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Research Report

Communications Trend Radar 2022. Language awareness, closed communication, gigification, synthetic media & cybersecurity

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COMMUNICATIONS TREND RADAR 2022



Language
Awareness



Closed
Communication



Gigification



Synthetic
Media



Cybersecurity



ACADEMIC SOCIETY
FOR MANAGEMENT & COMMUNICATION

An initiative of the Günter Thiele Foundation

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EDITORIAL

Communication leaders need a profound knowledge of all future trends that will impact their work. Identifying and evaluating the developments that will really matter isn't easy. Reviewing normative recommendations by consultants and topics in relevant publications reveals little consistency. This comes as no surprise. Clarity on upcoming issues and their significance can only be achieved by applying sound methodology and investing a great deal of time and effort. The Academic Society for Management & Communication has taken this route and distilled resources from renowned universities and leading corporations. The annual *Communications Trend Radar* identifies core trends from society, business management, and technology that have the potential to fundamentally change communications.

A glimpse back to our previous study twelve months ago confirms the importance of recognizing trends early on. We predicted that in 2021 *denialists* – people who reject facts and scientific evidence – would gain more importance in the stakeholder set. One year on, many employers are having a tough time with anti-vaxxers. *Voice interaction*, one of the tech trends on our watchlist last year, is taking off. Around 30% of users in the US, UK and Germany now use voice assistants on a daily basis. *Sustainable communications*, another trend from 2021, has also been on the rise recently. Several companies, such as a Hamburg power utility, have started measuring the ecological footprint of their marketing communications activities – and recommended others to follow suit.

This retrospective emphasizes that it's essential for communication leaders to become aware of future developments, understand how they could affect daily practices in their organizations, and seize the opportunities they offer. The *Communications Trend Radar* concentrates on trends in related fields of business management, technology, and society. These are



The Communications Trend Radar research team (left to right): Stefan Stieglitz, Daniel Ziegele, Sünje Clausen, and Ansgar Zerfass

usually more difficult to grasp for communicators than developments within the communications sector itself.

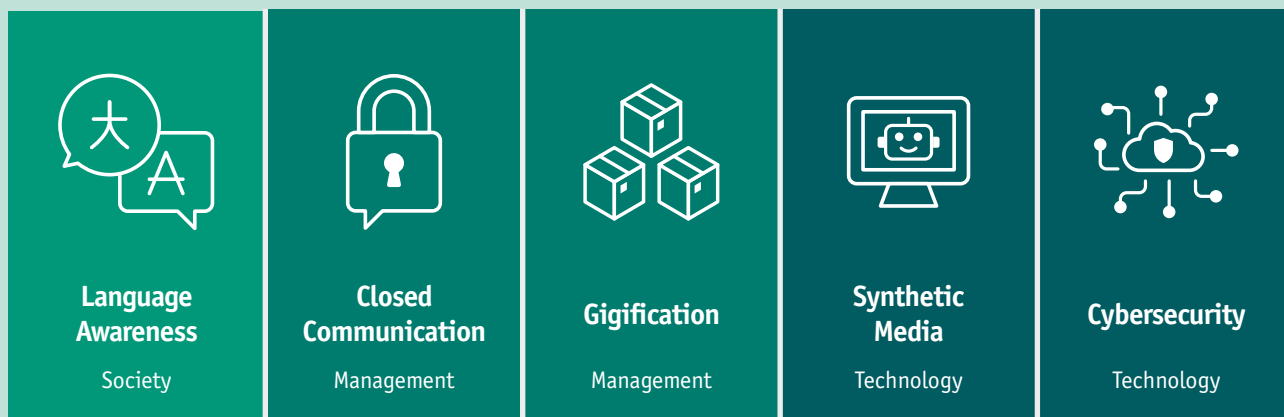
A team of researchers at the German universities of Leipzig and Duisburg-Essen is constantly observing emerging trends. We scanned hundreds of the most recent business and academic publications, selected the most relevant topics, and scored them according to their impact on corporate communications. As a result, we identified five trends for the *Communications Trend Radar 2022* that have to potential to change communications profoundly or that offer new opportunities for communicators to position themselves as thought leaders.

We would like to thank Sünje Clausen and Daniel Ziegele for their research, our corporate partners who provided insights on the trends, and Karen Berger for communicating this study.

Ansgar Zerfass

Stefan Stieglitz

THE MOST RELEVANT TRENDS FOR CORPORATE COMMUNICATIONS IN 2022



METHODOLOGY

The Communications Trend Radar is an applied research project focusing on trends that impact corporate communications. It was initiated by the Academic Society for Management & Communication, in collaboration with Leipzig University and the University of Duisburg-Essen. Starting in 2020, a new edition of the Communications Trend Radar has been published annually. The overarching goal is to help communication leaders to prepare for trends that look set to influence their work.

A **trend** refers to developments which are predicted to unfold over several years and have a more lasting impact than short-lived fashions and hypes. Such trends may stem from practices in disciplines adjacent to corporate communications or from scientific research translating into practice. Therefore, the Communications Trend Radar specifically focuses on current professional and academic discourses in the areas of management, technology, and society. These areas are monitored and assessed regarding their possible relevance for communication professionals. For each of these areas, trends were understood as follows:

- **Society:** Trends emerging in different domains of public communication, opinion formation, and values that might change people's attitudes and

behavior, and affect expectations regarding businesses, their activities, and their communication.

- **Management:** Trends in strategic management and organizational design that communication professionals should be aware of.
- **Technology:** Technological developments that could either impact corporate communications or be used by communication professionals.

RESEARCH PROCESS

- 1 **Sources & screening:** First, we selected information sources which provide relevant insights into the professional discourse in the areas of management, technology, and society. These sources primarily included recent publications from scientific journals and conferences in the focus areas as well as selected newspapers (e.g., The Economist), magazines (e.g., Harvard Business Review), social news sites (e.g., Reddit Science), blogs and websites (e.g., The Next Web), whitepapers, and corporate trend reports. Sources were included based on their academic reputation (impact scores, rankings) within their field or, in the case of non-academic sources, their general reputation and website traffic (Alexa Internet).

2 Trend profiles: Each potential trend was systematically documented in a trend profile consisting of a brief description and several criteria estimating the trend's relevance to corporate communications. Specifically, we assessed the impact of the trend on the function (e.g., governance, goals, competencies), processes (e.g., platforms, formats, stakeholder interaction), and management (e.g., content processes, cost structures) of corporate communications. We also considered the extent to which a trend offers communication leaders an opportunity to raise their profile within the company. In total, fifteen trend profiles were compiled during this phase.

3 Scoring: Based on the criteria detailed in the trend profiles, a scoring method was derived to rate each of the trends. Scoring was conducted individually by a total of six researchers and members of the Academic Society involved in the Communications Trend Radar project. Based on the ratings and qualitative feedback on the trends, twelve trends were selected for further consideration.

4 Selection process: These twelve trends were first discussed among the Communications Trend Radar team at an online workshop in July 2021. Each team member voted individually for the top trends in the areas of management, technology, and society. We proposed five trends for 2022 based on the outcome of this process.

5 Verification: These trends were examined further and later discussed with communication leaders during a workshop in November 2021.

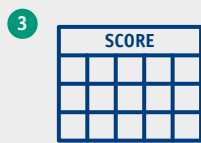
6 Report: All trends were analyzed and described in more detail in this publication.

Outlook: The trend selection process will be restarted in 2022 for the third time to identify the most relevant trends for corporate communications in 2023. Furthermore, three of the five trends for this year – language awareness, closed communication, and synthetic media – will be examined in more detail. A brief description of these research projects can be found on p. 36.

Selection process for trends in the Communications Trend Radar 2022



1 Search for trends in international professional and academic discourses



3 Scoring process to evaluate trends



5 Discussion with corporate partners

2021

2 Systematic documentation in trend profiles

4 Workshop to select most relevant trends

2022

6 Publication of the Communications Trend Radar



LANGUAGE AWARENESS

Valuing and embracing the diversity of language



AT A GLANCE

- ▶ **Language awareness** describes consciousness of linguistic differences and sensitivity in the use of language.
- ▶ Due to rising cultural sensitivity in many societies, **language use** as part of most communication instruments is becoming **increasingly contested**. Specifically, higher expectations in terms of **diversity and inclusion** require a conscious, sensitive use of language.
- ▶ In some countries like Germany and the United States, **debates are heated** and rather judgmental.
- ▶ Communication managers will have to meet the expectations of **different stakeholders and cultures** while keeping in mind **content and usability**.
- ▶ Organizations should consider empirical insights rather than personal opinions and listen carefully to their stakeholders before determining their individual approach to language awareness.

THE POWER OF LANGUAGE

After decades of research, the scientific consensus is that language has existed for more than 40,000 years, developing continuously throughout this period. Over the course of thousands of years, language has become highly complex and diverse. According to UNESCO, there are currently almost 6,500 languages worldwide. Whether English, German, Hindi or Xhosa, the importance of language should still not be underestimated. Language is regarded as the “mirror of the nation” (Friedrich Schiller) and the “key to the world” (Wilhelm von Humboldt). It’s said to have a considerable influence on our mindset and our perception of the world. For communicators, language is above all their key communication tool. It facilitates understanding and enables action to be coordinated among different entities (Habermas, 1984).

WHEN WORDING BECOMES MORE RELEVANT THAN CONTENT

In recent years, new debates have emerged around language. Two popular examples are political correctness and gender-sensitive language. The objective of **political correctness** is to avoid offending specific groups of people (Brilling, 2015). **Gender-sensitive language** aims at the cognitive inclusion of different genders and weakening biases in mental representations (Horvath & Sczesny, 2016).

But **language criticism** is drawing ever wider circles. Not only linguists and professional communicators in journalism and organizational communications, but also amateur language critics are getting in on the debate. A “clash of cultures” emerges in the comments sections of newspapers and corporate intranets, at team meetings or the lunch table. The variety of viewpoints leads to disagreement among advocates and opponents. Quite often, the focus of the discussion shifts from the actual content to wording and phrasing – or from what’s said to how it’s said. Debates are characterized by strong emotions, polarization, and stigmatization, especially in the German-speaking countries (Klug, 2020).

Yet, **language awareness** in its original understanding actually means pretty much the opposite. It’s not about criticizing language use, but about intelligently applying words and cognitive frameworks. The concept was first developed in language education and applied linguistics, and has since found its way into various disciplines (Fairclough, 2014). The Association for Language Awareness defines language awareness as “explicit knowledge about language, and conscious perception and sensitivity in language learning, language teaching and language use” (Figueras, 2017, p. 186). Goals include creating interest in language and acceptance of language diversity.

WHY DOES LANGUAGE AWARENESS UPSET SO MANY PEOPLE?

Efforts towards politically correct and diversity-sensitive language share a desire to reduce discrimination and bias. These intentions are hard to criticize. According to a recent survey, 35% of companies surveyed in Germany already use gender-sensitive language in external communications and 25% in internal communications (ifo Institute, 2021). However, these decisions are heavily debated. Most recently, in addition to outrage on social media platforms, legal action has been taken by employees against language guidelines. But why do people get so worked up about them?

- **Broad rejection of language change:** There is an accompanying fear of forced language change. Denialists (see our Communications Trend Radar 2021 report) may consider this as a manifestation of a totalitarian state attempting to control the population’s mindset through language manipulation like “Newspeak” in George Orwell’s dystopian novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Here, however, a distinction must be made between language control and language criticism. Language control describes a deliberate attempt by a state or organization to influence public language use. Language criticism, however, follows the goal of improving language (e.g., the basic idea of gender-sensitive

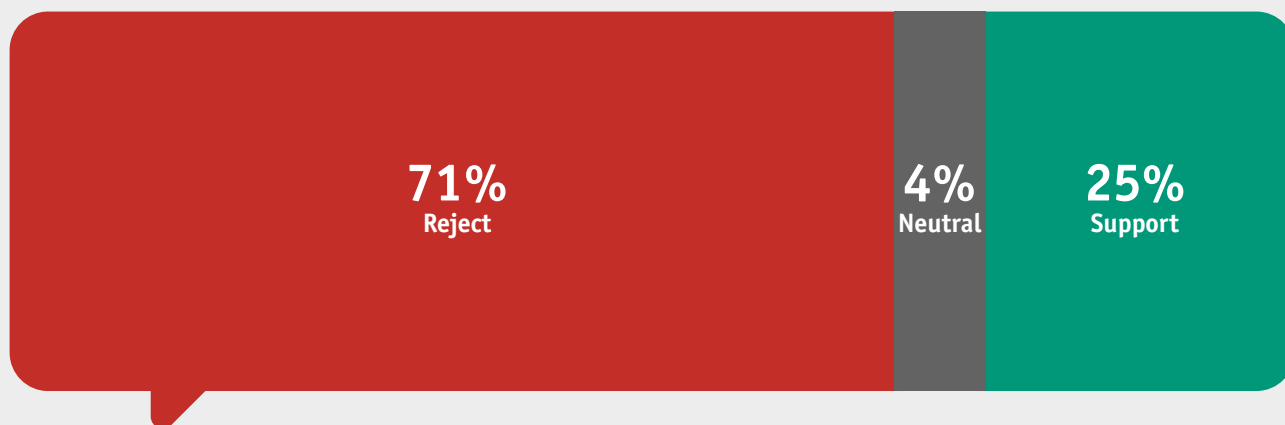
language). Despite this distinction, rejection is high – over 70% of Germans are against gender-inclusive language according to Politbarometer, a representative survey by Germany’s ZDF TV channel (ZDF 2021, see graphic below).

- ▶ **The nature of linguistic criticism:** Language researchers have analyzed the nature of linguistic criticism presented in debates about political correctness and gender-sensitive language. In the current debate, criticism can be divided into three types: dogmatism, moralism, and meliorism (see graphic on p. 9). In the German-speaking world, the debate is particularly intense, with dogmatic and moral criticism dominating (Klug, 2020). As a result, supporters and advocates are suspected of being moralizers or wiseacres. Although hardly any countries have introduced language bans, fears of a “language police” are brewing. A supposedly well-intentioned and sensitive use of language can be misinterpreted as a violation of common practices and rules.
- ▶ **The degree of stigmatization:** Political correctness and gender-sensitive language have become

buzzwords in their own right, with all underlying concepts shortened and simplified. Quite often, many attitudes are subsumed under these buzzwords. For example, people who are for or against gender-neutral language are often attributed certain political viewpoints. Given this stigmatization, the question is no longer about which language option should be used, but about how progressive or conservative someone is (Klebusek et al., 2016).

- ▶ **The lack of guidance:** Discussions about language are often based on personal opinions rather than facts. Presumably, this is partly because little empirical knowledge is available on the expectations of specific audiences and stakeholders, with no large-scale surveys or long-term studies to provide guidance. Experiments on the advantages and disadvantages of gender-inclusive language offer initial insights: For example, using a gender-fair language when describing professionals leads to a higher proportion of respondents realizing that the person is a woman (Kollmayer et al., 2018). Making the situation even more difficult is the fact that the 6,500 or more languages worldwide vary

Gender sensitive-language: a debate with little shades of grey



Current debates often lack consensus. A few supporters of gender-sensitive language are opposed by a large number of opponents. This is also shown by first representative surveys such as the ZDF Politbarometer (July 2021) in Germany. Of the respondents, 25 percent support the idea, while 71 percent reject it. Neutral voices are almost missing - only 4 percent have no or a neutral opinion.

significantly. For example, Finnish and Chinese are considered gender-neutral languages in which gender is already relegated to the background (Hellinger & Bußmann, 2003). The lack of international orientation is highlighted by the diverging requirements among users, technology, and the law.

- ▶ **Amateur language critics:** The aforementioned amateur language critics who try to distinguish between “right” and “wrong” dominate the debate, while “real” experts (linguists and language historians) are hardly heard and not credited for their expertise.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR COMMUNICATION LEADERS AND PROFESSIONALS

The reasons identified above contribute to the fact that language awareness in its current form feels exhausting and confusing for most people. In companies, language as a communication tool is the domain of corporate communications. What can those responsible for communication contribute to improve language awareness, i.e., by raising consciousness and acceptance of linguistic diversity?

- ▶ **Take a stance based on empirical insights:** Communicators should detach themselves from emotions and personal opinions. The aim shouldn't be to participate in the culture war and the fundamental debate, but to collect and weigh up logical arguments. This isn't a simple undertaking because the subject matter is confusing, with arguments ranging from equality to censorship. What's more, content and usability play a role and should also be taken into consideration. The practicality of individual solutions often tends to be pushed into the background amid all the emotions.
- ▶ **Listen to your stakeholders:** As well as being spoken, language must also be heard. Monitoring and listening have been an integral part of corporate communications for years. In times of fundamental debates about language, however, it's even more important to listen carefully to your stakeholders and audiences. Only those who know their target groups also understand how to address them. What drives individual groups? How do my employees feel about inclusive language? Are there differences between journalists and customers in terms of preferences?

Three common types of language criticism

Dogmatism

Dogmatism is characterized by strongly asserting opinions and rejecting all other views.

Moralism

Moralism refers to judgments about what is morally right and wrong.

Meliorism

Meliorism describes the desire to make the world better through human improvement.

In linguistic debates about political correctness or inclusive language, these types overlap. For example, changes in wording are intended to make language fairer and more inclusive while debates are based on strong opinions and moral considerations.

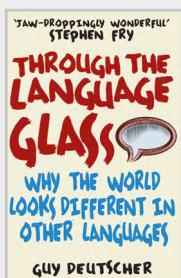
Many companies are already addressing these questions proactively by initiating dialogue, for example, in the form of employee surveys or moderated discussion forums on the intranet. The answer to language use doesn't always have to be a one-fits-all solution – partly because opinions differ widely. Instead of corporate language guidelines for all kinds of internal and external communications, organizations should be able to adapt language use to cultural differences. Due to the ever-increasing technological possibilities, the extent to which individualized approaches can be realized on a personal level can also be examined.

- ▶ **Persevere and be patient:** If companies want to change their language use, they should plan for the long haul. Language is just one piece in the puzzle of building mutual trust, addressing anti-discrimination, and promoting diversity and inclusion. Especially diversity and inclusion are

a marathon rather than a sprint. Quick reactions and interventions may do more to harm credibility than they do to promote awareness. We're talking about "a long-term change management and learning project with cultural change as the ultimate goal" (Wolfgruber et al., 2021, p. 23). Communication managers should also be prepared for critical counter-voices. Companies should carefully determine their standpoint and stand up for the decision they have made.

Ultimately, linguistics and language history point out that language change has always existed and always will. Language isn't a rigid construct, but socially negotiated. When considering language awareness, there should be no right or wrong, good or bad, but an acceptance of linguistic diversity. And despite all the heated debate, we shouldn't forget that maintaining harmony among one's own workforce or even in society is important, and that stability is a value in itself.

READING RECOMMENDATIONS



Guy Deutscher: Through the Language Glass (2011)

Language shapes our thinking and our perception. The Israeli linguist Guy Deutscher illustrates this by using the example of mother tongues. He elaborates numerous examples to describe the mother tongue as a lens through which we see the world.



George Orwell: Nineteen Eighty-Four (1949)

George Orwell turns the idea that language shapes our thinking around in his famous novel Nineteen Eighty-Four. He describes a fictitious, totalitarian state that tries to control the thoughts of the population by manipulating language. The idea is that people shouldn't even be able to think of rebelling because they lack the words to do so.

FOUR THOUGHTS ON LANGUAGE AWARENESS



» The increasingly sophisticated use of our main tool – our language – is a real challenge facing us. It must be seen alongside the core communication challenges we already have, and I think this makes the job incomparably more complex. «

Prof. Christof Ehrhart, Executive Vice President Corporate Communications & Governmental Affairs, Bosch

» Moving from current language topics like political correctness and gender sensitivity to diversity and inclusion is of high relevance for us – especially as a consumer-centric company. We've already taken some steps by raising awareness and talking to different internal and external stakeholders. However, we see that more efforts and a constant exchange are necessary to gain further insights into how people – including our own employees – want to be addressed.«

Anke Schmidt, Vice President Corporate Communications & Government Relations, Beiersdorf



» To me, openness, listening, and empathizing are key. In this context, it's important to have shared corporate values that are non-negotiable and binding for everyone. Within this framework, we then make adaptations depending on the cultural contexts, which are also expressed in the language we use. «

Dr. Nina Schwab-Hautzinger, Senior Vice President Corporate Communications & Government Relations, BASF

» In the end, linguistic sensitivity is also an expression of more cultural sensitivity. That's part of our job as communicators, and we embrace it. «

Carsten Tilger, Senior Vice President Corporate Communications & Public Affairs, Henkel



CLOSED COMMUNICATION

A shift from public to closed media environments



AT A GLANCE

- ▶ Closed communication describes communication **via private channels and platforms** that are only accessible to selected individuals or groups.
- ▶ The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the **retreat into the private sphere**. Private messaging services like Telegram are popular examples of closed communication using partly hidden platforms.
- ▶ As a result, **media use is shifting** from public to private media environments. For communicators, more and more interactions between stakeholders are becoming invisible.
- ▶ On the other hand, **new opportunities** are emerging, for example, for community management and employee engagement.

COVID-19 AND THE RETREAT INTO THE PRIVATE SPHERE

“Retreat into the private sphere” – this could be a suitable headline to describe the beginnings of the COVID-19 pandemic. People were encouraged to stay at home to protect themselves and others. Instead of being in the office, many found themselves working from home. School turned into home schooling, while the living room was transformed into a gym. For many weeks, people’s own four walls were their entire world. Consequently, communication was also exclusively mediated by digital platforms. Colleagues and clients met in virtual spaces provided by Zoom, Microsoft Teams, and the like. And instead of going to the movies, Netflix etc. were the main means of entertainment. In addition to video conferencing platforms, the importance of closed communication environments – especially messaging services such as WhatsApp, Telegram, WeChat, Facebook Messenger, and Slack – increased enormously among private and professional users.

CLOSED COMMUNICATION – THE SWITCH TO PRIVATE MEDIA CHANNELS

Closed communication describes conversations and the **exchange of information via private channels and platforms** that are only accessible to selected people. These are usually messaging services where people can chat with each other, send audio messages, and share media content. Instead of using a newsfeed, exchange takes place one-on-one or within specific groups.

A representative survey of online use among the German population by ARD and ZDF (Germany’s largest public broadcasters) shows that the importance of messaging services has increased by more than a third during the last twelve months. 71% of respondents now use such **messaging services** on a daily basis – compared to just 63% before the pandemic in 2019. By contrast, Facebook, the largest social media platform, is used daily by only 15% of Germans – a figure which is dwindling, for in 2019, one in five still scrolled through their Facebook newsfeed

every day (Beisch & Koch, 2021). The “retreat into the private sphere” is pulling audiences away from not only traditional media but also social media.

FIVE REASONS WHY CLOSED COMMUNICATION HAS INCREASED

A lot of people have discovered the benefits of closed communication environments. Messaging services like Telegram are often labeled as dark social, but this falls far short of the mark. We see five main reasons why closed communication is on the rise:

- 1 Changing patterns of media use:** Communication and media use has changed considerably due to the impact of the mobile internet, social media channels, and messaging apps. Letters and phone calls are passé; chatting is the way to go. Four out of five people in Germany use messaging services at least weekly, as the ARD/ZDF online study cited above shows. In the 14–49 age group, it’s almost everyone. The youngest age group in particular has grown up texting instead of calling or ringing the doorbell. Chatting is convenient because it’s quick, can be done at the same time as something else, and requires little effort. This is in sharp contrast to phone calls: *The New York Times* and *Forbes* magazine write that Gen Z often don’t even answer calls because they perceive it as crossing a line. A study by bankmycell even found that cell phone ringing causes anxiety (phone phobia) in four out of five young people. Times have changed, and so has media use.
- 2 The evolving media landscape:** Simply considering the change in media use would be one-sided, because the media landscape has also changed significantly over the decades. Thanks to the internet and mobile devices, media products and services are now available anytime and anywhere (Višnovský & Radošinská, 2017). Then again, trust in media, whether via search engines, traditional media, owned media, or social media, is at an all-time low (Edelman, 2021). The Reuters Institute

» *If you think about the trend towards closed communication even further, it would mean the end of the public sphere as we know it. And that's a huge challenge for our profession.* «

Prof. Christof Ehrhart, Bosch

for Study in Journalism publishes the *Journalism, Media, and Technology Trends and Predictions* annually. In recent years, trends have included the rise of paywalls, growth in hyper-partisan opinion-led channels and podcasts (meaning special and niche topics) – and shifts to closed networks and community groups (Newman, 2022). Fragmentation along the lines of specific interests and opinions can also encourage people to exchange information in communities with people who share the same interests.

3 Concerns about data privacy: A special feature explaining the popularity of messaging services is that they offer more privacy in terms of data protection. For example, messaging apps such as WhatsApp and Telegram use end-to-end encryption. This means that messages are encrypted by the sender and can only be decrypted by the intended recipient. Lack of trust is another factor encouraging closed communication groups. The social media industry is divided among just a handful of players. Meta alone, the recently renamed Facebook group, controls much of the market with Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp. In addition, with Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube having been hit by a series of security leaks and data protection disputes, many users now seek independent solutions that put data protection and privacy first. According to a 2019 Cisco survey, around one-third of adults “care about privacy, are willing to act, and have done so by switching companies or providers over data or data-sharing policies.” (Redman & Waitman, 2020) This is where closed communication services come into play. They are mostly designed for data protection and data avoidance and, unlike most competing products, don't require a phone number

or other personal information to use them. Well-known examples include Telegram, Signal, Threema, Discord, and Wire.

4 The dynamics of deplatforming: It isn't just data protection problems that have caused the major social media platforms to lose users in the past. Most recently, Facebook and Twitter have also discarded users through deplatforming. Deplatforming describes the permanent exclusion of users and groups by deleting the profiles of those who've violated platform rules. The most prominent example is Donald Trump, whose profiles on both Facebook and Twitter have been permanently deleted (the former US president now plans to launch his own social media platform called Truth Social). The aim is to remove the reach and thus the influence of individuals or groups. However, the effect is thought to be limited because those concerned simply move to a new digital home (e.g., Telegram) and their supporters and other readers follow them (Rogers, 2020). In the process, there is criticism that freedom of expression is being stifled and that those involved will become further radicalized in private (Urman & Katz, 2020). As a matter of fact, deplatforming has led to the substantial growth of closed communication platforms in the recent past.

5 Hotbed for COVID-19 denialists: COVID-19 denialists have discovered the benefits of closed communication platforms. During the pandemic, conspiracy narratives have mushroomed (Peters & Besley, 2020). Denialists of the pandemic and conspiracy theorists have joined forces on

messaging services such as Telegram to reinforce their beliefs. They cite unreliable sources and spread fake news (Bendel, 2017). A study by the German sociologists Salheiser and Richter (2020), who specialize in research on right-wing extremism, shows that closed communication environments are also hijacked by far-right groups to spread claims of an elite-driven “COVID-19 dictatorship”. This is possible and goes unsanctioned due to the confidentiality of the messaging service Telegram. Telegram is completely unregulated: since the company is based in Dubai and its server locations are unknown, legal infringements cannot be punished by national jurisdiction.

» We're completely immersed in the 'footballification' of politics. Actions are judged not by an objective assessment of their content but by the perceived allegiances of protagonists. «

James O'Brien, British journalist, podcaster and author

by expanding their community management approaches. They no longer direct content exclusively to journalists, social media influencers, or the general public, but try to reach “communities” – clearly defined, smaller groups of interested or influential people. Knowledge from managing brand communities and employee communities can be transferred to a broader array of issue and stakeholder networks.

► **Accepting the privacy of stakeholders:**

Communication managers should put themselves into their stakeholders’ shoes. Since humans are social beings who value privacy and want to be understood, the development towards closed communication is understandable, logical, and probably only just at the beginning. Many topics – whether COVID-19, language, discrimination, or even one’s favorite soccer club – are discussed very passionately these days. The more passionate the debate, the lower the mutual effort to understand the other side seems to be. We see the results of this in “black-and-white” rhetoric and denialism. Once people have adopted a position, they prefer to stay loyal to it rather than be persuaded by facts and arguments. Neuroscientists have an explanation for this cognitive power-saving mode: the need for social integration and narrative coherence (Eagleman, 2020). Communications managers should therefore accept

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR COMMUNICATION LEADERS AND PROFESSIONALS

What can corporate communications do to cope with the rise of closed communication groups? How can stakeholders still be reached given the shift to closed communication environments? Will closed communication spell a dead end for the aim of corporate communications to engage all relevant stakeholders of an organization? A few responses are outlined below.

► **Enhancing community management:** First of all, most companies have already reacted to the changes in media use and the media landscape

» The question about closed communication is whether we have to accept that stakeholders don't want to communicate with us anymore, or whether we can engage them again. A lot of things are changing drastically as a result of this trend, but I also see opportunities that can help us – especially in the area of employee engagement. «

Anke Schmidt, Beiersdorf

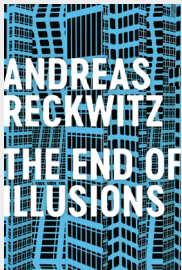
that their internal and external stakeholders exchange information privately on a messaging app or discuss the latest products in closed forums.

- ▶ **Utilizing opportunities for the company:** Closed communication therefore certainly offers potential for companies. As people hope for stronger connectedness and more intensive exchange with like-minded people, communicators can offer corresponding closed environments that promise better conditions for active stakeholders. In contrast, on many public platforms, corporations have to deal with confusion, a profusion of negative comments, and even hate speech. And it's difficult to coordinate interaction between stakeholders in such a way that all the players are involved and everybody gets a positive return. However, since we are still at the very beginning of this dynamic

development, there is a lack of research regarding corporate communications. For whom are closed communication environments worthwhile? Which platforms are suitable? And what detrimental factors have to be taken into account? These are only some of the open questions in this field.

- ▶ **Restoring trust and credibility:** There is clearly a growing number of stakeholders who aren't interested in communicating with businesses at all. How can these groups be reached? Can they be penetrated with moral appeals? Can humor, irony, and simple imagery get through to this community? Confronting them with facts alone won't be enough, as the experience with denialists shows. It will therefore be a lengthy task to find new modes of communication that restore trust and credibility.

READING RECOMMENDATIONS



Andreas Reckwitz: *The End of Illusions* (2021)

Sociologist Andreas Reckwitz analyzes aspects of social change in late modernity in five essays. Whether the rise of populism, the sense of belonging within one's own group, or the conflict between self-marketing and self-realization, Reckwitz's descriptions help to critically discuss changes in society as well as drivers and consequences of closed communication.



Dave Eggers: *The Circle* (2013) / *The Every* (2021)

In his first bestselling novel, Dave Eggers portrays the world's largest social media company, The Circle, which is increasingly taking over social control through data collection and surveillance.

The sequel begins as the company merges with the planet's dominant e-commerce site to create the richest and most dangerous – and, oddly enough, most popular – monopoly ever known: The Every. Eggers constructs a noteworthy dystopia and lays out the need for privacy in a digital age.



GIGIFICATION

Outsourcing communication tasks to drive productivity

AT A GLANCE

- ▶ **Gigification** describes the division of projects and large tasks into small and completely independent jobs (gigs).
- ▶ The **gig economy** (also: platform economy, on-demand economy) refers to a job market based on such small task jobs that are mediated through digital platforms.
- ▶ The demand for gigs is **rapidly increasing** due to remote work, digital nomadism, and globalization. It can help corporations to attract **qualified workers** who are high in demand.
- ▶ Corporate communications can **outsource various tasks as gigs**; for example, creative tasks, text layout, presentation design, and software development can already be performed as gigs.

THE GROWTH OF THE GIG ECONOMY

It's been almost two years now since COVID-19 slowed down the world economy, forcing society to learn to cope with supply shortages. While many industries faced a severe crisis, **delivery services have been booming worldwide**. Amazon Fresh, the internet giant's grocery delivery service, for example, grew more than 300% in terms of revenue in just one month. European delivery conglomerate Just Eat Takeaway, including the German

brand Lieferando, reported nearly 600 million orders in 2020, almost twice as many as in the previous year. New players are entering the market all the time. What all competitors have in common is that they are part of the gig economy.

The idea of the gigification of tasks, i.e., structuring work into small, easy-to-complete tasks, was born out of necessity. The first **gig platforms** like Uber emerged during the financial crisis in 2009. And they were

instantly successful as many people sought alternative sources of income (Vallas & Schor, 2020). It's therefore hardly surprising that the demand for gigs grew by more than 40% in the recent economic crisis (Herrmann, 2020).

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE GIG ECONOMY

The gig economy has already received a lot of attention in the public debate and in research. Journalists and researchers have adopted the term **gigification** "to refer broadly to these less structured work arrangements as well as more narrowly to the subset of flexible jobs mediated through various online platforms" (Abraham et al., 2018, p. 1).

The **gig economy** (also: platform economy, on-demand economy) describes a job market based on task-based jobs that are mediated through digital platforms. The goal of using these digital platforms is to **save costs** by hiring employees as independent contractors who perform their gigs independently (Kaine & Josserand, 2019). The platforms serve as a kind of online marketplace and list open tasks like eBay lists goods. For gig workers, this offers the opportunity to turn their skills into a source of income. Workers have maximum flexibility as they can perform tasks after work, in their free time, or even as a full-time freelancer. For companies, gig platforms reduce transaction costs and offer a maximum of transparency thanks to star ratings, reviews, and recommendation rates.

Two **types of gigs** can be distinguished:

1 Digitally mediated gigs – performed in real life:

These gigs, also referred to as on-demand work, involve a transition into the real world. Workers are assigned jobs via the respective platform, which they then execute (Kaine & Josserand, 2019). Typical examples are Uber (point-to-point transportation), Delivery Hero (food delivery services), and TaskRabbit (labor activities).

2 Digitally mediated gigs – performed virtually:

Such gigs are mostly mediated via crowd-based platforms. These platforms serve as a marketplace where individuals can offer or accept small jobs. These jobs can then be completed regardless of location, typically directly from home on one's own computer (Kaine & Josserand, 2019). Well-known examples include Amazon Mechanical Turk (for microtasks such as filling out surveys), Fiverr (for services such as graphic design or translations), or Kaggle (for data science and machine learning).

INCREASING GIGIFICATION OF KNOWLEDGE WORK

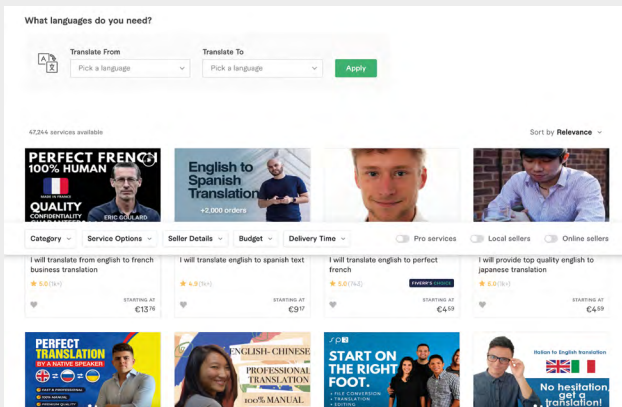
It's not just gigs for unskilled workers that are booming. According to a McKinsey study, **creative professions and knowledge-intensive sectors** are the fastest-growing parts of the gig economy (Manyika et al., 2016). This refers to jobs in which highly skilled workers perform complex tasks that are difficult to standardize. These include, for example, engineers, consultants, management executives, and communication experts. Sameer Hasija, a professor and expert on technology and operations management at INSEAD, and colleagues (2020) explain the gigification of knowledge work with trends in digitalization. Technological achievements enable "more objective evaluation, which not only makes it easier to have more reliable customer feedback and ratings, but also makes it easier to create performance-based contracts."

WHAT COMMUNICATION TASKS ARE ELIGIBLE FOR GIGS?

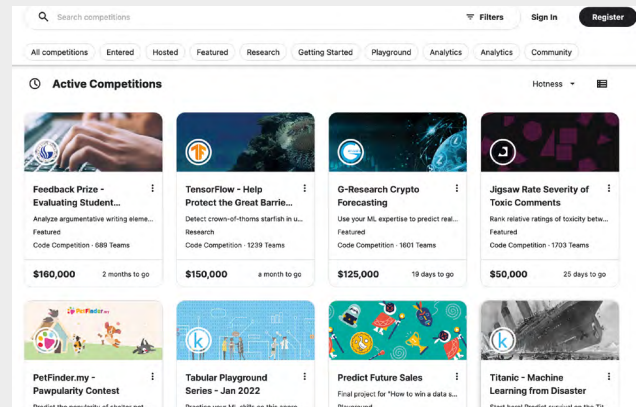
The idea of gigifying knowledge-based work (such as communication management) assumes that any activity can be divided into a set of different tasks. Hasija and his colleagues (2020) developed three criteria whether a task is, technically speaking, ready for gigification:

Different platforms, different gigs

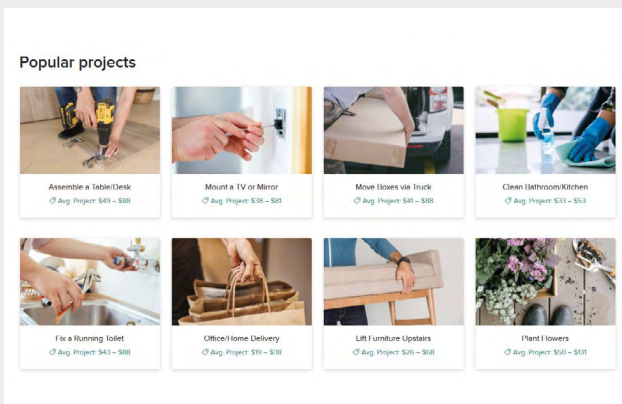
Four popular examples of gig platforms show that there is a suitable platform for nearly every type of gig.



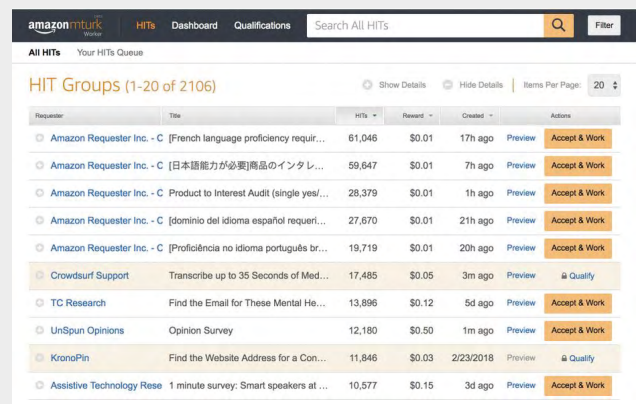
Fiverr: Design jobs, graphic editing, and translations can be offered on Fiverr.



Kaggle: On Kaggle, programmers and data scientists alike find gigs offered as competitions.



TaskRabbit: When labor or repair is needed, TaskRabbit helps potential clients to connect with workers.



Amazon Mechanical Turk: Amazon's gig platform is popular for gigs in data gathering and data processing.

- 1 Is the task codifiable?** This means whether a task can be easily structured and objectively evaluated. If this is true, a task is generally suitable to be performed as a gig. If not, a second question has to be asked.
- 2 Do value creation and value consumption take place independently of each other?** The basic question here is whether quality checks can take place and improvements can be made prior to the final value consumption (e.g., a presentation of results).

If the question is no, the requirements are not met, and gigification is not recommended. If the answer is yes, a third question will clarify the situation.

- 3 Can the task be completed remotely?** Finally, there is the question of whether a task can be completed regardless of location and time or only at a specific workstation. If it can, the task is ready for gigification. If not, a reengineering of processes or tasks is necessary before the task can be gigified; alternatively, the job

should better be done inhouse or outsourced in the traditional way.

ADVANTAGES OF GIGS FOR CORPORATE COMMUNICATIONS

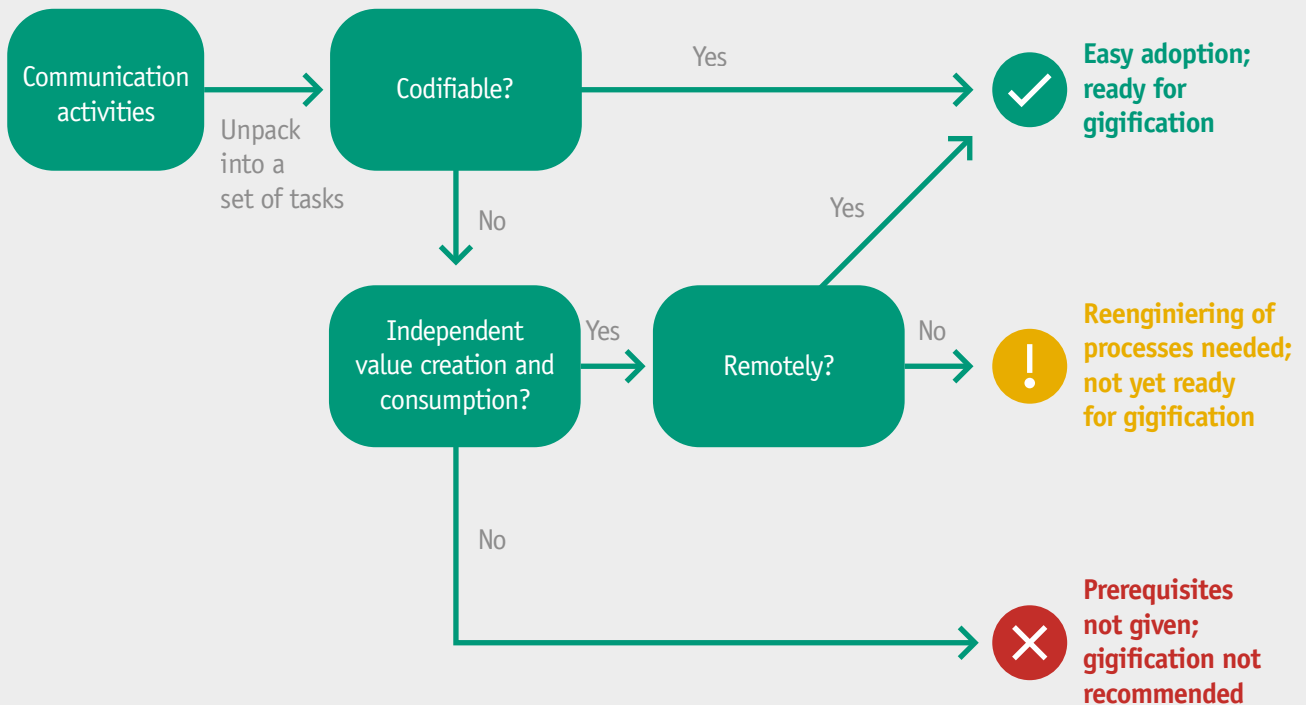
Answering these questions leads to a simple process that helps identify when a task is suitable for gigification and when it isn't (see figure below).

Even though the gigification of knowledge work is still in its infancy, communication leaders should already keep an eye on this trend and understand the function and challenges with initial experiments. Three aspects are worth highlighting here:

The three criteria outlined above primarily concern whether a task can be technically implemented as a gig. However, the process model misses the **contextual perspective**, which is very important for communications work. Does the task require industry or insider knowledge? If so, it may be better not to outsource a task as a gig, even if the model recommends it. Possible communication tasks that are eligible for gigs include design and graphics tasks as well as translations of interviews or reports.

- ✓ **Flexibility:** One of the biggest advantages of gigification is the flexibility it allows – not only for gig workers, but also for communication departments. Gig workers can provide a short-term solution to bottlenecks, for example, when colleagues are on vacation or sick, or when there is currently no free capacity due to many parallel projects. In this case, a gig can be purchased and carried out much

Ready for gigification?



How can communication leaders identify tasks that are ready to be transformed into a gig? To answer this question, managers have to carefully examine the operations of their department and analyze activities on the task level. The three questions about codification, asynchronous control, and remote realization can help to determine whether a task can easily be gigified.

» Although the concept is definitely interesting, for many of our communication services, the context, the relationship, and an understanding of who we are and what we want is needed. That's a challenge that needs to be solved by gig workers in order to fully unfold the potential of this trend.«

Dr. Nina Schwab-Hautzinger, BASF

faster than, for example, an agency can be briefed. The large selection of providers on the platforms is also an advantage. Teams aren't dependent on one translator, for example, but can draw flexibly from a large pool of providers.

- ✓ **Lower transaction cost:** Another obvious advantage are lower transaction costs (Vallas & Schor, 2020). Instead of searching for alternative providers, checking their quality through references and pitches, making contact, and coordinating them, communication managers can do all that on a gig platform. Ideally, this saves costs and a lot of time. If you understand the gig economy, it allows you to get projects off the ground at short notice and react flexibly if necessary.
- ✓ **Attracting experts and talents:** Home office and remote working arrangements have become more popular than ever, with flexibility and autonomy being a new priority for many workers. According to a recent survey commissioned by the World Economic Forum (2021), around two-thirds of the 12,500 people surveyed want to continue to work flexibly in terms of location. Almost one-third of respondents said they were even willing to change employers if this wasn't the case. One group of people is already living this autonomy: digital nomads. They travel around the world and work from wherever they like. This is particularly popular among young, technology-savvy creatives. Whether remote work or digital nomadism, gigs help to meet the demands for new work models and thus attract previously unattainable talent.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR COMMUNICATION LEADERS AND PROFESSIONALS

The pandemic has strengthened the gig economy and made it more likely that it will become an essential labor market for the future across all sectors (Herrmann, 2020). Whether for individual tasks, entire projects, or co-creation – the possibilities of gigification in corporate communications are manifold. However, there are hardly any best practices for communication management so far. The first step is to develop suitable use cases and to identify the strengths and weaknesses for one's own department in pilot projects. Three basic scenarios are conceivable:

- ▶ **Purchasing services on gig platforms:** Many services that communication departments need are already offered on gig platforms. Editing photographs, creating illustrations, translating interviews: numerous gig workers can already be found for all these services. Communicators can test how the services compare with traditional service providers and inhouse production in terms of quality or time.
- ▶ **Designing your own platform for gig workers:** If companies don't want to use existing platforms, they can also create their own, tailored solution. Such platforms help to advertise gigified tasks and projects, which gig workers can then apply for. Among other things, this gives more control over ensuring that gig workers are paid a fair wage with no agency fees. Creative or programming competitions as well as co-creation among gig workers can also be realized this way.

» *The younger generation has a very different attitude towards the work-life balance and at the same time is very dedicated and passionate about specific projects they can own and drive. For this generation of young communication managers, gigs are certainly highly exciting. I think we can learn from the concept of gigification and explore new ways to organize our tasks in a way to attract young people and still get non-gigifiable work done.* «

Prof. Christof Ehrhart, Bosch

► **Organizing tasks internally as gigs:** A gig platform can also be used internally. For example, individual, non-specialized tasks could be posted on an internal team platform and employees in the communications department can then decide, like gig workers, which tasks to take on as well as when and where to complete them. There is much potential here, especially in agile set-ups and among employees who place great value on flexibility.

Be aware of criticism: Although there are many opportunities and advantages on both sides, the downsides of the gig economy must not be forgotten. Gig workers lack pension entitlements, enjoy less job security, and are not part of the team. These disadvantages can quickly become a risk for the company as the gig economy is often publicly criticized for its insecure working conditions (Stewart & Stanford, 2017).

READING RECOMMENDATIONS



Colin Crouch: Will the gig economy prevail? (2019)

Political scientist and sociologist Colin Crouch takes a critical look at the successes of Uber, Foodora, etc. He analyzes and criticizes precarious working conditions in the gig economy, and provides numerous suggestions for changes to the labor market.



Paul Oyer: The gig economy. Non-traditional employment is a great opportunity for many, but it won't replace traditional employment (2020)

Stanford professor Paul Oyer, an economist, provides a concise overview of the gig economy. In addition to advantages and disadvantages and a comparison to the traditional organization of work, he addresses risks as well as debates about taxes, retirement provisions, and the gender pay gap. Download: <https://bit.ly/GigEco2020>

SYNTHETIC MEDIA

A new era of content generation and public communication



AT A GLANCE

- ▶ **Synthetic media** refers to media content that has been partially or completely generated by computers. Often, the content appears highly realistic and is created using artificial intelligence.
- ▶ **Examples** include artificially created or modified photos, videos, and audio files (e.g., deepfakes), computer-generated avatars (e.g., virtual influencers), as well as artificially generated texts or articles (e.g., “robo-journalism” and bots).
- ▶ This technology trend is expected to **transform public communication, content production processes, and public opinion formation**. It can shorten production times for multimedia content, lower production costs, create new types of media content and help to personalize content.
- ▶ At the same time the improved technology exacerbates the **risks of manipulated content and cyberattacks** through deepfakes.

SYNTHETIC MEDIA IS HERE TO STAY

Synthetic media is no longer a futuristic scenario. The underlying technology has recently matured to a level where the content produced appears highly realistic. Virtual influencers have emerged within the last three years and are being booked (or developed) for influencer

communications by major brands. Various apps and open-source software tools have been introduced that make the affordable creation of synthetic media available to the masses without the need for extensive technological skills. Software providers like brighterAI offer the automated anonymization of videos and images using deepfake technology for clients such as

» *Synthetic media definitely has negative issue potential. But there are also promising applications of synthetic media in corporate communications. For example, as we continue having virtual events, avatars can be integrated into these digital settings, which would make the formats more interesting.* «

Dr. Nina Schwab-Hautzinger, BASF

Deutsche Bahn or Renault. In addition, the first cases of fraud involving deepfakes have occurred, causing substantial financial damage (Stupp, 2019). Synthetic media has arrived in the here and now and is identified as a key trend across many disciplines (Webb et al., 2021).

OPPORTUNITIES AND RISKS FOR CORPORATE COMMUNICATIONS

Synthetic media will become relevant for corporate communications as it will change how media is created and perceived. The technology provides an opportunity to explore new creative content and formats such as developing a virtual influencer tailored to the target audience or developing multilingual CEO videos.

The expected **main advantages** of synthetic media for corporate communications are:

- ▶ Shorter production times for multimedia content
- ▶ Lower production costs
- ▶ Creative, novel, and improved types of media content
- ▶ More control (e.g., in influencer communications)

Apart from these advantages, synthetic media also raises **concerns** as it blurs the lines between reality and imagination, and exacerbates the risks of manipulation: For example, computer-generated or modified voices and videos will make it harder to distinguish real from fake content. This could be abused for cyberattacks or to harm corporate reputation.

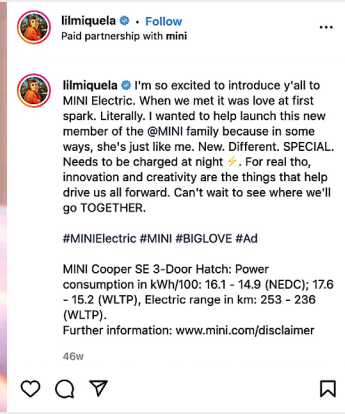
AVATARS – A NEW ERA OF INFLUENCER COMMUNICATIONS

Typically, a social media influencer can be defined as a human individual who is active on social media and has a significant reach or audience (e.g., many followers). Influencers have become an important channel for corporate communications to disseminate information and promote a brand, product, or service (Enke & Borchers, 2019). Recently, a new type of influencer appeared on social media: computer-generated, animated avatars. These avatars often have their own social media accounts, sometimes with millions of followers. A well-known example is @lilmiquela on Instagram. “Miquela” describes herself as a “19-year-old robot living in LA”, a Black Lives Matter activist, and has 3.1 million followers (January 2022). Miquela and her Instagram page are developed and maintained by a studio based in Los Angeles. She does yoga at the beach, meets up with friends, poses in new clothes, and interacts with fans. Major brands have already discovered her as a marketing platform. Miquela has appeared in video clips driving the MINI Electric car as well as kissing the model Bella Hadid while wearing Calvin Klein clothes (see picture on p. 25). In 2018, TIME magazine named Miquela one of the twenty-five most influential people on the internet.

Virtual influencers that are developed (or controlled) by a company provide unprecedented **opportunities for targeting and personalization**. For example,



Left: Screenshot from a promotional video by Calvin Klein in which the virtual influencer Miquela appears with the human model Bella Hadid



Right: Screenshot from a promotional post for the MINI Electric on Miquela's Instagram account

the appearance, voice, and values of a virtual influencer can be adapted to the expectations of specific target groups and audiences (Kalpokas, 2021). This is expected to increase the effectiveness of influencer communications. Working with virtual influencers also reduces or even completely eradicates some of the risks of working with human influencers. For example, while a human influencer might get involved in scandals that could harm associated brands, there is no chance of this happening to company-controlled virtual influencers (da Silva Oliveira & Chimenti, 2021). As virtual influencers are a new phenomenon, there is not a lot of research on how virtual influencers are perceived. Initial studies suggest that virtual influencers are a viable alternative to human influencers but should not appear too human-like as this might evoke skepticism among users (Arsenyan & Mirowska, 2021).

DEEPFAKES - THE FUTURE OF CONTENT GENERATION?

An important phenomenon within the field of synthetic media is deepfakes – photos, videos, or audio files (of humans) which appear highly realistic but have been partially or fully created with methods of artificial intelligence (AI). This goes far beyond the AI applications discussed in corporate communications

to date (Zerfass et al., 2020). The info box (p. 27) provides a brief introduction to the underlying technology of deepfakes – so called generative adversarial networks (GANs). This technology allows for example to replace the face of a person in a photo or video with another face (“face swapping”) or to read a text out in someone else’s voice (“text-to-speech”).

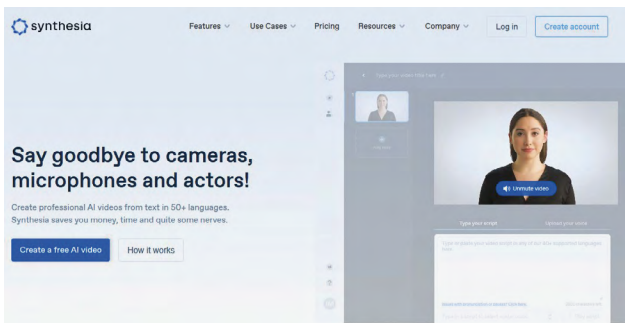
Deepfakes have been described as “the future of content generation” (Debusman, 2020). They promise to accelerate the production of new content, to lower production costs, and to enable new forms of digital media content. Although this might sound futuristic to many, deepfakes have already appeared in public media. For example, in South Korea, a TV channel used a deepfake version of a news reporter which resembled her appearance, voice, gestures, and facial expressions to report the headlines on live TV (see picture on p. 26; Debusman, 2020). Furthermore, the “Malaria Must Die” campaign on YouTube features deepfake videos of David Beckham speaking in nine different languages, or at the age of seventy (see picture on p. 26).

In the last few years, creating deepfakes has become accessible to the public (sometimes free of charge) through apps (e.g., FaceApp, Zao, Reface) and open-source software (e.g., DeepFaceLab). Thus, creating a deepfake of



Left: Deepfake resembling the appearance, voice, and gestures of a Korean news reporter
 Right: Deepfake of a 70-year-old David Beckham in the “Malaria Must Die” campaign

a person nowadays often only requires a few photos of them (Kietzmann et al., 2020). Besides these tools, there are software companies producing deepfakes and synthetic media, for example, for internal communications. For example, Synthesia (see screenshot below) creates videos with virtual avatars delivering messages in more than fifty languages based on a written script or presentation.



Software company Synthesia provides AI-based deepfake videos

SYNTHETIC MEDIA WILL BLUR THE BOUNDARIES BETWEEN REAL AND FAKE

While media content has always been manipulated to some degree (e.g., by using Photoshop to modify pictures), synthetic media will exacerbate the **risk of manipulation**. The perception of reality might become

destabilized as multiple realities could exist (Kalpokas, 2020). Synthetic media is changing the role of the media to no longer “mediate between the world and the experience of it but increasingly generate that experience.”

Deepfakes can simulate video evidence of incidents that never took place. This in turn could be used to **harm corporate reputation**, blackmail individuals, manipulate decisionmakers (social engineering), and create an environment of distrust (Kalpokas, 2021). Today, deepfakes can already be applied in real time during video or phone calls. In April 2021, Dutch politicians had a Zoom call with a confidant of the Kremlin critic Alexei Navalny. In the aftermath, it turned out that the politicians had spoken to an unknown individual using deepfake technology (Weiß, 2021).

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR COMMUNICATION LEADERS AND PROFESSIONALS

To **prepare for deepfake risks**, communication leaders and professionals should ask themselves: How fast can they identify and respond to potentially harmful deepfakes? How can they prepare for a future in which deepfakes become ubiquitous? The following approaches can help to minimize or avoid risks from deepfakes (Kietzmann et al., 2020):

» The nice thing is that as soon as deepfakes exist and audiences question the authenticity of content, they'll come to people like us and ask: 'What do you think?' And our reply won't be based on technical aspects only but much more on our experience of whether something seems probable. «

Prof. Christof Ehrhart, Bosch

BEHIND THE SCENES: USING ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE TO CREATE DEEPFAKES

By replacing actors, cameras, writers, and directors, artificial intelligence (AI) technology enables most types of synthetic media to be created. One important underlying technology is "generative adversarial networks" (GANs). They are used to modify and create images, videos, or audio files that often appear highly realistic and can't be easily distinguished from real media content.

GANs consist of two computer programs – a generator and a discriminator – working in tandem. The generator (in this case "Morgan") creates new content while the job of the discriminator ("Jean") is to identify whether content is real or fake.

For example, the goal might be to create a realistic image of a human face. To prepare for this task, Jean

is trained with thousands of images of real human faces to learn what a realistic human face looks like. Then, as displayed in the figure, Morgan starts generating new images by combining shapes and colors, and sending them to Jean for review. Jean decides whether each image created appears real or fake and sends this feedback to Morgan. Morgan then adjusts her image generation process to create images which Jean is more likely to classify as real.

This cycle is repeated numerous times until most of the images generated by Morgan are classified as "real" by Jean. Throughout the iterations, Morgan slowly learns what a realistic image of a human face looks like and learns to create images that look very similar to images of a real human face. The same principle can be applied to generating realistic video, audio, or art.



Generative adversarial networks (GANs) are one important underlying technology for deepfakes. They consist of two computer programs – a generator and a discriminator – working in tandem. The generator (in this case "Morgan") creates new content while the job of the discriminator ("Jean") is to identify whether content is real or fake.

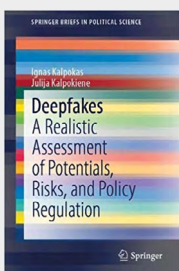
- ▶ **Record and store original content with activity logs:** While potentially controversial from a privacy perspective, this could help to identify and expose deepfakes used to falsely frame someone for having said or done something.
- ▶ **Adopt deepfake detection technologies:** They spot small irregularities in deepfakes which are imperceptible to humans. Although an “arms race” can be expected between deepfake production and detection, this should still offer some protection.
- ▶ **Advocate for legal protection:** Current legal frameworks inadequately cover the risks of deepfakes. New regulations are necessary to protect companies and their representatives.
- ▶ **Leverage trust between brands and customers:** Strong brands which generally deliver on what they promise and base their practices on strong ethics are usually better protected against deepfake threats.

Furthermore, communication leaders and professionals should start exploring **potential use cases for inte-**

grating synthetic media and deepfakes (Kietzmann et al., 2020). Corporate communications could:

- ▶ **Create, update, or correct audio and video files** with deepfake technology and thus reduce cost and time for content production
- ▶ **Improve personalization of content** by creating multilingual advertisements or instructional videos as audio and video deepfakes.
- ▶ **Enhance the customer experience** with photo and video deepfakes. For example, the technology allows customers to try on cosmetics, eyeglasses, hairstyles, or clothes virtually.
- ▶ **Collaborate with virtual influencers.** This can help to boost outreach and engage (new) audiences on social media.
- ▶ **Shape the brand image or revive brand history with virtual avatars.** Deepfake technologies help to create virtual avatars that represent a brand or organization.

READING RECOMMENDATIONS



Ignas Kalpokas & Julija Kalpokiene: Deepfakes – A Realistic Assessment of Potentials, Risks, and Policy Regulation (2022)

This forthcoming book by the communication and politics researcher Ignas Kalpokas and law professor Julija Kalpokiene promises to offer a multifaceted perspective on opportunities and pitfalls of synthetic media, especially deepfakes. The authors discuss both how synthetic media might exacerbate risks of manipulation and how it could be used in creative domains such as film and advertising.



Amy Webb et al.: Tech Trends Report 2021, Vol. 3 (2021)

In the third volume “New Realities, Synthetic Media, News, Information”, the authors of the Tech Trends Report from the Future Today Institute provide a concise overview of synthetic media, its expected disruptive impact, and emerging commercial players. <https://bit.ly/TechTrends2021-3>

CYBERSECURITY

Raising awareness, countering attacks, and safeguarding communications operations



AT A GLANCE

- ▶ **Cybersecurity** refers to the protection of computer systems, networks, and services from information leaks, theft, and damage.
- ▶ **Cyberattacks** are “the new normal” and can cause substantial financial and reputational damage. Organizations become more vulnerable due to increased digitalization, remote work, the introduction of unapproved software in the workplace, and the emergence of synthetic media, especially **deepfakes**. A major role is played by the human factor (inattentive employees).
- ▶ **Communication departments** must systematically address cybersecurity threats and can use their expertise to motivate and educate employees.
- ▶ In addition, communication leaders should put the highest priority on cybersecurity when building up their own **digital infrastructure and CommTech stack**.

WHY CYBERSECURITY IS AND WILL REMAIN HIGHLY RELEVANT

Although cybersecurity isn’t a new topic, it has become increasingly relevant in recent months. The number of cyberattacks and variants of malware is rising rapidly. New threats such as deepfakes are emerging, and companies are more vulnerable due to the rise of remote work in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Flexible work environments have exacerbated existing cybersecurity risks. This is due to the increased migration

of business processes to the digital realm and the use of remote access points (e.g., while working from home). Furthermore, using video conference tools and private devices for work (“bring your own device”), or using unofficial and unapproved software and hardware for work (“shadow IT”) increase the risk for cyberattacks.

In **corporate communications departments**, the rapid digitalization of internal and external communication processes as well as the use of information technology to support communication tasks – often called “CommTech” (Zerfass et al., 2021a) – add to these risks.

Some recent figures on cybersecurity highlight the importance:

- ▶ The German Federal Office for Information Security stated in a recent report on cybersecurity in Germany that on average **394,000 new malware variants appeared every day** between June 2020 and May 2021 – a 22% increase on the previous year (BSI, 2021, p. 11).
- ▶ IBM (2021) estimated the average total **cost of a data breach to be US\$4.24 million** (ranging from \$1.08 million in Brazil and \$4.89 million in Germany to \$9.05 million in the United States) – almost a 10% increase compared to 2020.
- ▶ **39%** of German communication professionals interviewed for the European Communication Monitor confirmed that their organizations had been hit by **cyberattacks or data** theft more than once during the previous year (Zerfass et al., 2020, p. 43).

THE HUMAN RISK FACTOR

One prominent cybersecurity threat is **(spear) phishing emails**, which embed infected links or attachments in increasingly authentic-looking emails. In 2020, (spear) phishing was the leading cause of **ransomware attacks** worldwide (Datto, 2020). Ransomware is a type of malicious software (“malware”) that encrypts computer files, a system, or network, and prevents the victim from accessing or using them. The victims are then pressured to pay a ransom to regain access to their data and systems. Often, the attackers use phishing mails to gain access to the victim’s system and spread the malware; they hence focus on human inattention and misconduct. These types of attacks utilizing the **human risk factor** have increased dramatically since the start of the pandemic (BSI, 2021).

The human risk factor also makes **synthetic media** (especially deepfakes) a threat for cybersecurity. The FBI (2021) expects that synthetic media will soon be

leveraged in cyberattacks to increase the sophistication of spear phishing and social engineering attacks, for example by imitating the voice or appearance of superiors or colleagues. In fact, such cases have already occurred: The CEO of a UK-based energy firm transferred €220,000 to fraudsters after being instructed to do so in a phone call with a deepfake of the CEO of its German parent company (Stupp, 2019).

THE IMPORTANCE OF EMPLOYEE BEHAVIOR IN CYBERSECURITY

Despite technological advances and increased investment in cybersecurity training and awareness, “employees continue to misunderstand, disregard, or even purposefully violate Internet Security Policies” (Chen et al., 2021, p. 1060). Accordingly, research aims to understand why some employees do and others don’t **comply with information security policies**. Recent research has identified several factors (Chen et al., 2021):

- ▶ **Perceived threats:** An employee who believes that their misconduct will make themselves and their organization more vulnerable to harm and that it will result in severe negative consequences for the organization is more likely to follow information security policies.
- ▶ **Perceived efficacy:** If employees trust their own abilities, i.e., they believe that a) they can understand, execute, and comply with the information security policy of their organization, and that b) by doing so they’ll contribute to protecting the organization from threats, they’re more likely to follow information security policies.
- ▶ **Intrinsic and extrinsic rewards:** Employees are less likely to follow information security policies if they expect to get more of their work done and save time. Furthermore, some employees might purposefully violate information security for intrinsic rewards (e.g., taking revenge).



» We are seeing that cybercriminals are focusing increasingly on individuals. The employee can become the 'gateway' for cyberattacks. A top-down approach along the lines of 'You must do this!' isn't enough. Therefore, besides mandatory cybersecurity trainings, Beiersdorf also raises awareness for risks in various ways, including by taking a light-hearted approach. For example, we held an escape room game in which employees had to work together to secure a data file. We also connected cybersecurity to soccer defense and included testimonials by Jogi Löw, until recently the manager of the Germany national soccer team and NIVEA Men brand ambassador. We make sure that the management speaks about cybersecurity to emphasize its importance. We also carry out a lot of simulated phishing attacks to see how the employees respond. Afterwards, we talk about the results transparently and how many phishing emails would have gotten through. «

Anke Schmidt, Vice President Corporate Communications & Government Relations, Beiersdorf

- **Response costs:** Employees are less likely to comply with information security policies if doing so takes time and effort.

Understanding these factors marks the first step to addressing them with **corporate communications strategies**. Corporate communication professionals should focus on **raising awareness** of cybersecurity threats that employees and other stakeholders aren't sufficiently aware of yet (e.g., deepfakes). However, this is practiced only by a minority of 31% across Europe (Zerfass et al., 2020b).

When raising awareness for cybersecurity, it's important to include ways to deal with potential risks. If a threat induces a strong fear response but a person lacks the knowledge or confidence to address it, they are likely

to avoid or ignore the threat and related warnings, which may lead to suboptimal behavior (Chen et al., 2021). As people quickly get used to warning messages and then ignore them, frequently altering the appearance of **warning messages** might be effective (Brinton Anderson et al., 2016).

Lastly, one of the biggest barriers to complying with information security policies is the time and effort required (Chen et al., 2021). One strategy is to use **digital nudging**, i.e., design and information elements which subtly steer behavior (Stieglitz & Clausen, 2021; Zerfass et al., 2021b). Communication departments could therefore devise communication strategies and digital nudges which make information security policies more comprehensible and more fun.

PREPARING FOR AND RESPONDING TO CYBERATTACKS

Corporate communication departments must prepare for cyberattacks. Although this is self-evident, research shows that not all companies are taking precautions (Zerfass et al., 2020b). Strategies for effectively communicating cyberattacks involving data breaches include (Knight & Nurse, 2020):

- 1 Prior to potential cyberattacks, communications departments should establish and maintain crisis communication capability, for example by forming a **crisis team** and establishing a **crisis information knowledge database** (e.g., how does the organization encrypt sensitive data?). This can also include drafting stakeholder-specific responses for likely scenarios and developing a “fallback” website with FAQs that can be activated in the event of a cyberattack. A recent survey indicated that communications departments are most concerned with cybercriminals hacking social media accounts, websites, and communication channels (Zerfass et al., 2020b) which could effectively silence corporate communications during a cyberattack. Thus, corporate communications should also have a **crisis communication infrastructure** which isn’t integrated into the general IT infrastructure. This infrastructure (and corresponding routines) is crucial for communicating with stakeholders if standard corporate communications channels are compromised during a cyberattack. **Regular drills and testing** including communications’ response to the incident are advised.
- 2 In the unfortunate event of a cyberattack, corporations need to decide whether to **disclose the incident** (unless of course disclosure is mandatory). Moreover, they need to decide a) what information to disclose and how to frame the message, b) when to disclose, and c) how to disclose (channels). Recommended strategies include accepting

responsibility, avoiding downplaying the incident or blaming others, and addressing the feelings of vulnerability which affected subjects might have. Early disclosures are desirable and might allow public opinion about the incident to be framed.

- 3 Lastly, corporate communications should **prepare for the reaction** of the public and **deliver the message**. Briefing the staff and ensuring sufficient resources for handling customer requests and media enquiries after the disclosure is advised. A CEO or chair should inform the public to emphasize that the incident is being taken seriously.

Besides communicating incidents to employees and the public, it’s crucial to **quickly share information about cyberattacks with other organizations** as it improves their ability to withstand new attacks (Abbosh & Bissell, 2020). Corporate communications could therefore establish communication practices and platforms for sharing information with other organizations.

TAKING CARE OF OUR OWN TURF: COMMTECH REQUIRES SOLID SECURITY MEASURES

Today, internal and external workflows in communication departments and stakeholder communications heavily depend on a variety of digital tools and platforms, often called “**CommTech**” (Zerfass et al., 2021a). In case that content management systems, databases with contact information, websites, intranets or social media channels break down, it can easily make a company “speechless” – a major threat for brands, their reputation and corporate culture in today’s globally connected communication spheres. Traditional software infrastructure in organizations is mostly managed by IT departments, who are knowledgeable of security measures. CommTech, however, are often “**lightweight infrastructure**” (also called **shadow IT**) installed by communication practitioners on their computers or online services provided by small startup companies serving the PR industry (Zerfass & Brockhaus, 2021).



» Back in 2017, we became aware that a malware attack via our email systems was imminent. Our crisis response team was faced with the challenge of telling all employees not to open emails and to stop using their digital devices. Our first instinct was 'Let's write an information email'. But obviously, this wasn't an option. Luckily, we had set up an IT tool ten years ago which was separated from our email client. This turned out to be a blessing, as it allowed us to display a warning message on 250 screens in cafeterias and production sites. We also had a tool for displaying the information on the screensavers of all computers around the world."

Carsten Tilger, Senior Vice President Corporate Communications & Public Affairs, Henkel

Another major threat are **data leaks in communication departments**. Internal documents like campaign strategies, monitoring data or intelligence reports about opinion-makers and stakeholders can be misinterpreted or scandalized by opponents and journalists when they become public. This has become obvious in two recent European cases: In France, a stakeholder monitoring lists provided by a communications agency for Monsanto was made public. In Germany, the "Framing Manual" used for internal training purposes by public broadcaster ARD caused outrage. Both cases led to reputation problems for the organizations involved, although the communication activities proved to be legally and ethically correct.

Both challenges require communication leaders and professionals to **mitigate cybersecurity risks in their own areas** of responsibility. Yet, 52% of them indicated in a recent survey across Europe that they do not engage with the implementation of security measures or guidelines in their own department (Zerfass et al., 2020, p. 46).

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR COMMUNICATION LEADERS AND PROFESSIONALS

- ▶ **Protect the communications infrastructure to ensure continuous operations:** Security strategies should become an integral part of running a communication department and of every CommTech investment in communication departments. Back-up structures and routines should be established, including alternative communication channels with key stakeholders when normal practices have to be suspended.
- ▶ **Leverage communications capabilities to make information security policies more accessible, effective, and fun:** Employee misconduct (mainly unintentional) is still one of the biggest risk factors for cybersecurity. Communication professionals can develop strategies to make cybersecurity more attractive and less time-consuming.

- **Consider cyberattacks and new threats posed by deepfakes and synthetic media in crisis preparation:** Existing crisis communication routines and training should be updated to include current

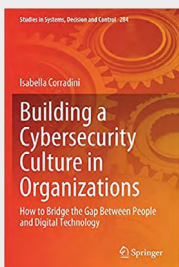
issues like social engineering and phishing attacks, which are already among the leading causes of data **breaches** and cyberattacks.



» *If data is the new gold in times of digitalization, then trust is the new platinum. For a technology provider like SIEMENS, it's essential that our stakeholders, partners and customers associate us with cybersecurity. To convey this message more effectively, we launched a globally coordinated cybersecurity communication drive in 2019, which included appearances at tradeshows, our own webcasts, podcasts, videos, articles, social media, etc. As well as addressing external audiences, raising awareness among employees of cybersecurity risks is immensely important, too, for two reasons. First, because our employees are multipliers. And second, to ensure that they're as careful as possible online; after all, our colleagues are our best firewall. For example, we've produced several campaigns about various aspects of cybersecurity for our global employees. This shouldn't be too dry if we want to reach our colleagues, so it's a mixture of informative and entertaining stories as well as gamification. We look at questions like: How does a hack happen? How can a hacker be successful? What kind of threat actors exist? What role could a single employee play within a hack? And last but not least, we provide useful tips on how to be as secure as possible – all, of course, set in a casual, informative, easy to understand, and entertaining style. «*

Sebastian Weibel, Head of Global Communications "Cybersecurity at Siemens", Siemens AG

READING RECOMMENDATION



Isabella Corradini: Building a Cybersecurity Culture in Organizations – How to Bridge the Gap between People and Digital Technology (2021)

This book offers a practical guide to developing an effective cybersecurity culture in organizations. Training programs and effective communication within organizations are discussed. The book illustrates how communications can become one of the key drivers for successful cybersecurity awareness initiatives.

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DIGGING DEEPER

THREE UPCOMING STUDIES WILL ANALYZE THE TRENDS LANGUAGE AWARENESS, CLOSED COMMUNICATION, AND SYNTHETIC MEDIA MORE CLOSELY

To find out more about how the identified trends will affect corporate communications, three research projects will be kicked off in 2022.

DEALING WITH CRITICAL VOICES ON D&I MEASURES AND INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE

*Professor Sabine Einwiller, Daniel Wolfgruber
University of Vienna*

As a matter of fact, organizations are often heavily criticized for using inclusive language, combating discrimination, or setting female quotas for management positions. The aim of this research project is to better understand how organizations can deal with internal and external resistance as well as criticism of D&I measures and inclusive language. The project is guided by two key questions:

- ▶ How do companies deal with criticism of their D&I initiatives and inclusive language from internal and external stakeholders?
- ▶ What communication strategies are helpful when dealing with negative comments on D&I content in social media?

The research team will analyze D&I-related social media posts and threads that are controversially debated. They will also interview corporate experts on D&I communication to find out what communication strategies have proven successful.

COMMUNITY MANAGEMENT ON CLOSED MEDIA PLATFORMS

*Professor Ulrike Röttger, Lennart Rettler
University of Münster*

In recent years, many users as well as companies have partly or in some cases fully withdrawn from public

social media platforms and moved to semi-public or non-public platforms instead. Responding to this development, corporate communications have established community management to replace general stakeholder management. This research project will shed light on how closed media platforms operate and explore communication strategies. The main research questions are:

- ▶ What closed media platforms can be used in external corporate communications, for what reasons, and with what kind of goals?
- ▶ For whom are closed media platforms suitable?
- ▶ How do community managers assess the opportunities and risks of closed media platforms?

The research team will interview community managers in corporations and analyze the topics and content shared on closed media platforms.

WILL SYNTHETIC MEDIA BE THE FUTURE OF CONTENT GENERATION?

*Professor Stefan Stieglitz, Suenje Clausen
University of Duisburg-Essen*

Synthetic media can help communication departments to develop content faster and cheaper. However, there is a lack of studies exploring application scenarios. The new research project will therefore focus on:

- ▶ Exploring and categorizing different types of synthetic media
- ▶ Developing application scenarios for synthetic media in corporate communications
- ▶ Assessing the opportunities and risks of synthetic media

To do so, a literature review on synthetic media as well as interviews with corporate experts will be conducted.

ACADEMIC SOCIETY FOR MANAGEMENT & COMMUNICATION

The Academic Society for Management & Communication is a not-profit think tank in the field of corporate communications, supported by leading companies and universities. Through collaborative research and knowledge sharing, the Academic Society aims to actively shape the future of corporate communications. The initiative was founded in 2010, and is currently supported by six professors, four universities, and more than forty corporate partners.

The Academic Society initiates practical, forward-looking research projects. These extensive, multi-disciplinary studies are designed to support the ongoing professionalization of corporate communications. In the past few years, more than twenty research projects have been carried out in areas such as

agility, virtual corporate communication, digitalization, value creation, and diversity.

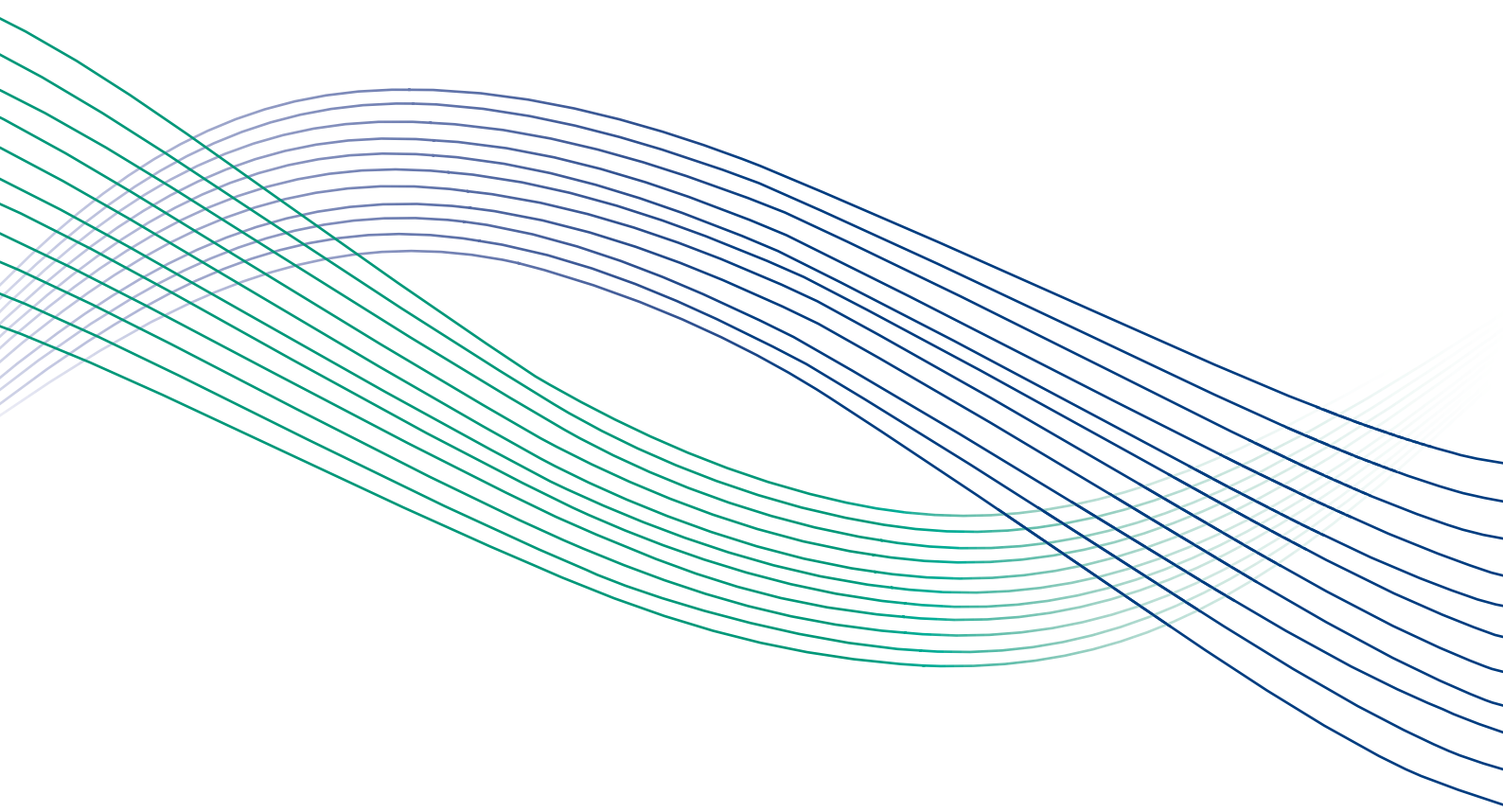
In 2020, the Academic Society started the research series Communications Trend Radar. On an annual basis, five core trends in the areas of management, society and technology are identified. The first Communications Trend Radar report was published in February 2021.

The Academic Society is part of the Günter Thiele Foundation for Communication & Management, an independent non-profit entity that is dedicated to advancing science and knowledge transfer in the field of corporate communications.

For more information, go to academic-society.net.

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