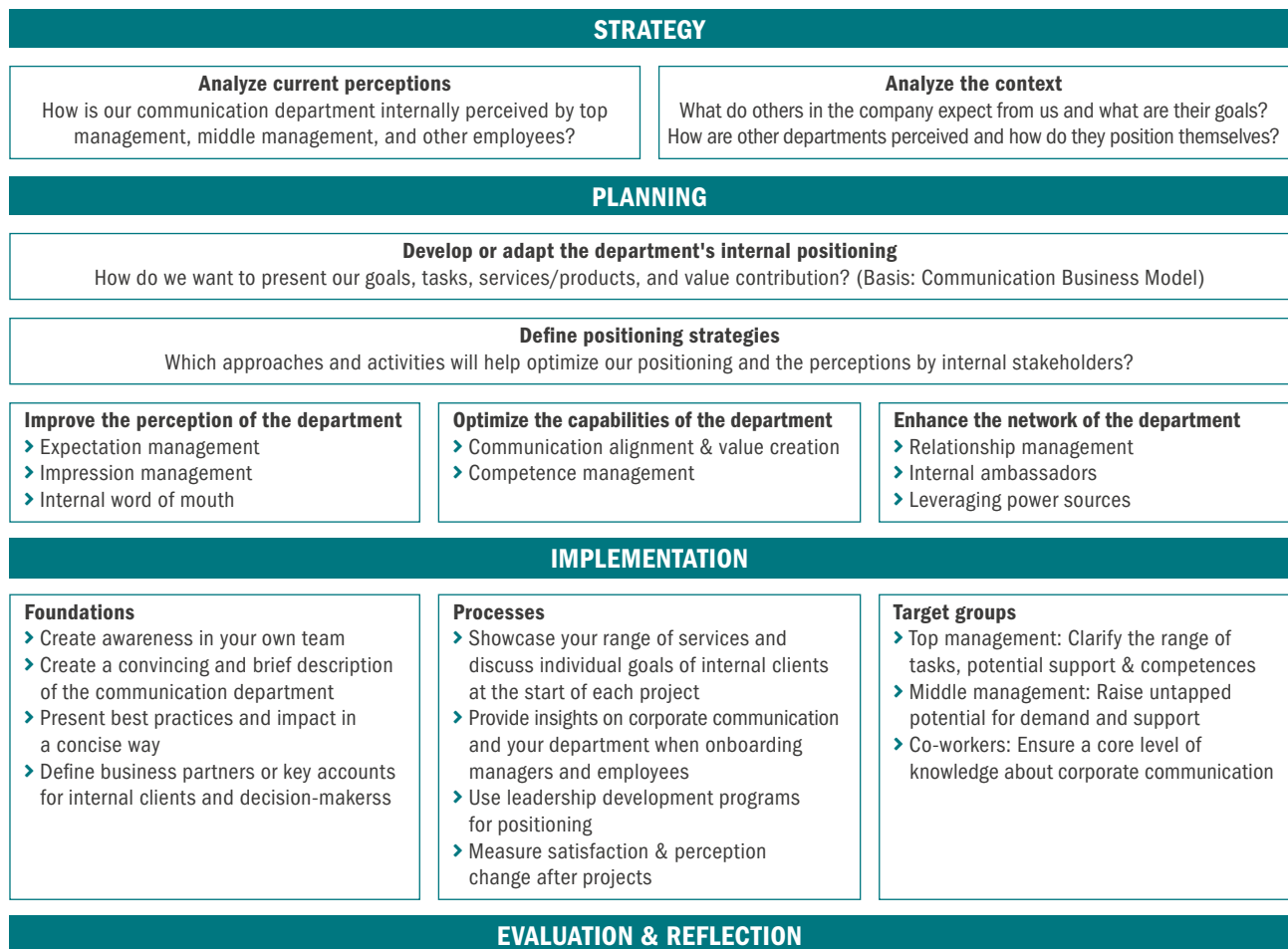
TOWARDS A BETTER POSITIONING

The study reveals concerning discrepancies between the generally positive perception of corporate communication among internal stakeholders and critical assessments of aspects such as the key tasks and competences attributed to communication departments, as well as the justifiability of the resources allocated to them. It clearly shows that a lack of knowledge about the work of communication units negatively affects their evaluation. Conversely, this means that the perception of communication departments can be positively influenced by attempts to improve their positioning among internal stakeholders.

The framework outlined below provides some ideas for practice. It has been inspired by existing research in strategic communication and a second part of this study, where a sample of 32 communication leaders representing the 180 largest listed and private companies in German were interviewed about positioning practices. We suggest the following steps:

› Start by analyzing the current perceptions of the communication department in your company among all hierarchical levels. The questionnaire used in this study might be helpful. Keep an eye on middle managers' perceptions and try to understand them as they may influence decisions by board members and may become future top executives. It would also make sense to research what others expect from your team and how other functional departments that compete for influence and resources (e.g., human resources, strategy, marketing) position themselves within the organization.

Four steps to optimize the positioning of communication departments

STRATEGY

Analyze current perceptions How is our communication department internally perceived by top management, middle management, and other employees?	**Analyze the context** What do others in the company expect from us and what are their goals? How are other departments perceived and how do they position themselves?

PLANNING

Develop or adapt the department's internal positioning How do we want to present our goals, tasks, services/products, and value contribution? (Basis: Communication Business Model)

Define positioning strategies Which approaches and activities will help optimize our positioning and the perceptions by internal stakeholders?

Improve the perception of the department › Expectation management › Impression management › Internal word of mouth	**Optimize the capabilities of the department** › Communication alignment & value creation › Competence management	**Enhance the network of the department** › Relationship management › Internal ambassadors › Leveraging power sources

IMPLEMENTATION

Foundations › Create awareness in your own team › Create a convincing and brief description of the communication department › Present best practices and impact in a concise way › Define business partners or key accounts for internal clients and decision-makerss	**Processes** › Showcase your range of services and discuss individual goals of internal clients at the start of each project › Provide insights on corporate communication and your department when onboarding managers and employees › Use leadership development programs for positioning › Measure satisfaction & perception change after projects	**Target groups** › Top management: Clarify the range of tasks, potential support & competences › Middle management: Raise untapped potential for demand and support › Co-workers: Ensure a core level of knowledge about corporate communication

EVALUATION & REFLECTION

Source: Prof. Dr. Ansgar Zerfass

› Develop a future-oriented profile for the communication department using a business model approach (Zerfass & Link, 2024). Choose positioning strategies that help to reach this profile. This study shows that such approaches can focus either on enhancing the department's perception among internal stakeholders or on improving its competences and performance, i.e., through proven value creation and better alignment of corporate communication activities with overall goals of the organization. Both approaches should be complemented by strengthening the personal ties to internal decision-makers (relationship management), nurturing internal ambassadors across the organization, and leveraging sources of power like official mandates, expertise, and information.

› Implement these positioning strategies by laying the foundations in your team, setting up suitable processes, and addressing different internal stakeholders with customized approaches. This requires leadership skills and operational excellence in your team. Changing the perceptions and winning the support of current and future decision-makers in the company is as difficult as convincing external stakeholders.

› Evaluate your achievements and reflect on what can be further optimized. Developing and establishing a convincing profile takes time and effort. But it's a prerequisite for the sustainable success of every communication department.

Positioning your department is an ongoing challenge. The demands for communication leaders are specifically high as their playing field is constantly changing and the internal perception is often blurred. However, this also creates a lot of opportunities for those who move ahead by regularly evaluating and reflecting on internal perceptions and positioning.

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MORE INFORMATION

READINESS: THE KEYSTONE OF CRISIS MANAGEMENT ARCHITECTURE

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Sticky crises have challenged industry leaders to evaluate existing approaches to crisis management. In a global quest led by the Crisis Communication Think Tank, READINESS has been identified as the keystone for a new architecture for managing issues, risks, conflicts, and crises. The new READINESS framework is supported by three pillars: multi-level efficacy, mindset, and dynamic process. It provides an enhanced map for corporate communication leaders to navigate through uncharted waters of emerging and mutating threats in order to safeguard business and security, and improving policy and governance.

READINESS: THE KEYSTONE LOST AND FOUND

Let's face it – we wouldn't be ready to even talk about READINESS if practitioners and scholars are not ready to think and act collaboratively. Before the new concept READINESS was widely recognized by scholars and practitioners alike, there is the notion of "sticky crisis" that scholars and practitioners jointly identified as a challenge. Sticky crises are manifested in complex, challenging, and recurring issues which bleed across sectors, industries, and geographical borders (Jin et al., 2024). Think of toxic polarization, geopolitical conflicts, social unrests, AI-driven disinformation campaigns, moral outages triggered by scansis (Coombs & Tachkova, 2023) which is rooted in greed and injustice and occurs when a crisis and a scandal fuse, and public trust erosion across institutions (van der Meer et al., 2024). The list is infinite. Although these might not always materialize into a real crisis for all companies, business leaders must be ready to see around the corner and have an agile system to anticipate and mitigate risks. For example, if you're in the beer industry in 2023, one of the questions that kept you awake at night likely was (and probably still is): How to avoid the Bud Light influencer campaign backlash? So sticky indeed.

As a leading crisis executive reflected at a Crisis Communication Think Tank (CCTT) webinar during the pandemic, combating sticky crises is like fighting quicksand – you're stuck, and you instinctively fight, and fight really hard; but it won't work and you're sinking even deeper. How to fight sticky crises? A typical playbook won't work. The existing architecture of crisis management might not be sufficient to address these complex and often spilling-over crisis threats (Wang & Laufer, 2024). If we are to devise something new, do we even have a blueprint?

Then at the end of the CCTT 2023 gathering, another communication executive threw in an insight that led to the "aha" moment – in military settings, you always need to be ready for combat. Likewise, in the crisis management world, leaders and their teams need to be always ready to combat crises and protect business, stakeholders, public health and safety, as well as security at individual, team, organization, and national levels. That's how we found READINESS – the missing keystone for the crisis management architecture.

"THE BEST OF BOTH WORLDS": THE CRISIS COMMUNICATION THINK TANK (CCTT)

The Crisis Communication Think Tank (CCTT) was founded in 2018 at the University of Georgia to create a thought leadership entity led by top communication executives and leading crisis communication scholars worldwide. The CCTT's mission is to advance crisis management research, practice, and training by identifying critical challenges together and crafting new directions for possible solutions (Jin et al., 2024).

We, as a US-Netherlands CCTT research team, have started our journey together towards the development of a new framework to address sticky crisis challenges and get organizations ready for an increasingly complex, ever-changing, and conflicting media environment and sociopolitical landscape. In the special issue Crisis Management Keystone in the Journal of Contingencies and Crisis Management, our first concept piece on READINESS and the new framework was published, titled

READINESS: A keystone concept beyond organizational crisis preparedness and resilience (Jin et al., 2024).

The READINESS model is already being used for crafting training to help prepare crisis managers for the challenging crises they're likely to face. We're also co-editing a new special issue, titled *Navigating unchartered waters: The forefront of crisis READINESS* in collaboration with the Journal of Communication Management.

READINESS ESSENTIALS: KEY PILLARS AND PROCESS-OUTCOME DUALITY

We define READINESS as "a multidimensional construct with multilevel efficacy, mental adaptability, and emotional leadership-focused mindset, with a dynamic process-driven agility at its core" (Jin et al., 2024). As a multidimensional construct, READINESS as an umbrella framework is supported by three pillars: multilevel efficacy, mindset, and dynamic process.

The READINESS model
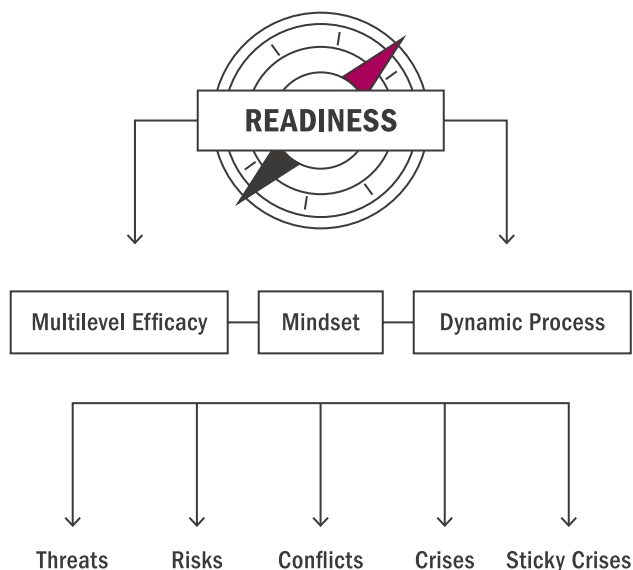
Source: Jin et al., 2024

We also gained initial empirical insights from scholars and practitioners via the CCTT global network (Jin et al., 2025). These expert insights affirmed the relevance and importance of READINESS as a concept that goes beyond preparedness and resilience. Light was shed on:

> The dual nature of crisis READINESS as both a process and an outcome;

> Resilience as both a process and an outcome; and

> A key distinction between READINESS and preparedness: While READINESS is conceived of as a mindset, preparedness is conceived of as physical tools, training, and planning.

READINESS as a process and outcome
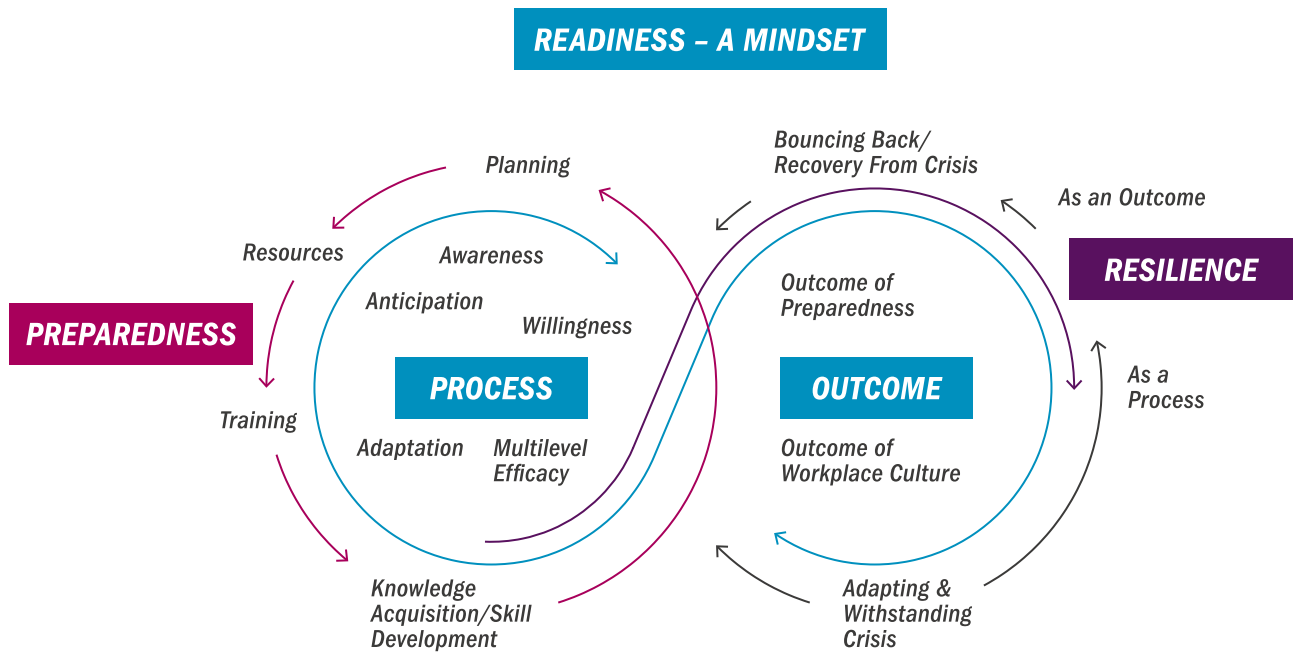
Source: Jin et al, 2025

THE CENTRAL ROLE OF MINDSET

"This is fun!" – a frequent comment made by crisis communication practitioners when describing why they choose crisis management as the career focus. Although no crisis is ever fun in and of itself, and the process of managing a crisis is stressful and often painful, there are certain unique traits or features that set crisis leaders apart from general business and communication management leaders.

As the key differentiator from preparedness, the right mindset is essential to READINESS. The READINESS mindset represents a holistic integration of:

> High emotional intelligence;

> The right attitude; and

> Optimal mentality and adaptability.

What we discover is that the willingness – at individual, team and organizational levels – to engage in crisis communication as an ongoing process, with courage, creativity and commitment, is essential. The capability and authenticity in building trusting relationships with top leadership, mid-management, and employees, as well as gaining influence at the final decision-making table are critical.

One of the understudied and underemphasized areas of crisis leadership is the right attitude. Humility, for instance, is both a trait, a character, and gesture designed by stakeholders as it provides "a sensegiving function that decreases stakeholders' negative emotions and fosters their trust in leadership" (Graffeo & Jin, 2024). No wonder that humility (i.e., a peaceful heart that lives in harmony with others), together with compassion and frugality, are considered the "Three Treasures" of Taoism philosophy.

Mental adaptability is another key ingredient, which has two facets:

> Cognitive adaptability (the ability and willingness of allocating one's attention to feedback from the context of a complex situation); and

> Affective adaptability (the ability and willingness of withholding one's affective responses during or after an emotionally-charged incident with high situational awareness of the nuanced crisis communication settings).

Crisis leaders with optimal mental adaptability are more likely to:

> "Believe they can effectively accomplish the crisis tasks required of them (self-efficacy),

> trust the organization's approach for managing the crisis,

> be confident in the ability of the organization and its teams to manage the crisis,

> and be optimistic for the overall outcome" (Jin et al., 2025).

Optimal mentality and adaptability are critical in managing constantly evolving or mutating crises and sticky crisis situations, requiring both cognitive and affective adaptability.

MULTILEVEL EFFICACY AND CROSS-LEARNING

Our READINESS framework integrates self-efficacy and collective efficacy, as individual practitioners and in the crisis management team setting when managing issues, risks, conflicts, and crises as an ongoing managerial process. As a legal expert, our CCTT executive training team emphasizes that it's time to change "cross-training" (e.g., the communications team getting trained by legal counsels) to "cross-learning" (e.g., the legal team hoping to learn from the communications team) model, especially during the prevention and preparation phases of crisis management.

Multilevel efficacy is both horizontal (within a team and at the same management level) and vertical (across different levels of management, from top management, middle management, operational leads, and frontline employees). In an organizational crisis setting, multilevel efficacy involves the individual, team, and organizational levels. As noted by a crisis communication scholar at our 2024 member gathering, in a large-scale disaster setting, inter-organizational efficacy will be essential when it comes to coordinating with multiple agencies in emergency response and disaster management. The building of READINESS efficacy starts from individual efficacy, team efficacy, to multidisciplinary cross-team learning and training to deal with internal and external setbacks encountered when managing a crisis.

It's critical to keep in mind that the individual level of READINESS applies to all members within an organization, not just the crisis team. Frontline employees, operation management, middle managers, division heads, and board members need to be in good alignment to sustain consistency, quality, and adaptability as a complex crisis situation evolves. Think of any large-scale nature of disaster emergency evacuation or a chaotic, rumor-laden scandal triggered by CEO behavior. All members of an organization may be required to confront a threat and play their roles via mediated (both traditional and social) and offline interpersonal communications.

The crisis team must possess a collective sense of READINESS, demonstrating both humility and belief in action that:

> The team has the ability and shared willingness to handle a crisis with desired positive outcomes;
> The team has confidence in their own and the larger organization's (including other departments') skills in taking the optimal actions;
> The organizational culture has a built-in capacity in managing uncertainties based on systematic stress-tests and improvements; and
> The dominant coalition and top leadership have and are willing to allocate resources and other support to managing the situational demands from a crisis.

READY TOGETHER ACROSS BOARD ROOM, WAR ROOM AND COURT ROOM

The fascinating process-outcome duality of READINESS, draws parallels to the wave-particle duality of photons. We can all agree that one cannot be too ready. With regard to whether and how to be ready all the time, just as the observation of photons is complex, the assessment of READINESS is yet to be further discovered and refined.

The fascinating process-outcome duality of READINESS *draws parallels to the wave-particle duality of photons.*

A process view is essential in crisis management, capturing the dynamic aspect of READINESS. Crises are disruptions for organizations and their people, as well as relationships from within and without, leading to uncertainties and changes. Sticky crisis challenges amplify the impact through the process. Dynamic capabilities, agile infrastructure, and mindset-aligned organizational culture are critical for communication leaders to help their organizations to better navigate uncertainty and disruption, across:

> The board room (top leadership support and buy-in);
> War room (multidisciplinary crisis team composed of area experts, e.g., communications, legal, finance who understand and respect each other and have a stress-tested process in place to be crisis ready all the time); and

> The courtrooms of the law and public opinions (willingness to engage in conflict resolution and negotiation process via issue position articulation, listening, and strategic conflict positioning that helps identify optimal strategy making and execution).

As Sun-Tzu wrote in The Art of War, "In the midst of chaos, there is also opportunity". Among the five essentials for victory, Sun-Tzu pointed out the need to know "when to fight and when not to fight" and to ensure the army is "animated by the same spirit throughout all its ranks". But how can we animate the spirit, or, in the READINESS framework, align the mindset across levels and roles?

Michel de Montaigne pointed out the surest sign of wisdom is constant cheerfulness – a wisdom so important in combating sticky crises, especially prolonged ones such as the pandemic. How can we stay alert yet optimistic (while avoiding the trap of complacency or over confidence) along the process so that opportunities can be identified and captured in time, taking both the pillars of efficacy and mindset individually and collectively?

Drawing inspiration from the sports-comedy-drama television series Ted Lasso, the "believe" speech given by Coach Lasso in the locker room, when the team was about to give up and lose the game, resonates loud and clear: "I think it's the lack of hope that comes and gets you. ... See, I believe in hope. I believe in belief."

LEAPING INTO READINESS: LEADERSHIP, EVALUATION, ALIGNMENT, PRECISION

The new READINESS framework offers a novel means for approaching crisis management. It also lays the foundation for developing a measurement for assessing how ready organizations are to manage risks and crises.

To unpack the READINESS-focused new crisis leadership, the collective efforts among CCTT members are orchestrated in the 2025 CCTT theme of LEAP: Leadership, Evaluation, Alignment, Precision. These four dimensions, constructed

around the efficacy-mindset-process READINESS pillars, manifest organizational READINESS in managing threats, risks, conflicts, and crises, including sticky crises.

For corporate communication executives, we recommend building a READINESS system as the chief organizational protection operation with the core LEAP units in place throughout the prevention, preparedness, response, and revisit crisis management phases.

LEAP: FOUR MANIFESTATIONS OF ORGANIZATIONAL READINESS

Leadership development and training emphasizing multilevel efficacy, mindset optimization via cross-learning.

Evaluating organizational wellbeing and crisis READINESS according to organizational, industrial, and cultural environments and proactive issue anticipation and readiness plan development.

Aligning leadership vision across top-middle-group levels and fostering crisis-ready relationships with primary stakeholders that is in line with organizational purpose and vision.

Precision-focused conflict positioning based on proactive and strategic corporate governance and crisis management systems, enhanced with emerging technology such as AI.

OUTLOOK

We're thankful for the opportunity to share our READINESS work with communication executives and business leaders. One of the most rewarding comments we received is that it's powerful and opens new ways of thinking. At the CCTT, we think and do together. It's our collective goal to get READY with our peers and collaborators around the world.

Based on the strong launch of the READINESS research and training programs, we look forward to collaborating further to refine our new conceptual lens and craft robust metrics for effective crisis management and measurement of READINESS on an ongoing basis. We will develop an instrument to assess READINESS, test the instrument, evaluate the relationships between the key variables in the model, and apply the instrument to create a new READINESS metric for organizations. Our goal is to create a tangible, practical tool that organizations and corporate communication leaders can use, enabling them to quantitatively assess and enhance their crisis management capabilities.

Kurt Lewin once said, "There is nothing more practical than a good theory." READINESS, as a new theoretical framework, has demonstrated its practical values to practitioners. We will continue to refine this crisis management keystone, equipping organizations with a forward-thinking approach to corporate communication and scientifically tested tools for optimal decision making and business operations in the face of sticky crisis challenges.

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MORE INFORMATION

For a more in-depth discussion of the READINESS concept, see the peer-reviewed articles by Jin et al., 2024 and 2025 (listed above) or visit the Crisis Communication Think Tank's website at https://grady.uga.edu/crisis-communication-think-tank/.

DO CEO VISUALS MATTER IN CRISIS COMMUNICATION?

AUTHORS: BORA YOOK, FAIRFIELD UNIVERSITY & DON W. STACKS, UNIVERSITY OF MIAMI
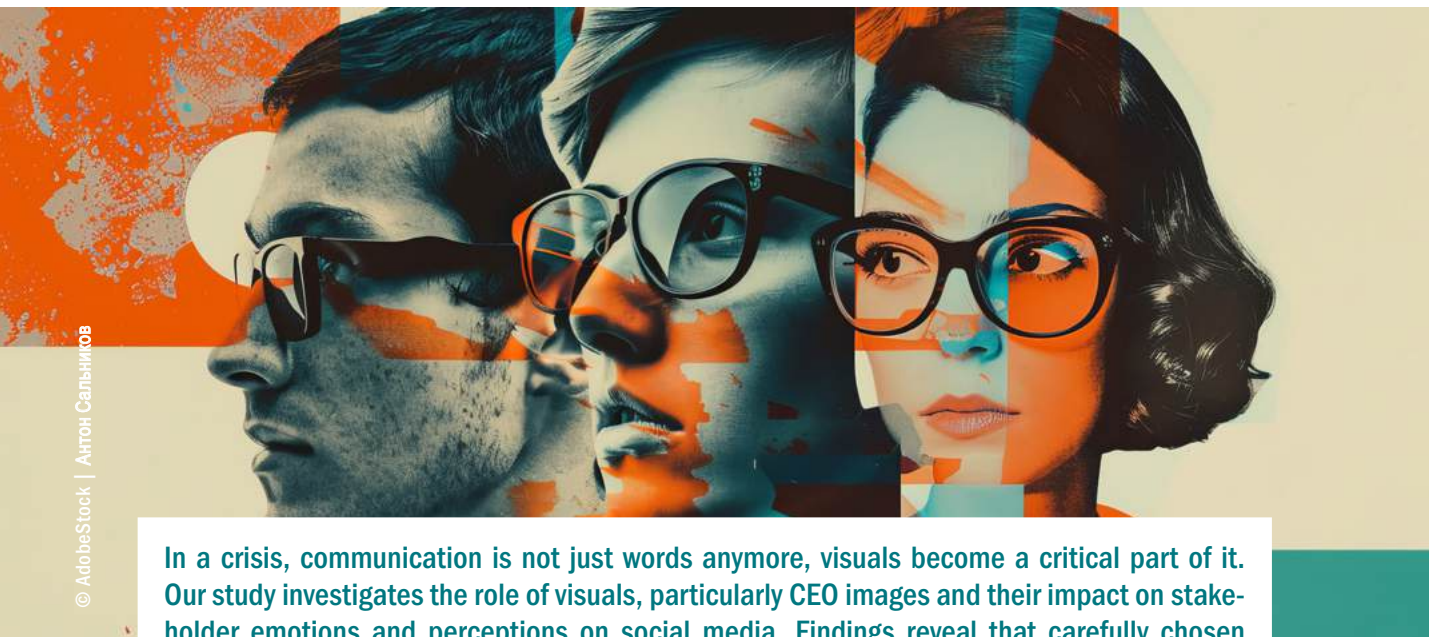
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In a crisis, communication is not just words anymore, visuals become a critical part of it. Our study investigates the role of visuals, particularly CEO images and their impact on stakeholder emotions and perceptions on social media. Findings reveal that carefully chosen visuals can mitigate anger and improve reputational outcomes. For corporate communication professionals, this research provides actionable insights into leveraging strategic visuals to navigate crises effectively.

INCORPORATING VISUALS IN CRISIS RESPONSES

In today's media landscape, a crisis can escalate within minutes, with social media serving as the primary battleground. While verbal strategies in crisis communication have been widely studied, the role of visuals – particularly CEO images – has received less attention. This study bridges that gap by examining how different image types affect stakeholder perceptions of responsibility, anger, and reputation during a corporate crisis.

This study employs the *Situational Crisis Communication Theory* (SCCT; Coombs, 2007) and *Associative Network Theory* (ANT; Anderson, 1983) to evaluate how verbal and visual strategies intersect. SCCT guides the messaging strategy by categorizing crises into victim, accidental, and preventable clusters depending on level of responsibility and prior crisis history, each requiring distinct responses. ANT adds a layer of understanding by explaining how visuals trigger associations in stakeholders' memories, influencing their emotional and cognitive responses.

Through an experimental design, the study tests three message strategies – apology, excuse, and attack accuser – paired with four visual types: no image, product image, a stereotypical CEO (formal attire at a podium), and a CEO reflecting the corporate character (e.g., casual clothing in a setting aligned with corporate values). This combination reveals key insights into the power of visuals in corporate crisis responses.

SITUATIONAL CRISIS COMMUNICATION THEORY (COOMBS, 2007)

> Posits that an organization's previous crisis history (i.e., repeated behaviors), perceived attribution of responsibility for the crisis, and prior reputation shape stakeholders' perceptions of the crisis situation.

> Categorizes crises into three clusters:
>   - Victim: Stakeholders attribute a low level of crisis responsibility to the organization; lowest reputational threat (e.g., natural disasters, product tampering).
>   - Accidental: Stakeholders assign a moderate level attribution of crisis responsibility to the organization.
>   - Preventable: Stakeholders attribute a high level of responsibility to the organization because of the organization's wrong-doing.

> → Recommends the most appropriate crisis message strategies based on the crisis clusters, considering how much responsibility is attributed to the organization and the reputational threat.

ASSOCIATIVE NETWORK THEORY OF MEMORY (ANDERSON, 1983; KRISHNAN, 1996)

> Posits that human memory consists of information pieces (nodes) and those information pieces are linked with one another, like a network.

> When people see one piece of information, it can activate a network and association in memory to react in various ways.

> → Visual cues in social media messages during a crisis can trigger direct or indirect associations with the organization and the crisis.

EFFECTS OF VISUALS

CEO images and reputation perception

The presence of a CEO in crisis communication can influence how stakeholders perceive an organization's accountability and leadership. The study found that a CEO image in a formal setting, wearing professional attire and speaking at a podium, was associated with the highest reputational scores compared to other image types, particularly a product image. This suggests that formal CEO images may reinforce a sense of accountability and control, making it particularly effective in crises where the organization has partial or significant responsibility of the crisis. Given that stakeholders often expect a high-ranking executive to publicly address such situations, a CEO appearing in a traditional leadership role can help mitigate reputational damage.

However, it's important to consider the context in which the CEO image is presented. While a formal CEO image strengthens perceptions of leadership, it may not be the best choice for all types of crises. In cases where stakeholders seek empathy and personal connection, a different type of CEO image – one that reflects the company's values in a more relatable setting – may be more effective.

Authenticity mitigates negative emotion

The study found that CEO images that reflected corporate character, such as a leader in a mission-driven setting aligned with company values, appeared to reduce anger levels among stakeholders compared to product images or no-image conditions. In the study, the hypothetical company was a restaurant chain facing a food-related crisis. When the CEO was photographed in a local farm setting which in alignment with the brand's core values, the negative emotional response was minimal. The CEO image was embedded in an environment that reinforced the company's connection to ethical food sourcing and sustainability.

Although the statistical significance was marginal, the trend suggests that when a CEO is depicted in a more relatable and mission-driven environment, stakeholders may interpret the response as more genuine and emotionally engaging. This finding has implications for corporate crisis communication strategy. When selecting visuals for crisis response, organizations should consider whether a formal or informal CEO image aligns better with stakeholder expectations. In crises that require a strong display of leadership and accountability, a formal CEO image may be more effective. However, when emotional connection and brand authenticity are more critical, a CEO image that aligns with the company's mission and values may help diffuse negative emotions and foster goodwill.

Product images may reinforce crisis associations

The study found that using a product image in crisis communication can have unintended negative consequences, as it may reinforce stakeholder associations with the crisis itself. Participants who viewed a product image during the crisis scenario reported higher levels of anger and lower reputational evaluations compared to those who saw CEO images or no image. One possible explanation for this effect is that the product image directly reminded them of the crisis, reinforcing negative associations rather than shifting attention to the company's response efforts, particularly in situations where the product itself is linked to the issue. In the case of a food safety crisis, for example, an image of the company's product may inadvertently reinforce stakeholder concerns about safety and quality, leading to greater frustration and distrust.

This finding highlights the importance of carefully selecting visuals that shift attention away from the crisis itself and toward the organization's response. When managing reputational threats, human-centric imagery, such as a CEO or employees actively addressing the situation, may help direct stakeholder focus toward corrective actions rather than the problem itself.

Example of an image stimuli in the experiment
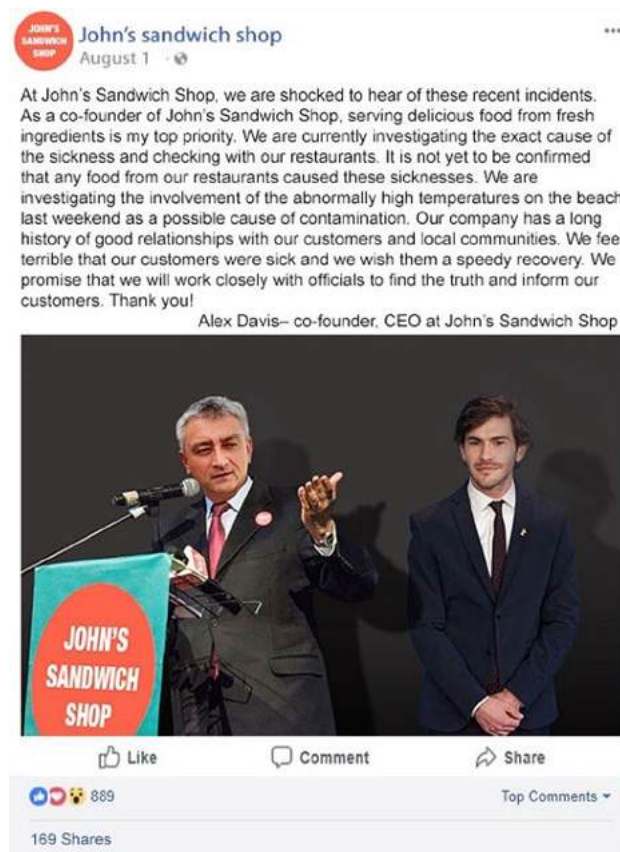
Source: Yook & Stacks, 2024

VISUAL STRATEGIES FOR SOCIAL MEDIA

> **Strategic use of CEO visuals:** While CEO visibility in crisis response can enhance credibility, its effectiveness depends on the crisis context. A stereotypical CEO image (formal, podium-style) may reinforce authority and responsibility, making it a useful choice for accidental crises where companies need to provide explanations. However, in crises where reducing negative emotions, such as anger, is crucial, a CEO reflecting corporate character may be more effective in softening stakeholder response. This approach is especially effective for brands with strong corporate values.

> **Limit product images in crisis messaging:** Organizations should be cautious when incorporating product images into crisis messages. While products represent the brand, they can also serve as reminders of the crisis by keeping the focus on the problem rather than the company's response. Instead, focus on visuals that highlight the company's leadership or values to shift stakeholder focus away from the crisis itself.

> **Prepare for visual-text integration:** Crisis communicators should ensure that visual choices align with verbal messaging strategies to maximize impact. For example, an apology message paired with a CEO image may be more effective in preventable type of crises than an apology with a product image, which could appear impersonal. Similarly, excuse messages may benefit from a formal CEO image to reinforce the company's reputation. Without alignment, visuals may dilute the intended message or even contradict the organization's strategic response.

> **Pre-test visuals for crisis response:** Given the variability in audience responses, communicators consider pre-testing visual strategies before deploying crisis messages on social media. Conducting small-scale audience testing or leveraging real-time feedback mechanisms can help organizations refine their visual choices to better match stakeholder expectations.

OUTLOOK

As social media continues to dominate corporate communication, organizations must recognize that crisis response is no longer just about having right words – it's about creating a cohesive message where visuals and text work together to influence stakeholder perceptions. This study highlights the increasing role of visuals in public reaction to crisis messages, demonstrating that integrating visuals with verbal messages is a strategic decision that can impact corporate reputation and stakeholder emotional responses. While verbal messaging remains the primary, our study findings suggest that carefully chosen visuals can complement message strategies and enhance the effectiveness of communication.

The results indicate that CEO images can add value in certain crisis scenarios, particularly when an organization needs to demonstrate accountability in preventable and accidental types of crisis. Product images, in contrast, may reinforce negative associations in crises related to product failures or safety concerns, signaling the need for caution in their use. The effectiveness of different image types is context-dependent, and there is no one-size-fits-all approach. These insights underscore the importance of aligning visual choices with crisis type, messaging strategy, and organizational values.

In addition to the use of visuals, the use of video-based responses should also be considered, given the increasing use of videos on social media platforms. Additionally, cultural variations in how CEO presence and visual messaging are perceived should be explored, as interpretations of authenticity, leadership, and corporate responsibility may differ globally.

For corporate communicators, the takeaway is clear: In crisis communication, strategic visual choices must align with both the organization's values and the crisis context. This way, organizations can create more compelling crisis responses that resonate with stakeholders, manage reputation and navigate crises more effectively in an ever-changing media landscape.

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MORE INFORMATION

A more detailed discussion of the study can be found in Yook & Stacks, 2024, on which this article is based.

THE FUTURE OF DIGITAL COMMUNICATION

FUTURE ROLES FOR COMMUNICATORS IN DIGITAL MEDIA-ARENAS: BOXTURNERS AND GLOBAL DIPLOMATS

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Digitalization is affecting not only the corporate communication function within organizations, but also giving rise to numerous new and unpredictable digitally-influenced societal issues. The more these changes occur, the greater the responsibility of communicators to monitor and manage these effects. To make sense of these effects, this article introduces the novel Digital Media-Arena (DMA) Framework (Badham et al., 2022, 2024) which outlines 14 digital spaces where organizations, stakeholders, and publics communicate today. The article then examines new emerging roles for corporate communications in the digital realm.

THE DIGITAL ECHOVERSE

Digital technology and AI are disrupting corporate communications' ability to manage communication with stakeholders. The environment in which organizations operate today has been called the echoverse, where "a diverse network of human and nonhuman actors – consumers, brands, AI agents, and more – continuously interact, influence, and reshape messages across digital platforms" and "messages circulate and echo, being amplified, modified, or dampened by ongoing interactions" (Bowers et al., 2024, p. 1). In this digital echoverse, communication is omnidirectional, send-er-receiver roles are blurred, organizational messages continuously evolve, and the meanings are co-created among stakeholders. Corporate communicators are faced with much more diverse and uncontrolled communication pathways where creation and dissemination of organizational messages is increasingly done by stakeholders.

In this digital echoverse, communication is omnidirectional and the meanings are co-created among stakeholders.

Digital corporate communication is understood as the strategic management of an organization's communications with its stakeholders and wider society, through the use of digital technologies and infrastructures (Luoma-aho &

Badham, 2023). Digital corporate communication is a vital function that nurtures an organization's intangible assets, such as reputation, legitimacy, and stakeholder trust. In the following, the new Digital Media-Arena (DMA) Framework is introduced to help communicators navigate this digital echoverse. DMAs left unattended and roles not adopted may lead to reputation and legitimacy challenges as stakeholders, competitors, and even hostile actors utilize the DMAs for their own purposes.

THE DIGITAL MEDIA-ARENAS

The digital realm of diverse media platforms has not only activated new stakeholders, but also diminished organizations' ability to shape communication related to and affecting them. Communication professionals have long relied on the PESO (paid, earned, shared, and owned media) model for media content planning, but in the dynamic echoverse this model is becoming outdated. The DMA Framework offers a contemporary planning grid for communication professionals attempting to address the challenge of how to interact with a diverse range of actors. Some of these actors master the use of digital communication tools (including AI and memes) to actively damage corporate reputations.

The value of DMA lies in mapping out the digital realm to assist communication professionals in strategic decision making on which arenas to communicate. Each DMA determines how much control organizations can have over their message and therefore how much influence they have over the way their messages are interpreted by stakeholders and members of the public. Each DMA also shows which actors can be expected to engage in support of or opposition to the organization and its messages.

The DMA Framework maps out a nuanced set of 14 established and emerging communication spaces that exist in the digital environment. Dynamic and at times overlapping, DMAs run along the spectrum

> between strong and weak control of corporate messages (horizontal axis)
> and between strong and weak control of the arena/platform (vertical axis).

The term "media" is complemented with the concept of interactive "arenas" or forums where anybody (stakeholders and members of the general public) can gather to discuss and debate matters that often relate to organizations and brands.

As seen in the figure below, a typical digital arena is characterized by an online discussion about an issue – sometimes linked to a # (e.g., #whomademyclothes) – which often points to organizations or brands deemed responsible for creating or solving that issue. These digital arenas are more suited to omnidirectional user-generated communication of messages than organization-generated messages. Some scholars refer to these digital spaces as issue arenas or even crisis arenas (Badham et al., 2022), where the free flow of opinions about brands collectively contributes to the inflation or deflation of corporate reputations.

Digital Media-Arenas (DMAs)

DMAs are positioned within two axes: (1) level of control over the corporate message and (2) level of control over the arena/platform.
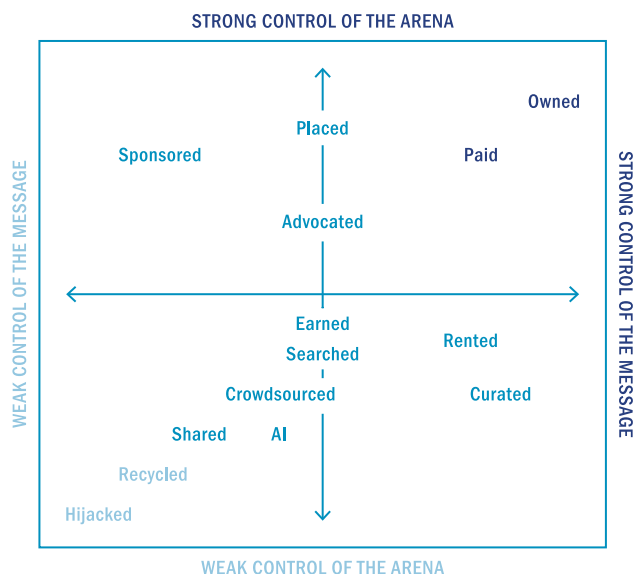
Source: Mark Badham and Vilma Luoma-aho

DMAs with stronger message control

> The two essential DMAs that enable fairly strong control over the design, production, and dissemination timing of an organizational message are **Owned** (e.g., organizational website, apps, and blogs) and **Paid** (advertising purchased in some medium).

DMAs offering moderate message control

Most DMAs fall under the area of moderate message control:

› **Placed** DMA refers to digital communication spaces in which organizations disseminate messages by subtly positioning their product or brand into content created by others, such as product placement in movies, games, or events.

› **Sponsored** DMA refers to communication spaces in which organizations subtly disseminate their messages to wider public by providing funding or other resource support for an individual, group, or charity.

› **Advocated** DMA refers to communication spaces in which stakeholders in a close relationship with the organization (e.g., employees and long-term clients) and with some level of intimate knowledge (e.g., about internal processes, strategies, and product blueprints), willingly and without coercion publicly endorse the organization. These mostly take the form of advocacy for the organization, but advocacy against the organization also is possible, such as corporate whistleblowers leaking information to the public about corporate wrongdoing.

› We list **Earned** DMA (i.e., news content, journalists' articles following editorial guidelines) in this category because although organizations can make use of these communication spaces to attract editorial publicity through media relations activities, corporate communication practitioners have a moderate degree of control over organizational messages in Earned DMA depending on factors such as level of media relations skill, the corporation's crisis history, and relations with journalists, producers, editors, or hosts.

› **Rented** DMA refers to communication spaces involving some contractual collaboration with social media celebrities or influencers in which they communicate an organizational message to their own audiences.

› **Searched** DMA refers to communication spaces in which members of the public conduct online searches for information related to brands. A corporation has a moderate level of control over its messages discovered through this process, such as through search engine optimization (SEO) tactics.

› **Curated** DMA are communication pathways in which

information-intermediary analysts, consultants or businesses – such as Edelman (e.g., Edelman Trust Barometer), Gartner (business insights and trends), and Nielsen (media industry ratings and analysis) – select, edit, and publish content about corporations from a wide range of sources for the purpose of supplying a curated and thus reinterpreted form of content. There is some control over the message, as some companies pay to participate, such as by signing up to the Best Place to Work competition.

› **Artificial Intelligence (AI)** DMA refers to communication spaces in which anyone can harvest information, create, or manipulate organizational messages via AI services and algorithms – typically through artificially constructed text, images, and videos (e.g., deepfakes and bots) in social media, news media, and other digital media. Using AI to generate their own messages enables corporations a moderate level of control over their messages here. Some forms of AI offer more control than others. For example, in-house bots answering employee questions provide more organizational control over content than public generative AI software (e.g., ChatGPT) harvesting content across the entire internet.

› **Crowdsourced** DMA refers to communication spaces in which members of the public contribute and edit content about an organization (e.g., testimonials, reviews) on publicly available crowdsourced sites. Typical examples include wikis (e.g., Wikipedia), product and service rating sites, and review sites (e.g., Trustpilot, Amazon and Glassdoor). To some extent, organizations can influence the content in these sites, but organizational control is very limited.

› While **Shared** DMA demonstrates the axiom 'power to the people', organizations have been able to exercise some degree of control over their messages delivered to fans via social media.

DMAs characterized by weak message control

› **Hijacked** DMA refers to communication spaces in which predator stakeholders hijack a brand's carefully crafted message and turn it into a reputation-damaging message.

Typically, they co-opt a brand or campaign hashtag and twist the intended message into an oppositional message. For example, the hashtag #DoctorsSpeakUp, created by physicians to promote vaccines on Twitter in early 2020, was successfully hijacked by anti-vaccine advocates.

› **Recycled** DMA refers to communication spaces in which members of the public appropriate organizational messages to distort their original meaning or context, mostly through use of humor and entertainment. Typical examples include memes and parodies created and shared in social media, TV shows, and blogs.

FIVE FUTURE CORPORATE COMMUNICATION ROLES

Digital technology is not just disrupting the ability of corporate communications to engage with stakeholders across traditional and newly-emerging media-arenas, it's also reshaping corporate communication roles in organizations and society. The second figure illustrates these new roles and shows which DMAs are most needed within each role.

1 Community builder

Belonging to a community remains a very central human need. It's not just NGOs and community associations that build communities, organizations also can foster community within and among their stakeholders – typically through a CSR and community relations function. Online brand communities focused on problem-solving a local issue or gaining product-related insights can be a natural starting point for organizations wanting to contribute to community building. But opportunities also exist for organizations to get involved in communities not centered around a brand. As an example, corporations can enable community through sustainability-related neighborhood groups figuring out how to best utilize local food waste.

But be forewarned: The idea that organizations can maintain control of these communities is dated. Today, organizations should adopt a stakeholder-centric approach in which the most valuable contributions come from members of the community while corporations remain simply as enablers of interaction and exchange (Luoma-aho & Vos, 2010).

Community-building functions include sustainability and diversity programs of organizations. They improve quality of life around the organization and its neighborhoods (e.g., environment, health, jobs), but they also benefit corporations. For example, community-building efforts can nurture employee branding, resulting in people choosing to work for an organization they see contributing to the best of society. Within these communities, learning to support stakeholders and customers without pushing an organizational agenda on them remains a challenge, but those corporations overcoming this will curate future faith-holders who can help the organization in challenging times, such as during online firestorms that happen sooner or later in the digital realm.

DMAs that most help build such communities are Sponsored, Advocated, Shared and Placed. The strongest influence on organizational culture comes from within the organization – from its employees and leadership, which points to the importance of employee advocacy (Advocated DMA). Employees could be further empowered to act as the organization's advocates for community-building initiatives and groups, representing issues or communities in need on behalf of the organization. When not able to contribute directly themselves, organizations can partner with other organizations more suited to achieve an improved sense of community, often around topics related to their mission. This partnering can consist of sponsoring young people's sports, environmental groups, and local community initiatives (via Sponsored DMA). Because people – particularly millennials – tend to approve of corporations that support causes and issues, corporate communication practitioners could inspire social media users to join the corporation in further building these communities (via Shared DMA) and signal their support for certain communities (e.g., those linked to environmental awareness or LGBTQ+ initiatives) by placing the corporate logo or a product within a TV show or online game (Placed DMA).

Questions to consider

Corporate communication practitioners aiming to become community builders should consider two key questions:
> Who in need in society can we best help in our area of business?
> What can we facilitate to improve their community?

2 Organizational conscience

As AI and machine learning take on greater roles in organizations, the more important ethics guiding these technologies become (Buhmann & Fieseler, 2023). There are several new technologies that require more thoughtful consideration of their potential negative consequences on organizations and society, especially over the long term. The increased use of AI-assisted communication can lead to severe consequences for organizations:

> Organizations need to verify the authenticity of messages apparently sent by the organization in the digital realm.
> While AI helps interpret and predict stakeholder behavior patterns, the big challenges remain the values on which the algorithms are built. Understanding and listening to emerging stakeholder needs and expectations may prove to be one of the most valuable skills of future communication practitioners, yet the limits of what kind of listening is acceptable require constant negotiation. AI is also increasingly used to scam organizations' managers and leaders into leaking organizational information or even mistakenly transferring organizational assets. Corporate communication professionals can work with IT departments to prevent these scams.
> Another central challenge is the ethical collection and use of data by organizations. At best, behavioral insights drawn from data analytics help communicators tailor content to meet stakeholder needs and preferences. At worst, such insights contribute to an "iron cage of surveillance" where performance is ranked and monitored for efficiency (Faraj et al., 2018).

Acting as the organizational conscience means ensuring organizations meet stakeholder expectations, especially regarding corporate responsibility. Matching organizational messages with organizational behavior in the digital realm is increasingly important as stakeholders are quick to call out various forms of corporate "washing" – ranging from vague sustainability signaling (greenwashing) to carewashing such as pretending to care about the war in Ukraine (warwashing), or signaling the organizations' value of equal treatment and rights of certain groups (rainbow washing).

Corporate communicators are highly attuned to emerging crises and risks that may affect the corporation, but AI also broadens the impact of crises to stakeholders and society. For this reason, corporate communication professionals need to act as the organization's conscience by working together with HR and legal units to curb the potential harms and biases of AI on organizations, stakeholders and society.

DMAs that are most in need of the organizational conscience role include AI, Curated, Rented, and Recycled DMA. Corporate communicators can help organizations become more ethical and transparent with their data collection and management practices (via AI DMA). For influencer collaborations where organizations borrow the attention of influencers' publics, a new form of organizational conscience is needed to understand how collaborations impact influencers and their public (Rented DMA). With rising accusations of corporate greenwashing and failing to live up to their promises, stakeholders have a fruitful new arena to mock inauthentic organizational messages through humor and memes (Recycled DMA). Organizational conscience is needed to portray an honest and transparent view of organizational reality so as not to attract criticism from industry analysts (Curated DMA). Communicators as organizational conscience can help predict where such clashes are likely to occur, and help mold corporate messages more in line with stakeholder expectations.

Questions to consider

Corporate communication practitioners setting out to adopt an organizational conscience role should consider two key questions:
> What are the social costs of AI efficiency?
> What happens when an algorithm developed to serve an organization starts to serve itself or gets hijacked and used for harmful purposes?

Digital Media-Arenas most needed with corporate communication roles
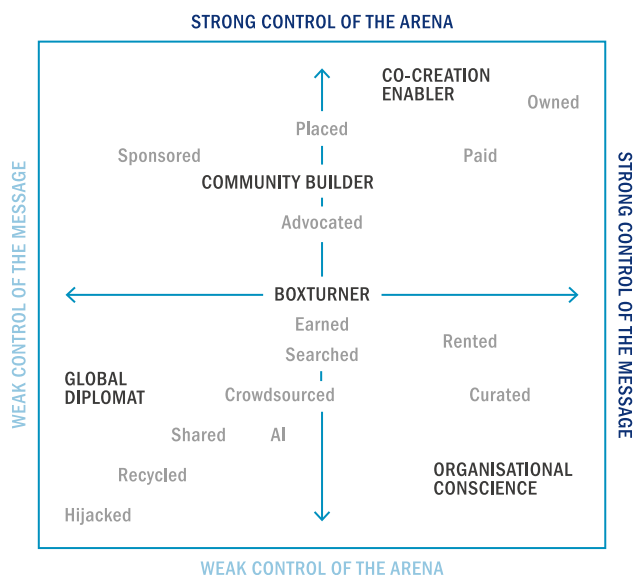
Source: Mark Badham and Vilma Luoma-aho

3 Co-creation enabler

Corporations and their brands are increasingly "owned" by stakeholders with the communicative and collective power to force change. Accordingly, corporate communicators need to embrace a more stakeholder-centric approach and welcome stakeholders into the organizational orbit. A key way to achieve this is through co-creation initiatives – ensuring stakeholders are given opportunities to contribute to the life of organizations. The digital environment enables a whole new level of co-creation with stakeholders, from co-creating products through 3D printing to recreation and innovation of existing and past products and services. As corporate faith-holders (fans and supporters) immerse their daily lives within brand-related virtual environments, corporations should provide them with co-creation opportunities to further strengthen corporate-stakeholder relations.

For example, give them product blueprints that enable them to repair and reproduce products. Digital customer experiences can also be co-created in the metaverse where customers can virtually try products (e.g., try on clothes or place digital furniture in their homes) and subsequently offer suggestions to improve them, as well as develop and code their own collectibles and games (Rahman et al., 2025).

Communication professionals can play a central role in defining rich personalized stakeholder experiences by becoming involved in these co-creation initiatives.

DMAs most suited to this co-creation enabler role include Owned DMA. For example, corporations can design digital spaces enabling stakeholder co-creation of products, services and experiences. Paid DMA are vital to attracting targeted stakeholders' and publics' attention towards these co-creation opportunities in Owned DMA. Employees are encouraged to participate alongside stakeholders in the co-creation initiatives (Advocated DMA), providing them with guidance and guardrails.

Questions to consider

Corporate communication practitioners aiming to become co-creation enablers should consider two key questions:

> Where do we draw the line between stakeholders' co-creation of corporate products and the corporation's legal concerns (e.g., copyright)?

> How can we best balance fans' co-creational aspirations with the potential limitations of corporate goals and resources?

4 Boxturner

The digital realm is often a reality check for organizations because anyone anywhere can find, declare, and share information about a corporation and its products and services. Not only does the internet leave behind an interlinked and lasting digital trail of past publicity of organizational indiscretions and wrongdoing, it also offers a wide-open terrain of communication spaces for consumers to say what they like (within online moderation boundaries) about their experiences with products and services. This criticism often metastasizes into a corporate crisis, beginning in one arena and then crossing over into other arenas like fall-

ing dominoes (Badham et al., 2022). Increasing numbers of stakeholders and publics (including news media) are checking and fact-checking what corporations say and measuring that across what they do. Conscious consumerism is giving rise to new expectations over what corporations can make, sell, and say. Boxturning (Luoma-aho et al., 2023) finds inconsistences in reporting and actions, for better or worse.

BOXTURNING

Boxturning refers to an emerging phenomenon in which stakeholders invested in brands are "turning the box over" to look for the details, the fine print, the less visible information that might reveal potential harm or deceit or conflict with expectations (Luoma-aho et al., 2023). Examples include harmful product ingredients, greenwashing, questionable investments, and toxic organizational practices. Boxturning can lead to public criticism in the form of boycotts and canceling brands and their leaders, but internal boxturning can help communication professionals produce engaging digital content for stakeholders on topics previously not discussed publicly.

Communication professionals should adopt a boxturner role to make sure everything the corporation says and does is consistent, honest, and transparent across all DMAs. Boxturning attracts increased attention to message consistency across platforms and channels and understanding the fine print implied. Communication professionals will need to focus more on the framing of their messages and on transparency of organizational processes. As negative messages remain more credible than positive in online environments, and negative messages spread faster than positive messages, this boxturning role requires speed in responding to an emerging crisis online. Boxturning is often a question of stakeholder resonance: organizational messages that do not resonate with stakeholder perceptions will lead to boxturning.

The most obvious DMA pertaining to this boxturner role is Earned DMA, as journalists traditionally have viewed their role in society as a watchdog holding corporations and governments accountable for their actions and statements. Of course, stakeholders and the public turn to Searched DMA to seek organizational information and to Shared DMA

to spread their findings. They also co-create organizational information on Crowdsourced DMA to make their findings more visible and legitimate. Influencers and celebrities are often quick to jump onboard boxturning endeavors if they match their areas of interest (Rented DMA).

Questions to consider

Corporate communication practitioners aiming to become boxturners should consider two key questions:

> Where do we receive the most complaints about our products or services?
> How can we make sure everything our organization (or client) says and does is consistent, honest, and transparent?

5 Global diplomat

The more global organizations become, the more complex their communication becomes as they seek to navigate differences in attitudes and behaviors across cultures and countries. Global tensions and cultural divides continue to polarize opinions and isolate individuals inside their own like-minded thought bubbles and echo chambers. Digital technologies and social media platforms have contributed to the increased polarization of individuals in society, and organizations are often pulled into such divisions. As a result, members of the public have quite contrasting and diverse expectations of institutions and organizations, more easily leading to expressions of outrage against them. This outrage extends to brands birthed in countries (i.e., their country of origin) that have been stigmatized (e.g., Russia).

Even inside organizations, polar opposites of social and political ideologies collide when organizations are asked to take a stand on global issues. Being aware and considerate of all parties and cultures remains challenging, yet organizations find themselves picking sides when it comes to cross-national crises such as military wars, trade wars, and pandemics. Remaining neutral is a challenge as employees demand that their employers identify with what is important to them. Balancing international tensions is a difficult task, and when done wrong can create a firestorm of criticism

from within organizations as well as from external sources.

Large multinational corporations are considered a resource for uniting previously diverse populations and ideologies (Edelman, 2024), and brands are taking on roles of global diplomacy. For communicators, the global diplomat role requires an understanding of the underlying pressures and organizational behaviors that can trigger division. This understanding can best emerge through heavy reliance on listening to public concerns and monitoring public opinion. Communicators' relationship-building and listening skills remain critical in this role.

Hijacked DMA becomes a central space where "hateholders" of a global corporation (stakeholders opposed to the corporation) attack it using defamatory hashtags to harness public criticism, like a dragnet trawling through online social networks. Likewise, when corporations get drawn into global sociopolitical controversies, memes and parodies abound online (Recycled DMA) and an epidemic of criticism spreads like wildfire through online social networks (Shared DMA). Earned DMA often become involved because news media outlets gravitate to these public tensions and cross-national conflicts.

Questions to consider

Corporate communication practitioners aiming to become global diplomats should consider two key questions:
> How can organizational choices help diminish geopolitical divisions?
> How do we make sure these choices adopt a long-term view so that shifts in political views and public opinion don't come back to bite us?

# IMPLICATIONS FOR CORPORATE COMMUNICATION

The value of the DMA Framework is that it shows 14 separate communication spaces (DMAs) where digital communication from or about organisations takes place between organizations and stakeholders, and also among stakeholders themselves. This array of DMAs reveals to corporate communicators:
> Where communication can and can't be controlled; and
> Where communication should prioritize "speaking" versus "listening".

After all, digital corporate communication should be both a listening and speaking profession (Macnamara, 2023). Reflecting on the five corporate communication roles, the DMA Framework suggests four complementary actions for communicators that can be positioned across four quadrants.
> **Innovate** (through the co-creation enabler role): Communication professionals should take advantage of the most controlled DMAs to encourage co-creation and innovation with the corporation.
> **Empower** (through the community builder role): In community-building DMAs, empowerment of communities and stakeholders should be the central aim, even when control of the organizational message is weak.
> **Reflect** (through the organisational conscience role and boxturner roles): Thinking deeply about what organisations are promising stakeholders and ensuring best use of AI to protect stakeholders is crucial in DMAs with weak arena control.
> **Monitor** (through the global diplomat role): Where there is little control over the organizational message and the arena/platform, communication professionals require a helicopter view of stakeholder and public communication taking place in the digital echoverse, and here organizational listening should be prioritized over organizational speaking.

Four emerging digital corporate communication actions
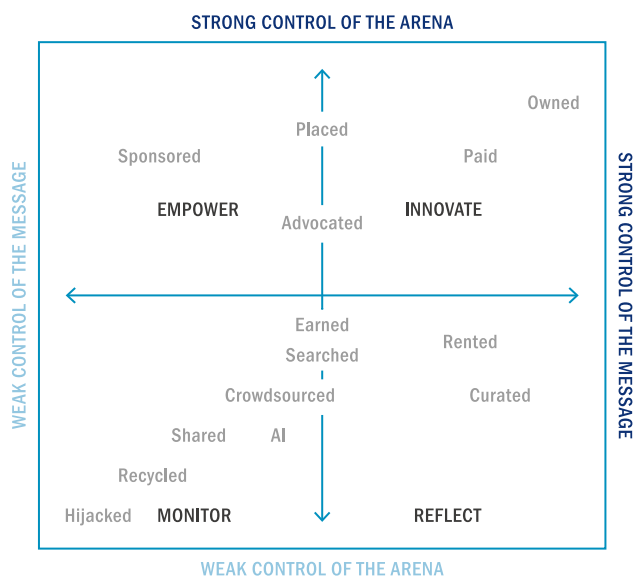
Source: Mark Badham and Vilma Luoma-aho

CONCLUSION

The explosion of digitally mediated forms of communication is changing the game for all communicators. Communication power has shifted drastically from organizations and institutions to the public and different stakeholders. Organizations are no longer in charge of their brand and messages, and reputations are increasingly at the mercy of our stakeholders formed on the different Digital Media-Arenas. How well the organization acknowledges these DMAs and both the positive and negative interaction taking place there is now a vital question.

The new emerging roles bring about some new tasks such as the boxturning of internal issues, or the organizational conscience, but many of the required roles are actually something communicators have already learned to do in their boundary spanning and community building functions. Global diplomats have previously been diplomats of the organizational culture on a smaller scale inside their organizations. Corporate communicators utilizing technology have an increased responsibility not just to organizations, but also to stakeholders and to society at large – to listen and to respect their voices as they attempt to both collaborate, co-create, and occasionally also recycle or hijack the organizational messages in DMAs. Understanding these different DMAs is the starting point of all digital development.

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MORE INFORMATION

Further details on the Digital Media-Arena Framework can be found in Badham et al., 2022, 2024, and in the forthcoming (2025) Routledge textbook Digital Communication Management: Theories and Practices for a Global and Volatile World.

HARNESSING AI VOICE ASSISTANTS FOR DIGITAL CORPORATE COMMUNICATION

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Voice-based assistants (VAs) are transforming digital corporate communication by fundamentally reshaping how organizations interact with stakeholders. Recent innovations in generative artificial intelligence, powered by large language models (LLMs), have led to the widespread adoption of VAs capable of perceiving their environment, making decisions, and automating processes in real-time. Their ability to simulate human-like empathy, combined with increased agency, enhances the naturalness and relatability of their interactions. Consequently, these assistants function as multimodal, customizable tools that can adapt to the varied ways organizations choose to integrate them into their workflows. In this article, we illustrate the current applications of VAs through real-world examples.

A NEW GENERATION OF ASSISTANTS

Digital voice communication (DVC) is the strategic management of voice-based communication channels to improve communication in organizations, society, and with organizational stakeholders. Voice-based digital corporate communication rose over the last decade in parallel with the advancement of AI techniques such as natural language processing and automatic speech recognition. Prominent VAs like Amazon Alexa, Google Assistant, and Apple Siri exemplify this innovation. These assistants function as artificially enabled agents capable of using human language to engage in contextual dialogues, process complex requests,

and expand their knowledge base. Their ability to monitor behaviors, analyze patterns, and understand needs empowers organizations to automate tasks, predict behaviors, and foster interactive engagements. However, these earlier generations of VAs were constrained by technological limitations; they relied on scripted responses, had limited capacity for nuanced natural language understanding, and produced voices that lacked human-like quality and expressiveness. The generalized absence of genuine affective resonance and contextualized responsiveness generated some aversion toward AI as these VAs often appeared cold and impersonal.

The launch of ChatGPT (OpenAI) at the end of 2022 marked the beginning of a new generation of assistants. This rapid expansion, followed by the emergence of competitive platforms like Claude (Anthropic) and Gemini (Google), has created fertile ground for innovation in corporate communication. By 2024, 70 % of UK and 65% of US companies were using these advanced assistants (SAS, 2024). This new wave of VAs is becoming increasingly accessible and seamlessly integrated across company levels and functional areas. They can now be used by anyone, anywhere, and are often embedded into mobile devices, messaging apps like WhatsApp, corporate platforms such as Salesforce, and various digital ecosystems. While their level of specialization depends on how companies deploy them – whether for broad or targeted use – they benefit from two key advancements expected to drive even greater adoption: empathy and agency.

› **Empathy** is a fundamental aspect of human social behavior, essential for building meaningful connections. VAs that can simulate all key dimensions of empathy – cognitive, affective, and compassionate – enhance interpersonal interactions and can be perceived as genuine by users (Mari et al., 2024). Empathic VAs, such as Hume AI's EVI, can detect and interpret user emotions in real-time by analyzing speech patterns, including tone, vocal bursts, and emotional language. This capability allows them to engage in adaptive and emotionally attuned interactions, creating adaptive and affectively attuned exchanges.

› **Agentic AI** refers to systems that perceive their environment, make autonomous decisions, and act toward specific goals without constant human input. These systems simulate human-like agency, enabling problem-solving, learning, and adaptive decision-making. ChatGPT's "scheduled tasks" feature showcases agentic AI's potential by automating actions like reminders, reports, and workflows. VAs with these capabilities transform corporate communication by ensuring personalization, on-brand messaging, and scalable interactions, among other things. Their 24/7 availability enhances engagement, crisis management, and internal communication, setting a new standard for organizational efficiency.

The impact of agentic and empathic generative AI-based VAs is far-reaching and positions digital voice communication (DVC) as a disruptive and widely accessible innovation in digital corporate communication.

DIGITAL VOICE COMMUNICATION FRAMEWORK

VAs have enabled corporate communication professionals to design diverse push and pull initiatives tailored to the bi-directional nature of voice as a communication touchpoint. Understanding the organizational environment in which DVC operates requires examining the dual role of VAs as spaces for interaction (arenas) and channels for communication (media). The DVC framework, inspired by the PESO model (Paid, Earned, Shared, and Owned media) and emerging forms of communication presented in the digital media-arenas (DMA) framework, such as Searched media, addresses the strategic use of VAs for effective corporate communication (Macnamara et al., 2016; Badham et al., 2022). This framework emphasizes the importance of engaging stakeholders such as employees, influencers, and customers, demonstrating the universal role of DCC across organizational and societal contexts (Badham & Luoma-aho, 2023).

Digital Voice Communication (DVC) framework
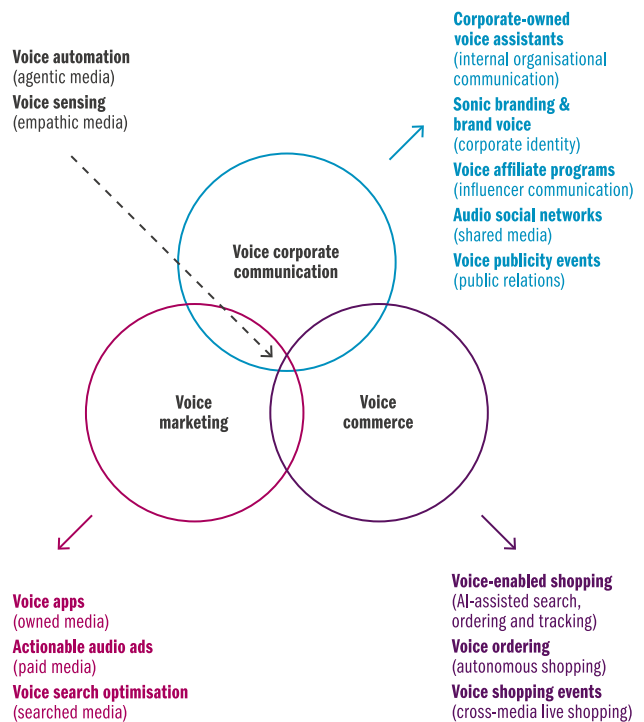
Source: Mari et al., 2023

The DVC framework categorizes voice-based communication into 11 main activities based on the inductive analysis of nearly 100 interviews with industry executives. These activities relate to using voice for corporate communication, marketing, and commerce and highlight organizational innovation opportunities.

Voice corporate communication

Voice corporate communication refers to the strategic implementation and management of voice-based assistants to enhance internal corporate communication and stakeholder engagement. This evolving field is characterized by five key practices:

› **Corporate-owned voice assistants (OVAs)** play an increasingly significant role in internal corporate communication, providing managers and employees with efficient access to business information. For instance, a VA might respond to a query during meetings such as, "What was our market share in the small appliances segment in the UK during Q1 2025?" Additionally, OVAs support frontline workers by streamlining operational tasks. Walmart's "Ask Sam", a mobile-based VA, assists over 5,000 employees in the US by answering queries related to product pricing and placement while also providing policy updates during crisis management, as demonstrated during the COVID-19 pandemic.

› **Sonic branding and brand voice** are the auditory representations of corporate identity and have become a critical component of brand differentiation. Traditionally, organizations have used auditory elements such as the "Intel Inside" chime or McDonald's "I'm Lovin' It" audio signature to reinforce brand identity. However, the future of corporate sound extends beyond jingles to encompass distinctive brand voices. KFC has developed a brand voice modeled after its founder, Colonel Sanders, ensuring consistency across various media touchpoints, including television ads and VAs.

› **Voice affiliate programs** enable influencers to promote third-party products through audio content and earn commissions. The Amazon Associates Program and the Amazon Influencer Program illustrate the potential of voice-driven marketing. Influencers curate product recommendations via live streams, shoppable photos, and videos, connecting brands with targeted audiences. Communication managers can utilize Alexa-enabled affiliate programs to collaborate with influencers and media partners, thereby amplifying their brand messaging to Amazon's extensive customer base.

› **Audio social networks** are voice-only platforms organizations consider for their social engagement potential. The emergence of X Spaces and LinkedIn Audio Events has highlighted the potential for company participation in voice-driven discussions. Initially dominated by influencers, these platforms now attract strategic stakeholders interested in diverse topics such as sustainability, gender equality, and cryptocurrency investment. Corporate communicators need to determine whether to actively host discussions or adopt a passive listening approach. Options include sponsoring chat rooms, featuring guest speakers, or directly moderating discussions.

› **Voice publicity events** are voice-driven initiatives that organizations use to generate media coverage and public engagement. A notable example is Nike's campaign during an NBA halftime show, where millions of viewers were invited to use Google Assistant to "Ask Nike" to purchase the pre-release Nike shoes worn by two top players. All pairs were sold within six minutes, with over 15,000 purchase requests for the $350 shoes. The event generated extensive media coverage, producing millions of dollars in exposure and demonstrating the power of voice technology in brand activations.

Voice marketing

Voice marketing employs a combination of push and pull communication strategies to create immersive, convenient, and relevant brand experiences, thereby strengthening consumer relationships. The rapid adoption of voice marketing is closely linked to:

› **Voice applications** are branded voice applications, known as "skills" on Amazon Alexa and "custom GPT" on ChatGPT, that serve four primary functions: utility, entertainment, information, and education. These third-party apps offer companies limitless opportunities to enhance

strategic relationships with consumers. For instance, the scotch brand Talisker pioneered an Alexa skill to replicate a guided tasting, similar to those conducted at its distillery, providing a step-by-step audio guide to enhance whisky appreciation. Additionally, Custom GPTs allow brands to create personalized conversational agents that align with their tone and service goals.

› **Actionable audio advertisements** encourage listeners to engage with a brand or purchase products on VAs. Amazon introduced a service enabling advertisers to insert periodic audio ads between songs on Amazon Music. Brands such as Berocca by Bayer Consumer Health have innovated with actionable audio ads. Digital radio listeners can use voice commands to request additional product details or place orders "hands-free" directly through Alexa.

› **Voice search optimization** requires companies like Procter & Gamble to refine product descriptions to align with verbal search behavior to improve the visibility of search results. Unlike text-based searches, voice queries often incorporate long-tail keywords and conversational phrases with filler words such as "the" or "for" (e.g., "benefits of AI" versus "what are the benefits of AI"). Effective voice search strategies can significantly impact an organization's digital performance, emphasizing managers' need to stay informed on best practices in this evolving domain.

Voice commerce

Voice commerce encompasses transactions initiated via voice commands directly through brand-owned platforms or third-party marketplaces. This domain integrates technical capabilities and communication strategies that facilitate product searches, customer reviews, order placement, and tracking. Key voice commerce practices include voice-enabled shopping, voice ordering, and voice shopping events.

› **Voice-enabled shopping** allows repeat customers to purchase physical products or services using voice commands without inputting additional details such as addresses or payment credentials. Transactions can occur via third-party voice apps (e.g., Spotify) or through native voice shopping services like Google Shopping. Domino's Pizza pioneered one of the earliest voice-driven commercial transactions through its custom Alexa skill. By saying, "Alexa, ask Domino's to feed me!" users can create new orders, reorder their previous selections, or track their deliveries.

› **Voice ordering automation** marks a significant step toward autonomous shopping, minimizing or even eliminating human decision-making in purchases. Brands can capitalize on this shift by adopting subscription-based revenue models and offering exclusive content or advanced features. A notable example is Jeopardy!, produced by Sony Pictures Television, which became the first Alexa skill to introduce a paid subscription. Users could access additional episodes for $1.99 per month, demonstrating how voice technology can drive new monetization strategies in digital commerce.

› **Voice shopping events** combine live product discovery with time-sensitive purchasing incentives, creating urgency through exclusive, limited-time offers. By integrating multiple media channels, these events encourage immediate action. For example, a TV ad might prompt viewers to ask Alexa to buy a limited-edition cereal available only during a live sports event. This strategy merges entertainment with commerce, enhancing engagement, and driving instant conversions.

POTENTIAL OF VOICE SENSING AND AUTOMATION

To fully tap into the potential of AI-driven VAs in digital corporate communication, corporate communicators should systematically explore relevant use cases across various media and arenas. At the same time, rapid advancements in voice technologies further amplify synergies among corporate communication, marketing, and commerce. It's crucial to consider how VAs, acting as agentic and empathic media, can enhance communication within organizations, society at large, and with key stakeholders.

Voice automation

Transforming into agentic media, VAs autonomously generate, distribute, and analyze communication to bolster organizational engagement. For corporate communication managers, these systems streamline internal workflows, enable personalized stakeholder interactions, and ensure consistent, real-time messaging across multiple channels. Organizations adopting agentic VAs can improve efficiency, facilitate better decision-making, and advance their communication strategies in an increasingly digital environment.

A key feature of agentic media is its ability to operate across various organizational functions, fostering collaboration and eliminating silos. For instance, Unilever's Unabot supports internal training and employee engagement by providing instant access to corporate updates and policy changes via voice commands. Similarly, IBM employees use voice automation to troubleshoot common IT issues and access real-time business insights, easing IT workloads. At PwC, Amazon Alexa offers personalized internal updates, allowing employees to check project statuses and announcements hands-free.

Voice sensing

Evolving into empathic media, VAs detect and interpret emotional cues in real time and adapt their communication style accordingly. By analyzing tone, pitch, and cadence, these assistants can identify stress or excitement and respond with reassurance or encouragement. Such emotional intelligence promotes healthier workplace interactions by averting misunderstandings and fostering employee well-being. Deloitte, for example, is piloting VAs that gauge employee sentiment during standups, giving managers early insights into team morale. Meanwhile, SAP leverages empathic media solutions that assess tone and sentiment in conference calls, dynamically adjusting agendas to diffuse tension and ensure balanced participation. As voice sensing grows more advanced, it streamlines communication and cultivates a supportive corporate culture that values emotional well-being and higher engagement across teams.

Despite the vast innovative potential of voice sensing and automation in corporate communication and beyond, transparency, control, and privacy issues must be carefully evaluated, as failures in these areas could damage reputation. Monitoring the evolution of voice technologies helps organizations avoid premature adoption without understanding associated risks while also enabling timely implementation with clearly defined safeguards.

CONCLUSION

Voice-based digital corporate communication marks a fundamental transformation in stakeholder engagement, and the DVC framework shows current opportunities. Organizations can cultivate stronger relationships and enrich user experiences by automating tasks through empathy-centered approaches. However, integrating AI-driven VAs in corporate communication presents several challenges. Organizations may struggle to ensure these systems operate ethically while maintaining trust and compliance. Thus, managers are encouraged to assess how VAs will affect stakeholder perceptions and guide decision-making in the long run. Additionally, balancing automation with meaningful human-like interactions remains a key hurdle when full control of the message is not necessarily possible. As AI and voice technology continue to advance, they will further influence corporate communication practices. Enterprises that strategically align VAs with their overarching goals will be poised to excel in the evolving digital environment.

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MORE INFORMATION

The voice communication framework and AI voice assistants are discussed in more detail in Mari & Algesheimer, 2022, and in Mari et al., 2023, 2024.

BUILDING RELATIONSHIP ON SOCIAL MEDIA: AI VS. HUMAN

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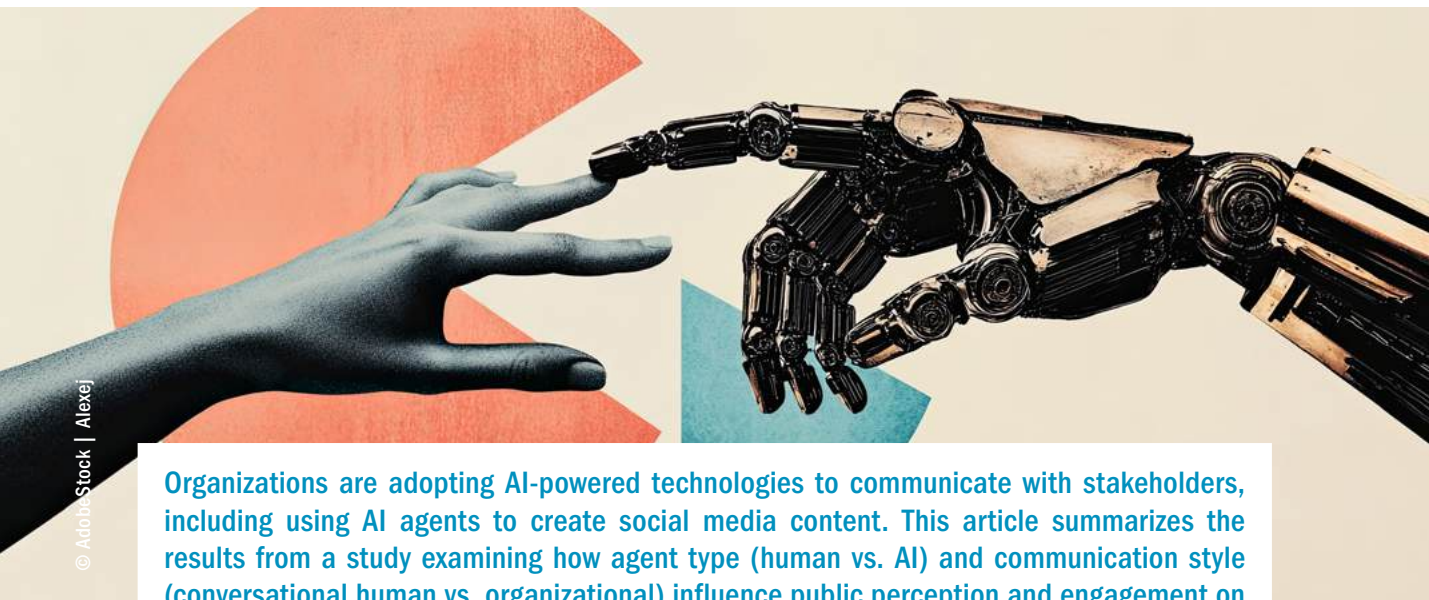
Organizations are adopting AI-powered technologies to communicate with stakeholders, including using AI agents to create social media content. This article summarizes the results from a study examining how agent type (human vs. AI) and communication style (conversational human vs. organizational) influence public perception and engagement on social media. The findings suggest that while human agents are more effective in making people feel heard, AI-powered agents perform equally well in fostering other relational outcomes. These insights help corporate communication professionals assess whether AI-powered agents can replace human representatives in social media communication.

AI AND SOCIAL MEDIA COMMUNICATION

With advancements in AI technologies, organizations are increasingly relying on AI-powered tools to manage their online communications. Chatbots handle customer inquiries, and AI agents generate social media messages. These changes are reshaping corporate communication. A key shift is the use of AI to generate social media updates and engage stakeholders. This change raises an important question for corporate communication professionals and scholars: Can AI-generated social media communication achieve the same outcomes as human-created messages? As organizations integrate AI-powered agents that can employ varied message strategies, including differences in voice tone, understanding how these messages shape stakeholder perceptions is also crucial.

To explore this, we conducted an experiment in which participants were exposed to an X/Twitter account of a well-known American automobile manufacturer. They were randomly assigned to one of four mock X/Twitter pages, where all tweets were identical except for agent identification and tone of voice. Participants then evaluated their trust, satisfaction, commitment, and control mutuality toward the organization, along with their intention to engage with its social media in the future.

THE IMPACT OF AI VS. HUMAN AGENTS ON PUBLIC PERCEPTION AND ENGAGEMENT

Organizations were once assumed to have human employees writing all of their social media messages, shaping how publics interpreted and engaged with corporate communication. However, AI now challenges this assumption, sparking debate over whether people can build relationships with organizations through AI-powered agents as effectively as they do with human agents. Some scholars argue that biases against algorithm-based technologies make it harder for publics to build relationships with AI-powered agents (e.g., Dietvorst et al., 2015). Others suggest that people apply the same social rules to non-human agents as they do to humans, treating them similarly in interactions (Nass & Moon, 2000).

Advances in natural language algorithms have made AI-driven communication more sophisticated, which enables AI-powered agents to generate human-like messages and adopt various communication styles. Two different voice tones can be differentiated:

> **The conversational human voice** involves an interactive and natural tone, making organizational messages feel more personal and engaging (Kelleher, 2009). A key feature is its natural, friendly, and inviting tone, which resembles everyday conversation (Park & Lee, 2013). Organizations achieve this by writing in the first-person voice and incorporating emojis.

> **The organizational voice**, in contrast, follows a more formal, impersonal communication style (Oh & Ki, 2019).

Beyond relationship-building, organizations seek to increase public engagement in supportive behaviors, particularly on social media, where direct interaction is seamless. To drive engagement, organizations create social media messages that encourage actions such as liking, sharing, or commenting. Engagement also includes publics' intent to continue interacting with the organization's content over time. Research suggests that social media engagement positively influences individuals' behaviors, including their willingness to purchase a company's products or services (Coursaris et al., 2016).

WHAT WE MEASURED – KEY FACTORS IN PUBLIC PERCEPTION

This study examines how agent type (human vs. AI-powered agents) and voice tone (conversational human voice vs. organizational voice) influence key factors shaping publics' perception of an organization and their engagement intentions on social media. Based on public relations research (Hon & Grunig, 1999), these key factors are defined in the study as follows:

> Trust is the willingness of publics to open up to the organization.

> Satisfaction reflects how pleased publics are with their relationship with the organization.

> Commitment refers to the extent to which publics are willing to invest effort into maintaining the relationship.

> Control mutuality describes the degree to which publics believe they have influence over the organization.

HOW DO PEOPLE RESPOND TO AI VS. HUMAN AGENTS?

The short answer: while responses are generally similar, people feel they have more influence over an organization when messages come from human agents rather than AI-powered agents.

Our study found no significant differences in trust, satisfaction, commitment, and social media engagement between human and AI-powered agents. In other words, participants' perceptions of the organization remained consistent regardless of whether the messages were generated by a human or an AI. However, control mutuality differed between human and AI agents. Participants believed that they had more influence over the organization's decision-making process when a human, rather than an AI-powered agent, created the messages. This difference was based on the perception of the agent rather than the content itself, as messages within the same communication style were identical regardless of whether a human or AI created them.

People feel they have more influence over an organization when messages come from human agents

DOES THE AGENT'S TONE OF VOICE MATTER?

The study reveals that the tone of voice in social media messages has a significant impact on publics' perceptions of an organization. When organizations use a conversational human voice in their messages, trust, satisfaction, commitment, and control mutuality are all higher than when they use an organizational voice. In other words, relational outcomes are more positive when messages are written in a friendly, casual tone compared to a formal, structured one. This finding aligns with scientific evidence showing that a conversational tone creates a sense of humanness for online agents (e.g., Lu et al., 2022). People tend to resonate more with messages written in everyday language, as it makes them feel like they are engaging in a conversation with a real human being. Furthermore, a conversational tone fosters greater social media engagement by encouraging and inviting publics to interact with the organization.

Two of four mock X/Twitter pages for the study design

Human agent & conversational human voice
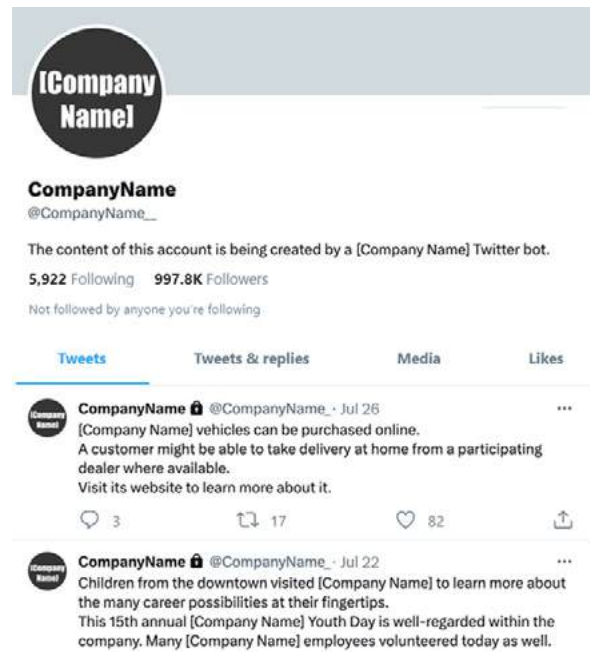
Bot agent & organizational voice

Source: Oh & Ki, 2024

INTERACTIONS BETWEEN AGENT TYPE AND VOICE TONE

In real-world settings, social media messages are often generated by combinations of different agents and voice tones. This study also examined how agent type and voice tone interact and influence public perception. The results showed that messages written in an organizational voice led to higher control mutuality when they were created by a human agent. However, when the messages were written in a conversational human voice, there was no difference in control mutuality between human and AI-powered agents.

While individuals tend to perceive more influence over

the organization when social media messages come from a human agent, this perception of influence remains the same when messages are delivered in a conversational tone, regardless of whether the agent is human or AI-powered. The humanness conveyed through a conversational voice tone may reduce apprehension or biases toward AI agent, as this voice tone increases the resemblance to a human-like conversation.

For the other outcomes (i.e., trust, satisfaction, commitment, and social media engagement), there was no noticeable difference based on the combination of agent type and voice tone.

PRACTICAL IMPLEMENTATION FOR CORPORATE COMMUNICATION

If your organization aims to build strong relationships with its publics and enhance social media engagement but is unsure whether to adopt AI or human agents to create social media messages, consider this question: What outcomes do we want to achieve through our social media communication? If the goal is to foster publics' trust, satisfaction, or commitment toward the organization, or to increase engagement with social media messages, then the type of agent – human or AI – does not require special consideration. In these cases, both human- and AI-generated messages can be equally effective.

However, if your organization's primary objective is to make publics feel that they have a voice in decision-making and that their input is valued, relying on AI-powered technologies to generate social media messages may not be the best approach. In such cases, it is crucial to ensure that publics are aware that a human employee is responsible for crafting the messages. This becomes especially important when the voice tone of the social media communication is formal, serious, and written in third-person voice.

If your organization chooses to use AI-powered agents for social media messages but still wants to convey that publics' opinions and insights are valued, the AI-generated messages should adopt a conversational, first-person, and friendly tone – one that closely resembles everyday human communication.

AI can complement but not fully replace human agents in corporate social media communication

HUMAN OR AI? INSIGHTS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

This article addresses a foundational question for corporate communication practitioners adopting AI technologies in their social media communication: Can organizations use AI agents instead of human agents to build relationships with their publics? The answer appears to be yes, but not always. AI can complement but not fully replace human agents in corporate social media communication. While the impacts of human and AI agents were largely similar overall, individuals were more likely to feel that the organization valued their opinions when a human agent created the social media messages.

The results also suggests that a friendly and engaging tone in social media communication leads to more positive outcomes compared to a formal and impersonal one. A human-like voice appears to blur the lines between human- and AI-generated communication, making AI-generated messages more effective when they adopt a conversational style.

While this study compared human and AI-powered agents, it did not explore scenarios in which human agents generate social media messages with the assistance of AI. Many corporate communication professionals already use AI tools to aid content creation, though their writing is not entirely AI-generated. More research is needed to determine whether AI-generated messages differ in impact from AI-assisted messages.

With the rapid evolution of technology, AI adoption in corporate communication seems inevitable. Although AI technology enables organizations to automate various tasks, including social media message creation, its impact on publics requires careful consideration. The results of this study suggest that rather than fully replacing human agents, AI may serve as a complement – enhancing efficiency while maintaining the human touch that publics value. To fully leverage these advancements, chief communication officers and corporate communication professionals should continue to assess and understand the implications of AI adoption.

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MORE INFORMATION

A detailed description of this study is available in Oh & Ki, 2024, as listed above.

LEVERAGING THE POTENTIAL OF AI-DRIVEN COMMUNICATION: LESSONS LEARNED FROM GOODYEAR, SAP & CLARIANT

CONTRIBUTORS: LAURA DUDA, MONIKA SCHALLER, KAI ROLKER

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The rise of AI-driven tools is reshaping corporate communication, offering new opportunities to improve efficiency, effectiveness, and strategic impact. What does this mean for global companies? And how can communication leaders provide direction? Three seasoned Chief Communication Officers – Laura Duda, Monika Schaller, and Kai Rolker – share their insights on the evolving role of AI at Goodyear, SAP, and Clariant. They discuss their strategic approaches, the progress they've made, and the most promising use cases. They also address key challenges: from overcoming resistance and developing the necessary competencies to managing changes in professional roles.

GOODYEAR is one of the world's largest tire companies. It employs about 68,000 people and manufactures its products at 53 facilities in 20 countries around the world. Its two Innovation Centers in Akron, Ohio, United States, and Colmar-Berg, Luxembourg, strive to develop state-of-the-art products and services that set the technology and performance standard for the industry.

SAP is a global leader in enterprise applications and business artificial intelligence. With more than 109,000 employees worldwide, organizations have trusted SAP for over 50 years to optimize business-critical operations across finance, procurement, HR, supply chain, and customer experience.

CLARIANT is a Swiss multinational specialty chemical company. It's a leader in the specialty chemicals sector and structured into three business units: care chemicals, adsorbents and additives, and catalysts. More than 10,000 people provide innovative solutions to key trends such as health- and sustainability-conscious consumers, energy transition, and circularity.

ROADMAPS TO AI-DRIVEN COMMUNICATION

What strategic approaches were chosen to implement AI in your communication department?

DUDA: About two years ago, following the launch of ChatGPT, Goodyear's Global Communications team formed an AI task force to research, align, and develop company perspectives and guidelines for communicators. We leverage the task force for two purposes: to share knowledge with our teams around the world, and to learn from one another and identify opportunities for additional collaboration.

The task force has strong representation across our geographies and areas of specialization, and we also included "advisors" from other areas of the company, like legal and IT, to make sure our approach reflects the broader AI perspectives, practices, and expectations that were simultaneously being established by those other functions. They've evaluated about 20 AI tools with the potential to support our work. Once our assessment was complete, we prioritized the use cases based on potential to automate tasks that may be considered more mundane in nature.

A lot of detailed research went into not only potential tools but also into critical trends, best practices, and benchmarking. Other considerations we looked at were the opportunities and risks with external agency partners and vendors who use AI. The task force used its findings to develop guidelines, recommend tools, and share how-tos for incorporating AI effectively into our day-to-day work.

SCHALLER: At SAP, our strategy for AI-driven communication is twofold. For media monitoring, we've already been using an AI-based tool for sentiment analysis and strategic media monitoring since 2022. This enables us to gain real-time insights into public perception, track key media narratives, and proactively adjust our communication strategies.

For generative content creation and research, we're currently implementing our own AI creation tool developed by software developers at SAP. This tool is being trained on Global Communication data such as key messaging documents, strategy papers, press releases, etc. and is based on our inhouse SAP GenAI Hub, which offers a variety of language models to use. This hub was introduced in early 2023.

THE PHASED APPROACH TO AI AT SAP

› **Initial requirements workshop & communications-wide survey:** Identifying specific pain points and areas where AI could provide the most value. Communication colleagues showed the need for a tailored communications AI bot.

› **Introduction of a suite of AI-powered assistants:** Starting with a "generic bot", which will be able to answer research questions such as "What is our key messaging on XYZ business topic?" or "What were our earnings results from XYZ quarter?".

› **Pilot phase:** Redefining the AI models based on real-world usage. Ensuring the tool remains adaptable and aligned with our communicators' needs is a key focus.

› **Final phase:** Scaling AI adoption, adding more specialized assistants, and integrating them seamlessly into the workflows. Fostering a cultural change to ensure consistent and accurate information dissemination.

ROLKER: At Clariant and in the communication department, our approach to AI has been both strategic and pragmatic. Due to our existing digital infrastructure and the fact that most of our data is stored in the cloud, we had a solid data foundation to work with.

Our goal in communications was to enable AI to enhance productivity, automate repetitive tasks, and support content creation while maintaining high-quality communication standards. At the same time, we supported the introduction of Clarita, our AI-powered assistant, across the company. By giving the tool a relatable identity, we encouraged employees to engage with AI early on, lowering adoption barriers. At the same time, we launched several AI-driven communication projects, initially focusing on three key areas: content creation, image generation, and marketing automation. These projects quickly gained traction, and we scaled them up significantly.

A critical element of our strategy has been cross-functional collaboration. AI is not just a tool for communication – it impacts multiple business functions. Therefore, we closely align with IT, strategy, and business units to ensure AI adoption creates real business value.

UNLOCKING THE POTENTIAL

Can you share examples of early successes or promising use cases that you've observed?

ROLKER: We started with the goal to initiate two AI projects in 2024, but the enthusiasm within the team led us to launch around 20. The demand for AI-driven solutions within our department and across the company has been remarkable. We've seen immediate benefits in productivity, efficiency, and content quality.

AI now assists us in creating press releases, speeches, Q&As, and even info sheets for media interviews. We're currently developing a specialized AI agent that automates this text creation and will be designed to understand our corporate tone, preferred terminology, and even the communication style of our executives. AI-generated images also help us reduce reliance on stock photos, improving brand consistency and compliance while lowering costs. On top of that, AI will play a crucial role in marketing automation. Instead of manually managing customer engagement, AI will help us analyze user behavior, optimize campaigns, and personalize communication at scale.

One of the biggest signs of success is that our communication team has repositioned itself within the company. We're no longer just storytellers; we're enablers of digital transformation. AI allows us to contribute more strategically to business goals, such as lead generation, personalized marketing, and sales enablement.

EXEMPLARY USE CASES AT CLARIANT

Clarita – Clariant's AI-powered assistant

> **Integrated reporting:** The preparation of the integrated annual report is a complex project with a high workload and colleagues from different areas of the company, most of whom are not communication professionals. Clarita helps to reduce the workload and improve stylistic and semantic consistency by, for example, drafting early versions of chapters or breaking up long sections into shorter, more readable blocks. There are also plans to use Clarita as a chatbot to help readers navigate the report by providing contextual answers rather than requiring them to manually search the document.

> **Image creation:** At Clariant, stock images are often used. With 10,000 employees, keeping track of licenses is a challenge – leading to double payments or, worse, unlicensed use. AI-based image generation opens up new possibilities. A custom AI tool was trained on landscape and nature images. Based on the results, an internal solution has been developed with the IT department. The goal: generate compliant, on-brand images with simple prompts.

DUDA: AI can be a good starting point for ideation and inspiration, including thought starters and initial drafts of communications to get past "blank page syndrome" more quickly. At Goodyear, we find AI to be very helpful when you need different versions of a message; the tools are good at increasing or decreasing the complexity of content for various channels and audiences.

AI can also be a huge time saver when it comes to summarizing research, meeting notes or transcripts and distilling the information down into the critical themes that support strategic communications planning. For us, that's the key – using AI in ways that free up the time spent on non-value-added tasks so we can spend more time on strategic work.

SCHALLER: AI-powered content creation has been particularly effective for communicators at SAP for assisting in drafting press releases, briefing documents, and executive LinkedIn posts, ensuring consistency and efficiency. Media
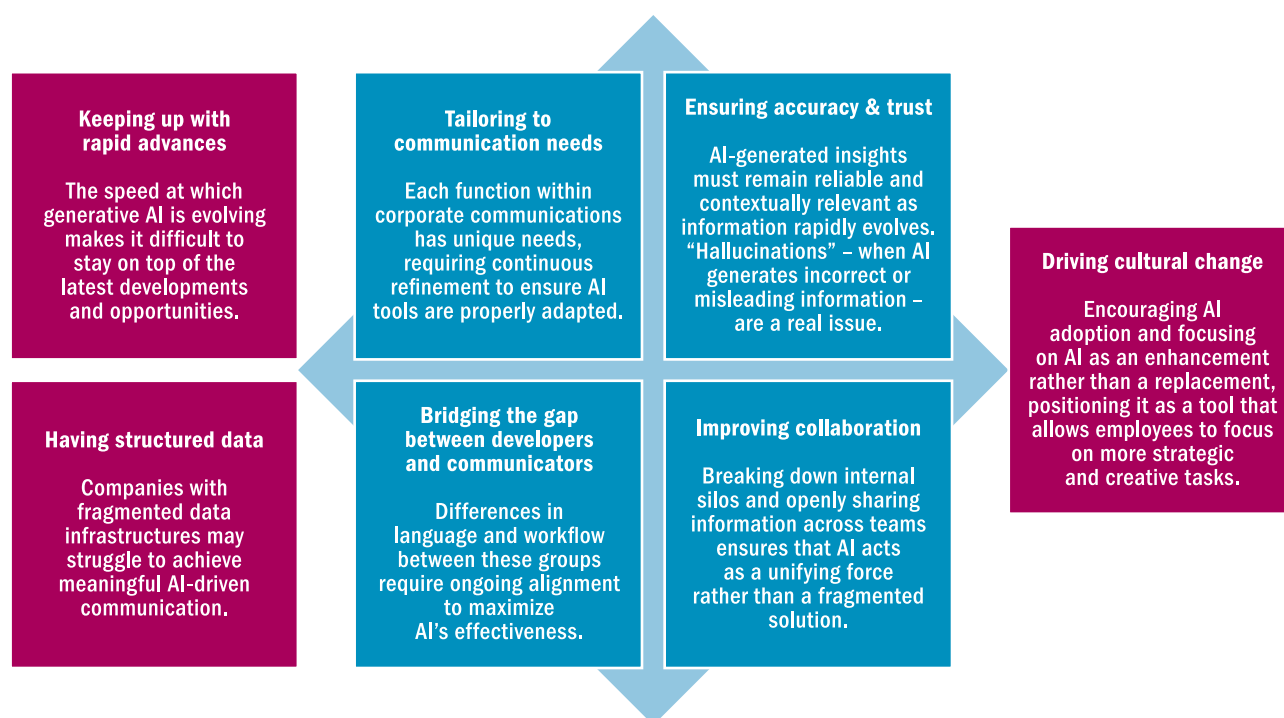
monitoring and sentiment analysis tools provide real-time insights into how SAP's brand and messages are perceived across various channels around the world.

Early results indicate improved efficiency, particularly in automating repetitive tasks such as briefing document preparation, media monitoring, and sentiment analysis. AI is helping us generate high-quality content while freeing up time for strategic initiatives. However, developing real-time data validation mechanisms is a critical focus in our next phase. AI must be able to "unlearn" outdated data as quickly as it learns new insights to prevent misinformation.

BARRIERS TO ADOPTING AI-POWERED COMMUNICATION

Based on insights from SAP, Clariant, and Goodyear, the most pressing hurdles to adopting AI-driven communication include:

Keeping up with rapid advances

The speed at which generative AI is evolving makes it difficult to stay on top of the latest developments and opportunities.

Tailoring to communication needs

Each function within corporate communications has unique needs, requiring continuous refinement to ensure AI tools are properly adapted.

Ensuring accuracy & trust

AI-generated insights must remain reliable and contextually relevant as information rapidly evolves. "Hallucinations" – when AI generates incorrect or misleading information – are a real issue.

Driving cultural change

Encouraging AI adoption and focusing on AI as an enhancement rather than a replacement, positioning it as a tool that allows employees to focus on more strategic and creative tasks.

Having structured data

Companies with fragmented data infrastructures may struggle to achieve meaningful AI-driven communication.

Bridging the gap between developers and communicators

Differences in language and workflow between these groups require ongoing alignment to maximize AI's effectiveness.

Improving collaboration

Breaking down internal silos and openly sharing information across teams ensures that AI acts as a unifying force rather than a fragmented solution.

ENGAGING PEOPLE

How are you ensuring that your team members are aligned with the shift to AI-driven communication?

SCHALLER: We've taken a self-learning approach at SAP, allowing individuals to explore AI at their own pace. We facilitate study groups where team members share the latest AI developments and best practices, ensuring continuous learning and collaboration. Given that we are a software company, many of our colleagues are already tech-savvy and eager to experiment with AI. Our guiding principle is that AI won't take your job – but someone who's good at using AI might.

We've found that most of our colleagues have a positive or neutral stance toward AI adoption. An initial survey among Global Communications colleagues revealed that 93% are either very positive, positive, or neutral regarding the impact of AI on their jobs. By fostering an open and supportive learning environment, we encourage everyone to explore AI's potential. Rather than enforcing adoption, we provide the necessary resources, support, and motivation to ensure all team members can leverage AI effectively in their daily work.

DUDA: We've made AI part of our intentional skill development at Goodyear by including updates and tutorials in our global communication team meetings, led by our own in-house experts and external guest speakers. We also share best practices and use cases through a series we call "AI in Action," which features specific examples from across the team that illustrate how they're using AI to be more efficient and productive.

Both initiatives support skill development and encourage our team members to own their experiences with AI. We want everyone to see AI is not something to be feared and that they should to jump in and see for themselves how it can further their creativity and effectiveness as communicators.

ROLKER: We've taken a proactive approach to AI upskilling. Training sessions, internal workshops, and hands-on projects help our team members become comfortable with AI tools. We also encourage experimentation – employees can test AI applications in their daily work without fearing mistakes.

Additionally, we integrate AI into our daily workflows gradually. Instead of overwhelming the team with sudden changes, we introduce AI solutions in phases. For example, we first used AI for draft writing before expanding to automated content generation. This step-by-step approach fosters confidence and adoption.

Communication and transparency are key. We openly discuss AI's strengths and limitations, ensuring that our team understands that AI is a supporting tool, not a replacement for human creativity and judgment. We also emphasize real-world impact. When employees see how AI reduces repetitive work and allows them to focus on high-value tasks, they become more willing to embrace it. Additionally, we highlight success stories from colleagues who've used AI to enhance their productivity or to create additional value for our businesses.

RISE OF AI-SAVVY COMMUNICATORS

Have you observed changes in the profiles or roles of communication professionals as AI becomes more integrated?

DUDA: It's less about new roles and more about changing the way we work on a day-to-day basis. If you leverage AI to be more efficient and effective, the time savings can really add up. From time saved searching for information, summarizing information, or writing a first draft, we know that integrating AI into our daily work lets us complete common tasks faster and have more time to think.

SCHALLER: We're seeing the rise of AI-savvy communicators, so professionals who can effectively leverage AI tools for strategic messaging are becoming key assets. Traditional communication roles are evolving to include elements of data analysis, AI prompt engineering, and digital strategy. Additionally, AI ethics advocates are emerging, ensuring AI-generated communication aligns with ethical guidelines and SAP's corporate values.

New role models are already emerging – those who can bridge the gap between technology and human storytelling. These professionals not only use AI effectively but also champion responsible AI adoption within corporate communication. Coming from media relations, there's one thing I don't think has changed: Comms will stay a people's business.

ROLKER: Of course, a shift to AI is only possible if you adapt your job profiles and acquire new skills. However, the mindset for this was already in place, enabling the entire team to embrace the change. Specifically, writing and storytelling remain crucial, but analytical and technical skills are gaining importance. Communicators who understand AI tools and can integrate them effectively into workflows are becoming highly valuable.

We're also seeing a shift in how communication teams interact with other departments. Traditionally, PR and marketing operated separately from IT and data analytics. Now, communicators need to collaborate closely with these functions to maximize AI's potential.

New role models are emerging – professionals who are not just great communicators but also AI-savvy strategists. The most successful teams are those that embrace AI as an enabler rather than seeing it as a threat. And most importantly, you can only win as a team. Collaboration not competition is the key to success.

CONTRIBUTORS

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BACKGROUND INFORMATION

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

STUDY HIGHLIGHTS: INSIGHTS ON GLOBAL RISKS, AI, AND CORPORATE STRATEGY

AUTHOR: MICHELLE WLOKA, MANAGING EDITOR

Understanding the future of corporate communication requires looking beyond its immediate boundaries. The following seven reports provide valuable insights not only from the field of communications, but also from adjacent disciplines such as management, journalism, and technology. Topics range from the transformative impact of AI on business and media to the reinvention of corporate strategy and the evolving challenges of journalism. All reports are based on research and provide food for thought for communication leaders.

Read the full report: Elsner, M., Atkinso, G., & Zahidi, S. (2025). Global Risks Report 2025. World Economic Forum. https://www.weforum.org/publications/global-risks-report-2025/

THE GLOBAL RISKS REPORT

Global risks are evolving rapidly, requiring decision-makers to manage both immediate crises and long-term uncertainties. Drawing on the insights of more than 900 experts from academia, business, government, and civil society, the World Economic Forum examines the severity, interconnectedness, and governance of global risks over three timeframes. The results suggest:

› Geopolitical, environmental, societal, economic, and technological uncertainties are undermining optimism. While 52% of experts see an uncertain short-term future, the 10-year outlook is even more concerning, with 62% predicting increasing turbulence and instability.

› State-based armed conflict has risen to the top of the list of current risks, reflecting growing national security concerns and worsening humanitarian crises. However, misinformation and disinformation are projected to be the most significant global risk by 2027.

› Inequality and social polarization are at the heart of the global risk landscape. These risks are expected to intensify over the next decade, with aging populations in countries such as Japan, South Korea, and Germany potentially exacerbating social and political instability.

> Extreme weather events remain the most pressing long-term concern. Biodiversity loss and ecosystem collapse have also worsened significantly, with younger generations expressing greater concern about environmental challenges than older age groups.

> Although the risks associated with AI and biotechnology remain underestimated in the short term, concern rises sharply in the 10-year risk rankings, with potential threats ranging from AI-driven disruptions to the misuse of gene editing and brain-computer interface technologies.

EUROPEAN COMMUNICATION MONITOR 2024/25

Contradictions, dualities, and paradoxes in corporate decision-making create tensions that force managers and organizations into difficult trade-offs. Based on in-depth interviews with chief communication officers from Europe's 300 largest companies, the report provides unique insights into emerging challenges for corporate communication and presents strategies to manage them:

> Organizational challenges (macro level): Companies must balance stakeholder expectations with corporate interests in an evolving sociopolitical and economic landscape. The study underscores the importance of scenario planning, an infrastructure of listening, and the development of diplomatic communication skills to manage reputational risk.

> Functional challenges (meso level): Communication departments face tensions between efficiency, innovation, and risk management, particularly regarding AI adoption. The report highlights the need for skill development and controlled experimentation to ensure responsible and effective AI integration.

> Personal challenges (micro level): CCOs struggle to balance personal development with the demands of a 24/7 job. As learning mostly occurs informally and self-referential today, the report calls for a more reflective professional discourse, as well as stronger connections between academia and practice to equip future communication leaders.

Read the full report: Zerfass, A., Buhmann, A., Laborde, A., Moreno, A., Romenti, S., & Tench, R. (2024). European Communication Monitor 2024. Managing tensions in corporate communications in the context of geopolitical crises, artificial intelligence, and managerial learning. EUPRERA. https://www.communicationmonitor.eu/

THE STATE OF THE CCO-PLUS

The role of chief communication officers (CCOs) is evolving to encompass responsibilities beyond traditional communication functions, signifying a transition towards a more integrated approach to corporate leadership. Drawing on insights from Fortune 1000 and Forbes Global 2000 companies, the *Observatory on Corporate Reputation (OCR)* has published a report which examines the emergence of "CCO-plus" roles, where communications leadership is combined with other strategic functions. The findings highlight:

> More CCOs are featured on company leadership pages, reflecting their increasing strategic role.

> CCOs are taking on additional responsibilities in HR, marketing, social impact/ESG, corporate affairs, brand/branding, public affairs, and investor relations.

> 32 different job functions have been identified alongside communications, indicating ongoing experimentation.

> New demands in skills and leadership for communication roles are reshaping talent management.

Read the full report: Carroll, C. (2025). The State of the CCO-Plus 2024. The Observatory om Corporate Communication. https://ocrnetwork.com/research/cco-pluswatch

AI INDEX REPORT

Artificial intelligence continues to advance rapidly, shaping industries, economies, and societies around the world. The *AI Index 2024 Report* published by the Stanford Institute for Human-Centered Artificial Intelligence tracks key trends in AI development, including technical progress, public perception, and geopolitical dynamics. The report is accompanied by raw data and an interactive tool that allows users to compare AI ecosystems in more than 30 countries. Key takeaways include:

> While AI has surpassed human capabilities in areas such as image classification, visual reasoning, and language understanding, it still struggles with complex challenges such as high-level mathematics, common sense reasoning, and strategic planning.

> The cost of training frontier AI models has skyrocketed. Estimates show that OpenAI's GPT-4 required $78 million in computational costs, while Google's Gemini Ultra reached $191 million.

> The United States leads the world in AI innovation. In 2023, US-based organizations produced 61 notable AI models, far outpacing the European Union's 21 and China's 15.

> Responsible AI evaluation lacks standardization. Major developers, including OpenAI, Google, and Anthropic use different metrics to evaluate AI safety and ethics, making it difficult to compare risks and limitations across models.

> AI increases worker productivity, but requires oversight. Studies show that AI enables faster task completion and improved output quality. However, misuse of AI can also lead to performance degradation if not managed carefully.

Read the full report: Maslej, N., Fattorini, L., Perrault, R., Parli, V., Reuel, A., Brynjolfsson, E., Etchemendy, J., Ligett, K., Lyons, T., Manyika, J., Niebles, J., Shoham, Y., Wald, R., & Clark, J. (2024). The AI Index 2024 Annual Report. Stanford University. https://aiindex.stanford.edu/report

TECH TRENDS

Technology-driven change is accelerating, reshaping industries, and redefining business strategies. *Deloitte's Tech Trends 2025* explores the key forces that will drive digital transformation over the next 18 to 24 months:

> Spatial computing, which merges the physical and digital world, is redefining digital interaction. Organizations are increasingly integrating augmented reality, virtual reality, and 3D modeling to improve decision-making, employee training, and customer engagement.

> AI adoption is moving beyond large language models. Organizations are exploring smaller, more specialized models for efficiency and accuracy. Advances in multimodal AI and AI-based simulations are enabling AI to not only generate insights, but also complete tasks.

> Companies are investing in hardware to meet the growing demand for computing resources. Personal computers embedded with AI chips will increase productivity by enabling offline AI processing, strengthening data privacy, reducing cloud computing costs, and ensuring long-term technological adaptability.

> AI is reshaping IT strategies. Organizations are using generative AI to automate software development, optimize IT operations, and enhance digital transformation. The shift from "human in charge" to "human in the loop" is changing the way technology teams approach engineering, finance, and innovation.

> Quantum computing presents a cybersecurity challenge. While full-scale quantum computers may be years away, their ability to break encryption requires immediate action because updating encryption practices is a lengthy process.
> Organizations are embedding AI into their core systems to improve efficiency, automation, and predictive capabilities. But while AI can simplify processes for users, it adds complexity at the architectural level, increasing the need for deep technical expertise.

Read the full report: Raskovich, K., Briggs, B., Bechtel, M., Burns, E., Ravinutala, A. & Buscaino, R. (2024). Tech Trends 2025. Deloitte Insights. https://www2.deloitte.com/us/en/insights/focus/tech-trends.html

JOURNALISM AND TECHNOLOGY TRENDS AND PREDICTIONS

The news industry faces mounting challenges as technological disruptions reshape the way audiences discover and consume information. Based on insights from 326 digital experts in 51 countries, this *Reuters Institute report* provides a comprehensive analysis of the challenges and opportunities for the news industry. Findings include:

> While many publishers have confidence in their own news organizations, broader confidence in journalism has sharply declined due to political polarization, increased attacks on the press, and media consolidation, all of which threaten editorial independence.
> 74% are concerned about a decline in search engine referral traffic, fearing that AI-generated summaries will reduce direct engagement with news sites. In response, many are looking to partner with AI platforms like ChatGPT and Perplexity to ensure visibility and revenue.
> While subscriptions (77%) remain the top priority, 36% of commercial publishers expect significant revenue from licensing deals with tech and AI companies. Product innovation is also rising, with many exploring new offerings in gaming and education.

Read the full report: Newman, N. & Cherubini, F. (2025). Journalism and Technology Trends and Predictions 2025. The Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism. https://doi.org/10.60625/risj-vte1-x706

> News organizations are increasingly adopting AI-powered personalization, including text-to-audio, AI-generated summaries, and multilingual translations. Over half are exploring AI-driven chatbots and search interfaces.
> Publisher sentiment toward X/Twitter has worsened, while Google Discover has emerged as a volatile but crucial traffic source. The industry remains divided on its platform dependence overall, with 31% aiming to cut ties and an equal proportion looking to strengthen them.
> The industry is divided on whether the influencer and creator economy benefits journalism – 27% view it as a threat, fearing traditional reporting will be marginalized, while 28% see opportunities to adopt new storytelling techniques and audience engagement strategies.

ANNUAL GLOBAL CEO SURVEY

The study, based on insights from 4,701 CEOs in 109 countries, explores how companies are adapting to transformative forces such as AI, sustainability, and shifting industry boundaries. The findings reveal both the potential and the challenges of reinvention in a rapidly evolving economic landscape:

> A third of CEOs report increased revenue and profitability from AI in the past year, and half expect further gains. While 13% have reduced headcount as a result of AI, 17% have increased headcount as a result of AI investment. Nearly half of CEOs are prioritizing the integration of AI into technology platforms and business processes over the next three years.

> Data suggests a strong link between sustainability efforts and higher profit margins. One in three CEOs say that climate-friendly initiatives have increased revenue, while two-thirds report either cost savings or no significant financial impact.

> 40% of CEOs report that their companies have expanded into new industries in the last five years. As industry boundaries blur, leaders must anticipate megatrends - including AI and climate change - and rethink their competitive positioning in evolving business ecosystems.

> Only 7% of revenue growth over the past five years has come from entirely new businesses, signaling a slow adaptation to market changes. Key barriers include rigid decision-making, limited resource reallocation, and the short tenure of many CEOs, which clashes with long-term transformation needs.

> Despite geopolitical tensions, nearly 60% of CEOs expect global economic growth to improve over the next year. However, 42% of CEOs believe their company won't be viable in a decade unless it fundamentally reinvents itself. However, confidence levels vary widely. German CEOs are the most pessimistic, citing weak demand and supply shortages, while CEOs in India and Argentina are the most optimistic about their domestic economies.

Read the full report: Moore, C., Boswell, L., Dekel, S., London, S. & Johnson, E. (2025). Reinvention on the edge of tomorrow. PwC's 28th Annual Global CEO Survey. https://www.pwc.com/gx/en/ceo-survey/2025/28th-ceo-survey.pdf

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THE ELGAR ENCYCLOPEDIA OF CORPORATE COMMUNICATION: A DUAL REVIEW

REVIEWERS: STEPHEN WADDINGTON, LEEDS BECKETT UNIVERSITY & SORA KIM, THE CHINESE UNIVERSITY OF HONG KONG

This 587-page reference work, edited by Klement Podnar, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia, describes itself as a comprehensive resource that captures the intricacies of corporate communication. The encyclopedia offers 87 short articles presenting key concepts and terms in corporate communication, marketing, business, and public relations, each including a concise definition and an overview of current research insights.

This review presents two different perspectives on the publication: a practitioner's view by Stephen Waddington from the United Kingdom and an academic assessment by Professor Sora Kim, Hong Kong.
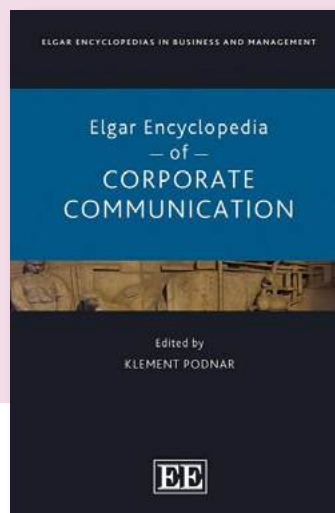
THE PRACTITIONER'S VIEW (STEPHEN WADDINGTON)

The Elgar series of encyclopedias in business and management set out to be the definitive reference works in their fields. It's a bold claim, but the *Elgar Encyclopedia of Corporate Communication* delivers on the promise and is quite unique.

The scale and breadth of the content is unlike any other contemporary book on corporate communication or public relations. It covers 87 topics across 11 broad themes over 578 pages, providing a comprehensive overview of modern corporate communication theory and practice. It is a tightly edited and well-produced book. The book leads with corporate communication theory but also provides bridges to other domains, notably management, psychology, sociology, and systems theory.

Each chapter is five or six pages long and follows a highly-structured format. It begins with clear definitions, discusses key theoretical arguments and implications for practice, and anticipates future developments. The sheer breadth and range of topics and editorial design have not compromised the quality or integrity of the content. The referencing is robust, providing an overview of the current literature and various arguments on each topic and theme. Each chapter provides a jumping-off point for further reading to gather a deeper perspective.

It's a firmly theoretical book, not practical one, written by an international community of more than 80 academic subject matter experts who research and write about corporate communications. The authors have a Western perspective, with most working in institutions in Europe and the US.

A closer look at the structure and focus of the book

The *Elgar Encyclopedia of Corporate Communication* provides a comprehensive overview of modern corporate communication. Its 11 interconnected themes cover theoretical foundations to practical applications and outcomes:

> **Theme I:** The encyclopedia begins with foundational theories, establishing the intellectual framework through key concepts like stakeholder theory and social constructionism.

> **Theme II:** This theoretical base leads naturally into Theme II, which explores the fundamental nature of organizations as entities, examining how they develop their identity, values, and culture.

> **Theme III:** Building on this understanding of the organization, Theme III delves into corporate branding – the process by which organizations present themselves to the world.

> **Theme IV:** This connects closely with Theme IV 's focus on corporate responsibilities, reflecting the modern imperative for organizations to consider their broader societal impact through social responsibility, transparency, and sustainable practices.

> **Theme V:** The narrative then takes a critical turn, examining corporate misbehavior and ethical challenges, from marketing myopia to corporate psychopaths.

> **Theme VI:** shifts to the practical challenges of managing change and crisis, offering insights into how organizations can navigate turbulent times and maintain their reputation.

> **Theme VII:** The encyclopedia's middle sections focus on the mechanics of communication, exploring communication processes.

> **Theme VIII:** Specific communication tools are detailed in Theme VIII.

> **Theme IX:** These technical aspects are then put into practice through examination of stakeholder engagement, showing how organizations build relationships with various audiences.

> **Theme X:** combines these elements by examining corporate communication outcomes and measuring the success of various communication strategies.

> **Theme XI:** The encyclopedia concludes with Theme XI, which explores negative corporate associations. This final section provides a balanced view by acknowledging the challenges and potential pitfalls organizations face in their communication efforts.

Connecting theoretical understanding with practical application

The encyclopedia maintains a coherent narrative that connects theoretical understanding with practical application whilst acknowledging the positive potential and inherent challenges of corporate communication. The structure allows readers to understand not just individual concepts but how they fit together in the larger context of corporate communication practice.

Practitioners interested in the science and theory of corporate communication should add the *Elgar Encyclopedia of Corporate Communication* to their bookshelves. It provides an accessible starting point to a broad range of corporate communication issues and topics, as any good encyclopedia should.

THE RESEARCHER'S VIEW (SORA KIM)

The *Elgar Encyclopedia of Corporate Communication* serves as a comprehensive resource that captures the breadth and depth of corporate communication, addressing its significance in a globalized and interconnected world. Authored by leading scholars and practitioners from diverse disciplines, including marketing, communication, public relations, and management, this encyclopedia underscores the interdisciplinary nature of corporate communication.

The diversity of contributors, spanning multiple countries and fields, enriches the work, offering a broad understanding of the subject. As a scholar in communication studies, I approached this encyclopedia with the goal of as-

sessing its relevance, inclusivity, and theoretical and practical implications for addressing contemporary challenges – such as stakeholder engagement, crisis management, and sustainability – in corporate communication.

Key themes and emerging trends in corporate communication

Authored by contributors from varied academic contexts, the encyclopedia reflects a well-rounded perspective on organizational challenges. Themes are presented through concise definitions of critical concepts, key findings that review existing scholarship, and identify research gaps and outlooks suggesting future research directions. The work emphasizes the strategic importance of corporate communication in building corporate identity, reputation, and stakeholder trust while mitigating negative corporate associations. Emerging issues like social influencer marketing, consumer complaining, and job disengagement highlight its relevance to addressing current global challenges.

Bridging theory, practice, and perspectives

The book stands out for its depth, breadth, and interdisciplinary focus. Its greatest strength lies in its ability to bridge theory and practice, making it a valuable resource for both academics and practitioners. The inclusion of recommended readings enhances its utility by guiding readers toward deeper exploration of specific topics. The thematic organization provides clarity, allowing readers to navigate complex subjects effectively. Topics such as corporate misbehavior, corporate responsibilities, and crisis communication resonate strongly in today's context, offering practical guidance for addressing real-world challenges.

An inspiring feature of the encyclopedia is its integration of institutional and stakeholder-centric perspectives. Corporate communication is presented not as an isolated function but as a strategic element interwoven with organization-stakeholder relationships. For instance, institutional perspectives are evident in discussions on themes like communication processes, tools, and outcomes, while stakeholder-centric perspectives are well presented in themes such as stakeholder engagement (e.g., pressure groups,

brand communities) and negative corporate associations (e.g., consumer complaining, skepticism). By addressing both perspectives, the encyclopedia provides a holistic view of corporate communication, encompassing the management of corporate reputation, identity, and image, alongside building positive relationships with stakeholders and incorporating their feedback.

A reflection on regional representation

While the encyclopedia demonstrates an admirable breadth of interdisciplinary and regional perspectives, its authorship does lean heavily toward European contributors. This focus highlights strong expertise in the region but limits representation from other areas, such as Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Notable contributions from scholars based in Asia, the United States, and Canada add valuable perspectives; however, a broader representation of scholars from diverse regions could further enhance the encyclopedia's global applicability and address culturally distinct communication practices.

Nevertheless, the encyclopedia aligns well with ongoing discussions in academic and professional circles, offering a robust framework for understanding the strategic and operational dimensions of corporate communication. It invites readers to think critically about how communication shapes organizational success and stakeholder relationships. Its emphasis on corporate social responsibility, digital transformation, and ethical communication aligns with current global priorities, making it a pivotal resource for advancing the field.

A vital resource for communication professionals

The Elgar Encyclopedia of Corporate Communication is a vital resource for scholars and students seeking a comprehensive understanding of corporate communication. Its interdisciplinary insights and theoretical and practical relevance make it a valuable reference. Future editions could benefit from greater cultural and regional diversity to enhance its global inclusiveness further. In sum, the encyclopedia is highly recommended for those seeking to understand and navigate the complexities of modern corporate communication.

REVIEWERS

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ABOUT THE BOOK

Podnar, K. (Ed.). (2024). Elgar encyclopedia of corporate communication. Edward Elgar. 578 pages. Available as hardback (ISBN: 9781802200867) or eBook (ISBN: 9781802200874) at https://doi.org/10.4337/9781802200874 or via bookshops.

EFFECTIVE FINANCIAL COMMUNICATION — A COMPARATIVE BOOK ANALYSIS

REVIEWERS: KAY BOMMER, GERMAN INVESTOR RELATIONS ASSOCIATION & ALEXANDER LASKIN, QUINNIPIAC UNIVERSITY

Drawing on research from finance, accounting, economics, psychology, and communication studies, this 318-page book by Christian Hoffmann and Nadine Strauß explores theories and empirical evidence on the effects and effectiveness of financial communication. It's open access and comprised of three main sections, exploring the fundamentals, impact, and management of financial communication and investor relations, offering insights for both academia and professional application.

This review presents two different perspectives on the publication: a practitioner's view by Kay Bommer, a long-time practitioner from Germany, and an academic assessment by Professor Alexander Laskin, USA.

THE PRACTITIONER'S VIEW (KAY BOMMER)

The field of investor relations (IR) has come a long way in recent decades. From a fledgling disclosure function, initially populated by a ragtag group of finance, legal, and PR professionals, IR has evolved into a strategic function with strong professional standards and a major role in creating corporate value. Today's capital markets are highly sophisticated, fast-paced, and internationally intertwined. As a long-time practitioner and managing director of DIRK, the Germany Investor Relations Association, I was thrilled to see that Hoffmann and Strauß, two high-profile investor relations scholars, have published the book *Effective Financial Communication*.

The book is comprised of three main sections. The first explores the foundations of financial communication. It explores the history and roots of IR, explains its key tasks, important tools, and its target audiences. Based on these help-

ful basics, the book then delves into the effects of financial communication, and systematically explores how and why IR contribute to corporate success. In short, it clearly explains the effects of financial communication. The third and final part applies these insights to the management of financial communication, covering the IR and PR department, the role of executives, and topics like digitalization and sustainability.

Financial communication uncovered: theory, evidence, and practical insights

This book may well be the most comprehensive summary of academic research into financial communication and IR to date. It reflects, systematizes, and explains insights from hundreds of studies from research fields as diverse

as communications, accounting, finance, law, sociology, and psychology. The authors' ability to integrate this sheer volume of interdisciplinary research into a compelling and understandable narrative is commendable. Practitioners will likely be surprised by the depth and breadth of the state of research into financial communication.

The book's focus on the effects of financial communication is of particular interest to practice. Which practitioner hasn't wondered if their work actually has an impact on their business, and why. While the various explanations of how financial communication affects capital markets, public discourse, individual investors, and corporate value may at times be quite academic, it's thrilling to see the richness of evidence on the impact of our profession. The authors dive deeply into psychological, economic, and sociological theoretical accounts of financial communication effects. However, each chapter ends on a helpful bullet-point summary of insights for practice, which is both concise and insightful.

Similarly, the third section of the book focusing on the management of the financial communication function is of significant interest to practice. The authors have themselves contributed much to the state of research on these matters. Accordingly, the book offers unique insights into how financial communication can and should be optimized for effectiveness across departments and management levels. Many of the insights offered in this section challenge the state of practice which is often shaped by resource constraints, legal requirements, and ad-hoc problem solving. From the perspective of the German Investor Relations Association, it would be great if we could contribute to making the book's recommendations common practice in our field.

Effective Financial Communication is less of a primer on IR, meant to help novices gain a footing in the field, but rather it offers rich and deep insights into how communication shapes capital markets and corporate value that will be of particular interest to more experienced practitioners. Those wondering about the impact of their work and seeking a sound understanding of the effects of investor relations will find an engaging scholarly account in this book. Beyond practice, I'm sure it will also be tremendously helpful to students and researchers interested in financial communication as it offers a unique summary of the state of research.

A challenging but inspiring read

Effective Financial Communication is a challenging, but inspiring and enlightening read for those seeking a sound understanding of the financial communication function and its impacts. Practitioners entering the field will benefit particularly from the initial section of this book. More experienced colleagues will enjoy the depth of reflection on financial communication effects and effectiveness in its subsequent sections. As noted, this book will likely be a must-read for those studying and research IR in the future.

THE RESEARCHER'S VIEW (ALEXANDER LASKIN)

In today's intricate financial landscape, effective communication is paramount. *Effective Financial Communication* by Hoffmann and Strauß addresses this crucial need, exploring the multifaceted nature of financial communication and investor relations. Given that both authors are European professors, based in Germany and Switzerland respectively, the book provides what is arguably the most comprehensive and insightful account of the financial communication profession in Europe, reflecting the specific regulatory and cultural contexts of the region. Drawing on insights from diverse disciplines, the book aims to bridge the gap between theory and practice. My review examines the book from an academic perspective, focusing on its theoretical underpinnings and contributions to research in this field.

Boundary spanning theory as a key asset

A key strength of the book is its interdisciplinary approach, integrating insights from finance, accounting, economics, psychology, and communication studies. This comprehensive perspective provides a nuanced understanding of the complexities of financial communication. The authors effectively synthesize existing research on topics like stakeholder capitalism, narrative construction, and agenda setting within the context of financial markets. The

historical overview of financial communication also offers valuable context. The detailed exploration of the role of narratives and equity storytelling is particularly insightful and offers practical guidance for crafting compelling corporate narratives. As a product of the authors' deep engagement with the European academic landscape (Germany and Switzerland), this work stands as a uniquely comprehensive analysis of the financial communication field in Europe and all over the world.

A significant contribution of the book lies in its application of boundary spanning theory to financial communication. The authors effectively explain how financial communication professionals act as boundary spanners, bridging the gap between organizations and their financial stakeholders. They highlight the tensions inherent in this role, such as the potential for conflicting loyalties and the need for cognitive and cultural alignment with both internal and external networks. The book's discussion of how boundary spanning facilitates information flow, reduces information asymmetry, and contributes to better alignment between organizational performance and stakeholder expectations is particularly insightful. The authors' exploration of the role of relationship quality in boundary spanning, drawing on concepts like social capital and network theory, adds another layer of depth to the analysis. They effectively illustrate how strong relationships can facilitate the exchange of valuable information and contribute to more effective financial communication. ns inherent in this role, such as the potential for conflicting loyalties and the need for cognitive and cultural alignment with both internal and external networks. The book's discussion of how boundary spanning facilitates information flow, reduces information asymmetry, and contributes to better alignment between organizational performance and stakeholder expectations is particularly insightful. The authors' exploration of the role of relationship quality in boundary spanning, drawing on concepts like social capital and network theory, adds another layer of depth to the analysis. They effectively illustrate how strong relationships can facilitate the exchange of valuable information and contribute to more effective financial communication.

However, while the book touches upon various aspects of digital evolution, a deeper exploration of the digital landscape and its influence on financial communication would have been beneficial. For example, the book fails to address the new financial instrument such as cryptocurrency and cryptocoins and what they bring to the area of financial communication. The profound impact of decentralized finance (DeFi), blockchain technology, and the increasing prevalence of cryptocurrencies like Bitcoin and Ethereum make such discussion a necessity. This omission is particularly striking given the growing interest in and market capitalization of these digital assets. For example, the book could have examined how traditional financial communication strategies need to be adapted to engage with crypto-native audiences and how companies are navigating the complex interplay between traditional finance and the decentralized world.

Additionally, the book addresses relationship management with an impressive level of detail but further discussion of the ethical considerations involved in building and maintaining trust with financial stakeholders would be valuable, especially in the context of emerging technologies and the potential for market manipulation with deepfakes and the synthetic media. Finally, while the book effectively integrates various theoretical frameworks, a more explicit articulation of a unifying theoretical model for financial communication could have strengthened the analysis.

Overall, the book contributes significantly to the corporate communication field by providing a structured framework for understanding and analyzing financial communication. Its focus on empirical evidence and practical implications makes it a valuable resource for both academics and practitioners.

A valuable resource

Effective Financial Communication is a valuable resource for academics, students, and practitioners seeking a comprehensive understanding of this dynamic field, whether in Europe or in other parts of the world. I highly recommend it for those interested in the strategic role and impact of financial communication in today's capital markets.

REVIEWERS

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ABOUT THE BOOK

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