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## Research Report

# Communication management radar 2026: Simulated communication, constrained AI agents, cognitive drift, power flux, strategic subtraction

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Communication Insights

# COMMUNICATION MANAGEMENT RADAR

2026

Simulated  
Communication

Constrained  
AI Agents

Cognitive Drift

Power Flux

Strategic  
Subtraction



**ACADEMIC SOCIETY**  
FOR MANAGEMENT & COMMUNICATION  
An initiative of the Günter Thiele Foundation



# TRACING THE ISSUES THAT SHAPE OUR FUTURE

Corporate communications practice is shaped by seen and unseen forces – every day, every week, every year. Innovations, cultural shifts, and new insights from various fields influence how we connect, lead, and make decisions. Some developments point toward new possibilities, while others are familiar yet often overlooked. The Communication Management Radar is our attempt to observe these influences, trace what is emerging or underexplored, and offer a perspective on what may shape the future of corporate communications.

For this year’s report, we conducted four focus group sessions with almost 30 Chief Communication Officers and members of their leadership teams, following a review of hundreds of recent academic studies and industry reports. A big thank you to all contributors for their time and valuable insights.

By taking an interdisciplinary approach, the Communication Management Radar helps identify blind spots in communication practice. Rather than urging you to take immediate action, we invite you to take a moment to consider how these insights relate to your own knowledge and practice. We hope this inspires reflection and enables you to build resilient teams in turbulent times.



**Dr. Michelle Wloka & Prof. Ansgar Zerfass**  
Leipzig University, Germany



*Dr. Michelle Wloka & Prof. Ansgar Zerfass*

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# FIVE PHENOMENA FOR REFLECTION

We have identified five recent developments in technology, management, and social sciences with transformative impact on the practice of corporate communications:

**1. Simulated Communication:** Information retrieval and debates online that are covertly influenced by the rising dominance of automated agents (bots) and unreliable GenAI systems.

**2. Constrained AI Agents:** Autonomous systems that combine great promises with major challenges when it comes to ensuring effectiveness, accountability, and trust within organizations and their ecosystems.

**3. Cognitive Drift:** The weakened human ability to critically assess, interpret, and question information in an increasingly complex reality shaped by automation and algorithmic communication.

**4. Power Flux:** Changing sources and modes of influence for communication processes in teams, organizations, and society.

**5. Strategic Subtraction:** Improving efficiency, resilience, and appeal by deliberately reducing the complexity of processes and the range of products and services, including their features and variants.

## FROM INSPIRATION TO PRACTICE: HOW TO USE THIS REPORT

Getting familiar with and reflecting on these phenomena enables communication leaders to future-proof their teams. There are a number of practical ways to do this: Start by browsing the topic overviews in this report and reflect on how they relate to your organization, its communication environment, your teams, and your own role. The reflection questions at the end of each chapter provide a useful starting point. Then identify one or two developments that are particularly relevant or challenging in your own context. Explore them further, for example using the recommended literature and discuss them with

your leadership group or relevant teams. This can be the first step toward developing concrete scenarios and launching innovation projects, enabling you and your teams stay ahead in a fast-changing profession.

## BACKGROUND AND METHODOLOGY

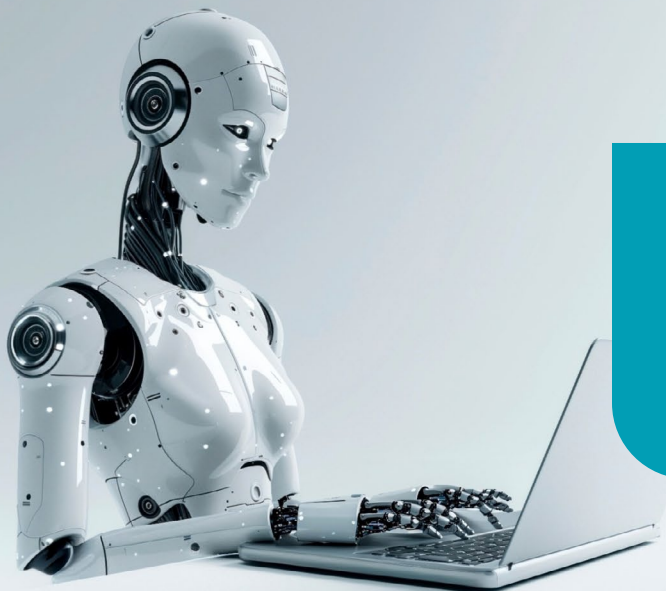
The Communication Management Radar was developed with three goals in mind: to foster reflection on emerging and underexplored developments, to provide practical insights for corporate communications, and to guide future research by identifying gaps and relevant questions. To achieve these goals, the project employed a two-phase approach:

### ► Phase 1: Scouting and evaluation

The researchers conducted a comprehensive literature review over several months and identified five phenomena with potential relevance for corporate communications. Sources included scientific journals, conference papers, newspapers, magazines, blogs, corporate trend reports, and other media covering technology, management, media, psychology, journalism, and more. Monitoring focused on publications from 2025, with supplementary research including relevant content from earlier periods. Each phenomenon was evaluated based on its potential impact on communication functions, processes, and management, as well as the opportunities it could provide communication leaders to influence strategic decisions within their organizations.

### ► Phase 2: Dialogue with practice

In autumn 2025, almost 30 Chief Communication Officers and members of their leadership teams from international companies affiliated with the Academic Society for Management & Communication discussed the identified phenomena in four digital brainstorming sessions. The discussions explored the phenomena's potential impact, the current status quo in organizations, and the practitioners' perspectives on their relevance.



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# 1. SIMULATED COMMUNICATION

## HIDDEN INFLUENCE ON OPINION BUILDING THROUGH BOTS AND GENAI

Two converging developments are increasingly shaping how public communication is formed online: the rapid rise of automated bot activity and a fundamental shift in how people access and consume information through generative AI (GenAI) systems. Together, these trends are blurring the line between communicative interactions driven by machines and those driven by established actors like humans and organizations. As a result, reliable information and trusted sources are put under pressure. What we read, hear, and see is increasingly a simulation of what has traditionally been understood as communication. This can ultimately lead to a synthetification of public communication and, consequently, of public opinion in modern societies (Saura García, 2025).

A key driver of this shift is the unprecedented growth of automated internet traffic, which is largely driven by the widespread availability of AI tools and large language models. Studies estimate that up to 60% of web traffic is now generated by bots (Imperva, 2025; Muzumdar et al., 2025). Artificial likes, comments, and shares create the illusion of popularity and consensus where little genuine human engagement exists. At the same time, malicious bot activity has increased for the sixth consecutive year, with bad bots now representing 37% of total internet traffic (Imperva, 2025). GenAI not only simplifies bot creation but also enables attackers to

continuously analyze failed attempts and adapt their strategies, making bots more sophisticated, evasive, and difficult to detect (Imperva, 2025).

### What are bots?

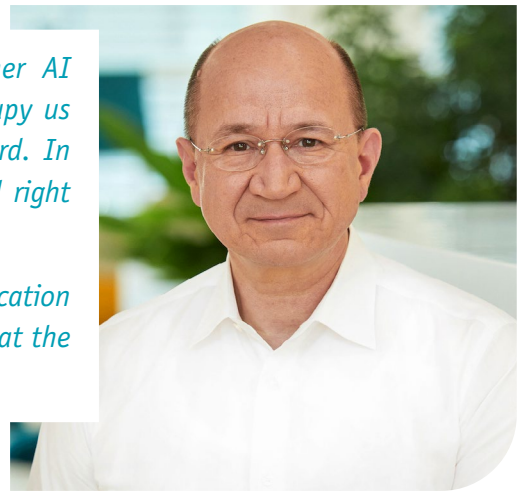
Bots are automated software programs that perform tasks on the internet. They range from benign applications, such as search engine crawlers that index websites, to malicious systems used for activities like data scraping and spamming. Both good and bad bots can mimic human behavior, making them difficult to detect. Even non-malicious bots can distort digital signals by inflating page views or engagement metrics, which can lead to misleading analytics and flawed decision-making (Imperva, 2025).

Meanwhile, human information-seeking behavior is shifting from traditional browsing to GenAI-mediated discovery. Search engines and platforms increasingly provide direct answers instead of lists of links, ushering in an era of “zero-click” information consumption. This shift has measurable consequences for online visibility and influence. Multiple reports predict a sharp decline in organic click-through rates of 34% to 60% (Crowe, 2024; Law, 2025; Newman, 2026).

»There's an increasingly prominent discussion about whether AI should be considered a stakeholder. I predict this will preoccupy us for some time, even though the idea itself is somewhat absurd. In practice, however, especially in media analytics, it's presented right now as a way to tailor communication to AI's "requirements".

The argument is that if AI doesn't understand you, your communication might fail and you will lose influence. This is a distortion of what the stakeholder concept is really meant to achieve.«

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



Beyond visibility, these changes have deeper implications for opinion building and shared reality. GenAI systems are known to hallucinate, provide inconsistent answers, and personalize responses based on inferred user characteristics. The same question may yield different answers for different users or even for repeated queries, which undermines the notion of stable, canonical information (Honan, 2025). Combined with bot-driven amplification and metric manipulation, this variability creates an environment in which influence is harder to trace, consensus is easier to manufacture, and trust in information sources becomes increasingly fragile. Bots and generative systems are increasingly producing, curating, and promoting content optimized for attention and consumption rather than dialogue or authenticity. This has given rise to the "Dead Internet Theory", which argues that much online activity is artificial, repetitive, and strategically engineered, leaving human participation marginal and performative (Muzumdar et al., 2025; Walter, 2024).

### The "Dead Internet Theory"

The theory originally emerged from fringe online communities and suggests that social media, search results, and digital conversations are increasingly shaped by automated accounts, synthetic personas, and algorithmically generated content that mimics human interaction. Once dismissed as a conspiracy theory, this idea has gained renewed relevance in light of recent evidence of large-scale bot traffic and AI-driven content production. These developments have made it harder to distinguish between genuine discourse and artificial influence (Walter, 2024; Muzumdar et al., 2025).

## RELEVANCE FOR CORPORATE COMMUNICATIONS

The rise of simulated communication results in challenges and opportunities for communication leaders and their teams:

- ▶ **Communication planning:** The declining validity of monitoring and measurement data makes it hard to take reasoned decisions when developing strategies and allocating budgets.
- ▶ **Risk and crisis management:** Public debates shaped by uncontrollable algorithms increase the need to reassess communicative threats and develop new ways to respond.
- ▶ **Stakeholder communication:** Nuanced messaging and dialogue become more difficult, and likely impossible, in a synthesized environment where corporate platforms and original content can be easily bypassed.

- ▶ **Advising top and middle management:** The rising opacity of public communication increases the need for expert guidance within organizations. This offers

new opportunities for communicators who can help executives to navigate the unstable spheres of opinion-building and stakeholder alignment.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR COMMUNICATION LEADERS AND PROFESSIONALS

- 1 **Optimize for generative visibility:** Expand on classic SEO with Generative Engine Optimization (GEO; also referred to as Answer Engine Optimization (AEO)). Structure your content so that it can reliably be surfaced by AI systems based on large language models and answer engines. FAQs, fact sheets, lists, and clearly cited sources are favored (Blackman, 2025).
- 2 **Invest in formats that build engagement and human interaction:** Prioritize formats that foster direct and habitual engagement while efficiently using resources. Formats such as video and audio allow teams to effectively reach audiences while reducing reliance on high-volume text output (Newman, 2026). Revive human-mediated communication, dialogue, and context-sensitive interactions, both internally and externally.
- 3 **Protect authenticity as a strategic asset:** Prioritize credibility, traceability, and human authorship. Avoid optimizing content solely for AI-driven engagement mechanics and strategies, such as content farming, where platforms encourage continuous user interaction by designing systems that promote content creation and sharing (Muzumdar et al., 2025).
- 4 **Redesign media and social media monitoring:** Update monitoring and briefing processes to reflect the consumption of information through chatbots and AI assistants. Rather than merely aggregating, curate and contextualize insights to ensure that communicators and top management are not misled by incomplete or inaccurate AI outputs.

## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- ▶ Should GenAI systems be treated as a stakeholder? What specific requirements are needed?
- ▶ Which communication channels will remain relevant?
- ▶ How can corporate communications continue to stay visible and provide reliable information?
- ▶ How are key stakeholders' information retrieval and opinion formation shaped by automated communication, both now and in the near future?
- ▶ How does the rise of simulated discourse and the syntheticfication of communication challenge the need for communication departments and their business models?

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## 2. CONSTRAINED AI AGENTS

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### AUTONOMOUS SYSTEMS LIMITED BY REAL-WORLD REQUIREMENTS

AI agents are gaining traction and gradually transitioning from experimental concepts to real-world applications in various fields, such as customer support, workflow

automation, and autonomous research. In call centers, for instance, early chatbots based on scripted decision trees are being replaced by systems capable of understanding intent, maintaining context and dynamically escalating decisions (Gya & Li, 2025). According to a recent McKinsey study, AI agents are not yet widely used,

### AI agents

An AI agent is an autonomous software system that uses AI to pursue defined goals by independently deciding and executing actions within its environment (IBM AI Ethics Board, 2025). Unlike traditional AI assistants or copilots, which require explicit prompts and cannot act independently, agents can be assigned high-level objectives and determine how to achieve them autonomously. They transform user interaction by shifting it from defining solutions to stating problems (Engels & Roberts, 2025). AI agents offer several advantages that may explain their growing adoption (IBM AI Ethics Board, 2025):

- ▶ They can be integrated directly into workflows to reduce task completion time and enhance human performance.

- ▶ They can operate continuously, manage multiple tasks in parallel and address complex challenges.
- ▶ Their ability to connect with external tools, data sources, and other agents enables more comprehensive and personalized responses.

The field is increasingly shifting from single-agent setups to multi-agent systems, in which multiple specialized agents collaborate within a shared environment. These systems exhibit new capabilities and emergent behaviors that surpass the potential of individual agents. However, they also introduce greater complexity and governance requirements (Engels & Roberts, 2025).



*»We have an AI agent that was introduced company-wide by our CEO. It's primarily used in marketing, but also in production and research. The tool keeps improving, and the directive is clear: Everyone is expected to contribute, develop modules, and stay engaged. Responsibility comes from the top, but I tell my team that we need to keep up and be part of it.«*

*Miriam Liebelt-Henn, VP Communications DACH, Sanofi*

but 62% of respondents reported that their organizations were at least experimenting with them (Singla et al., 2025).

Despite their potential, AI agents' capabilities are inherently constrained by real-world conditions. These constraints arise not from technical immaturity alone, but from the complexity, openness, and social embeddedness of the environments in which agents operate. As agentic systems interact with dynamic data sources, external tools, and other agents, their behavior becomes increasingly difficult to predict, evaluate, and reproduce (IBM AI Ethics Board, 2025). Decisions may depend on transient contexts or unavailable resources, and actions can be irreversible once executed in real-world settings, limiting control and correction (Ghose, 2024).

The autonomy of AI agents also challenges established mechanisms of oversight and responsibility. As agents move beyond static software and assume roles resembling human decision-makers, responsibility for their actions becomes blurred (Gya & Li, 2025) and it becomes harder to clearly attribute outcomes, ensure compliance, and maintain transparency. Understanding why an agent acted in a certain way, or whether its behavior aligned with organizational, ethical, or regulatory expectations, is often constrained by limited visibility into its internal processes and interactions (IBM AI Ethics Board, 2025).

Beyond technical and organizational considerations, human and societal factors further limit the deployment of AI agents. Trust in agentic systems is shaped by how users perceive their reliability, fairness, and impact on human roles. Overdelegation may lead to uncritical acceptance of agent decisions, while skepticism can prevent effective use (IBM AI Ethics Board, 2025). Concerns about human agency, job displacement, and environmental impact due to inefficient or redundant operations also place practical boundaries on how far autonomy can be extended (Ghose, 2024).

## RELEVANCE FOR CORPORATE COMMUNICATIONS

Multiple challenges and opportunities for communication leaders and their teams are linked to the availability and spread of AI agents:

- ▶ **Reputation management:** Misaligned or flawed actions of AI agents heighten reputational risk; this requires additional efforts for preparation and reaction.
- ▶ **Transformation of communication functions:** The growing use of CommTech and AI applications calls for a holistic assessment of both potential benefits and risks. When approached thoughtfully, it creates opportunities to innovate, improve efficiency, and make well-informed, responsible decisions.

- ▶ **Leadership and team culture:** Complex and opaque processes can disengage team members and encourage organized irresponsibility within communication departments. However, they also offer opportunities to establish a new culture of engagement and self-responsibility.
- ▶ **Internal standing:** Automating communication processes may reduce the prestige and expert power of communicators within an organization and lead to budget cuts. Developing a future-proof business model for communication departments can empower them.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR COMMUNICATION LEADERS AND PROFESSIONALS

- 1 **Critically evaluate before adopting:** Critically assess the purpose, operating context, and potential impact of AI agents before experimentation or deployment. The World Economic Forum recommends systematically classifying agents by function, core properties, and context to provide a sound basis for evaluation, risk assessment, and proportionate governance (Gya & Li, 2025) (see below).
- 2 **Ensure human oversight:** Deploy AI agents only in settings where humans remain responsible for critical decisions. Regular comparison of AI and human decisions, continuous performance monitoring, and security audits can help maintain control and accountability (Kosar et al., 2025).
- 3 **Align with long-term strategy:** Use AI agents as part of a broader digital transformation, not as permanent workarounds for legacy systems. Define clear transition and retirement plans to avoid long-term dependency (Kosar et al., 2025).
- 4 **Stay informed on regulation and impact:** Keep track of evolving legal and societal frameworks, such as the EU AI Act, and discussions even if agents are not directly deployed in communication functions, as regulatory gaps or misuse elsewhere can affect organizational trust and reputation.

## Dimensions for classification, evaluation, risk assessment, and governance practice

### Agent characteristics

#### 1. Function

What does the agent do?

#### 2. Role

Specialist | | | | Generalist

#### 3. Predictability

Deterministic | | | | Non-deterministic

#### 4. Autonomy

Low | | | | High

#### 5. Authority

Low | | | | High

### Operational context

#### 6. Use case

Application domain and environment where the agent performs its function

#### 7. Environment

Simple | | | | Complex

Source: Gya & Li, 2025

## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- ▶ To what extent can communication teams realistically deal with the systematic limitations of AI agents – or is it too risky altogether to use them when transparent results and accountability are needed?
- ▶ How can communicators balance short-term efficiency gains from agentic applications against potential long-term drawbacks, especially a loss of trust?
- ▶ To what extent should corporate communications take responsibility for shaping the discourse on accountability for AI-generated outputs within and beyond the organization?

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# 3. COGNITIVE DRIFT



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## DIMINISHING HIGHER-ORDER COGNITIVE SKILLS IN THE AGE OF GENAI

The rapid diffusion of GenAI across educational, professional, and everyday contexts has intensified concerns that it is changing how people learn, think, and make decisions. Although GenAI systems promise increased efficiency and productivity gains, a growing body of empirical research suggests that sustained reliance on them may weaken higher-order cognitive skills, including critical thinking, deep information processing, memory

consolidation, and autonomous judgment. As GenAI systems perform tasks that previously required active reasoning, users may engage less deeply in the cognitive processes that support learning and problem solving. According to experimental and survey-based research, frequent AI assistance is linked to diminished critical thinking and a greater tendency toward metacognitive laziness, defined as a decreased willingness to engage in effortful reasoning (Fan et al., 2025; Gerlich, 2025; Lee et al., 2025).

### Potential negative cognitive effects of GenAI usage



#### Cognitive effort

Reduced critical thinking  
Increased cognitive laziness



#### Memory and learning

Reduced knowledge retention  
Memory offloading



#### Information processing

Superficial information processing  
Attention decline



#### Reasoning

Overreliance on AI  
Weakened decision-making  
Homogenization of perspectives



Source: Michelle Wloka & Ansgar Zerfass, 2026

Furthermore, digital environments already fragment attention through interruptions and multitasking, which can impair cognitive performance and encourage superficial engagement with information (Risko & Gilbert, 2016). GenAI tools may exacerbate these effects. In an experiment with young adults, participants were asked to write multiple essays either with ChatGPT, using a search engine, or without digital assistance. Brain activity was measured throughout the process using EEG. Participants who relied on ChatGPT showed the lowest levels of neural engagement and performed worse not only in terms of brain activity, but also in language use and overall writing behavior. Over time, their effort declined even further, with many increasingly copying and pasting AI-generated text rather than actively composing their own essays (Kosmyna et al., 2025).

Further research on learning emphasizes that higher-order thinking depends on well-developed schemata – internal mental frameworks built through active recall, deliberate practice, and error correction. However, when learners consistently rely on AI tools for memory and reasoning, their schemata remain shallow. This limits intuitive understanding, knowledge transfer across domains, and the ability to detect errors (Oakley et al., 2025). The well-known “Google effect” reinforces this point: Easy access to information can lead individuals to remember how to find knowledge rather than to remember the knowledge itself (Sparrow et al., 2011).

### Cognitive offloading

Cognitive offloading involves using external aids, such as AI systems, digital tools, notes, or social networks, to minimize the mental effort needed to manage tasks and information. Although cognitive offloading can improve efficiency and free up cognitive resources, excessive reliance on external tools, especially AI, can reduce the necessity for deep cognitive involvement, which can negatively impact critical thinking, memory retention, and analytical abilities (Gerlich, 2025; Oakley et al., 2025).

**Example:** Constantly looking up information instead of internalizing it is like trying to complete a jigsaw puzzle by referring to the box image for each piece. The individual pieces may be correct, but the overall pattern is never internalized. Over time, excessive reliance on external sources makes recognizing patterns and recalling knowledge mentally exhausting and inefficient (Oakley et al., 2025).

These developments impact how audiences deal with public and corporate communications, but they are also relevant for communication professionals and their work. Overreliance on AI-generated recommendations can weaken autonomous judgment and promote convergence toward standardized outputs. Dependence on AI for routine and complex tasks may reduce opportunities for individuals to practice and develop their problem-solving and decision-making skills (Gerlich, 2025). In creative and analytical contexts, this reliance has been linked to reduced originality and stylistic homogenization (Niloy et al., 2024). These patterns limit the diversity of solutions, for example when producing and disseminating content. It also raises concerns about the long-term erosion of independent judgment and the narrowing of cognitive perspectives, which are both indispensable for advising top management.

»We first noticed the growing use of AI when colleagues outside the communications team submitted polished text suggestions. At first, the decline in small slips and grammatical inconsistencies felt like an improvement.

Over time, however, the content began to sound increasingly alike, revealing that people were presenting a level of writing expertise they didn't actually have. At that point, relying on AI started to feel counter-productive.«

**Peter Kretzschmar**, Head of Media and Communications DACH, BP



## RELEVANCE FOR CORPORATE COMMUNICATIONS

There are multiple implications for communication leaders and their teams related to the impact of GenAI on cognitive skills:

- ▶ **Team competencies and operations:** Implementing advanced AI systems like agents requires a mix of new competencies and experience to judge results. Overreliance on agentic output can lead to deskilling, which slows down processes and increases costs. However, when used thoughtfully, AI can enhance learning and support professional growth.
- ▶ **Communication services and products:** The output of communication departments may be too uniform

if they rely heavily on AI. There is also an increasing risk of poor content and low quality if team members lack experience and independent judgement.

- ▶ **Leadership load:** Communication leaders may face an increased burden if they need to close competence and quality gaps within their teams and among external suppliers.
- ▶ **Stakeholder communication:** Declining cognitive abilities among audiences can enhance the effectiveness of persuasion attempts, which is helpful in many situations where short messages and emotional appeals should be conveyed. Argumentative approaches, on the other hand, will be more difficult—for example, when it comes to finding common ground with critics and opponents.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR COMMUNICATION LEADERS AND PROFESSIONALS

- 1 **Prioritize coherence with core stakeholders:** Evaluate communication strategies primarily against the expectations, information needs, and cognitive frames of your core stakeholders, not against perceived shifts in mass attention or generalized preferences. As long as communication remains credible, relevant, and aligned with key audiences, reduced resonance in broader publics does not necessarily warrant a strategic adjustment.
- 2 **Critically review crisis communication readiness:** Crisis communication plans should be reassessed in light of growing uncertainty about information credibility and information processing. It becomes increasingly difficult to explain what can be considered reliable and what cannot during high-pressure situations, both internally and externally.

- 3 **Strengthen the media and AI literacy of your team:** These skills are more important than ever. Early-career professionals, in particular, benefit from strengthening their foundational knowledge of media systems, platform dynamics, and AI-generated content. This ensures they can critically assess and responsibly use these tools rather than implicitly relying on them.
- 4 **Use AI to strengthen, not replace, cognitive capabilities:** Integrate AI as a tool that enhances learning, analysis, and scenario thinking while preserving core cognitive skills. A strong foundation of internal knowledge and critical reasoning enables communication professionals to use AI strategically rather than as a substitute for understanding.

### QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- ▶ How can we preserve professional expertise individually and in our teams?
- ▶ How can we define and ensure the quality of communication in light of changing cognitive structures among all those involved?
- ▶ How can we ensure that messages still reach stakeholders and engage them effectively when cognitive capacity is reduced?
- ▶ In which situations do cognitive offloading and recipients' diminishing skills make our jobs easier, and in which situations do they pose the greatest challenge?
- ▶ Should corporate communications support critical discourse on the conditions shaping digital communication, or align with the broader push for technological innovation?

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## 4. POWER FLUX

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### CHANGING NETWORKS OF INFLUENCE THROUGH SOCIO-TECHNOLOGICAL TRENDS

Relationship management has long been a core objective of communication departments. It is one of the ways they contribute value to organizations. However, contemporary networks of influence are undergoing a structural reconfiguration, with direct implications for how relationships are initiated, maintained, and strategically managed. Changes in media consumption practices, platform governance, and work organization are overlapping and reshaping how influence is produced, distributed, and exercised in digital societies.

On the audience side, research consistently shows that traditional journalistic outlets are becoming less important, particularly to younger demographics, who consume news on social media and video platforms like YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok. On these platforms, individual creators often have more influence than traditional news organizations (Grbesa, 2025; Newman, 2026). This shift fragments the public sphere and blurs the lines between information, opinion, and entertainment. Additionally, digital platform companies have consolidated structural power extending well beyond markets into social and political life. Research on platform ecosystems shows that companies like Google, Apple, Meta, Amazon, and Microsoft act as infrastructural gatekeepers.

### The Politics of Platform Technologies

Digital platforms are modularized infrastructures that enable and govern interactions between users, businesses, and other ecosystem actors. They can facilitate social and economic activities such as communication, content sharing, online commerce, and access to services, and are central to the functioning of the modern digital economy (Degen & Gleiss, 2025; Spier, 2025).

According to research on the politics of technology (PoT), platforms are not neutral tools, but rather sociotechnical arrangements that embed specific values, redistribute power, and reinforce existing social orders when integrated into everyday practices (Spier, 2025). The dominant platform conglomerates – Google, Apple, Meta, Amazon, and Microsoft – have raised concerns about monopolization, regulatory circumvention, and the prioritization of corporate interests over the public interest. Although regulatory efforts, such as the EU Digital Markets Act, aim to curb excessive concentration, they have struggled to keep pace with platform expansion (Degen & Gleiss, 2025).



*»Even if it sounds simplistic, this brings us back to the fundamentals of stakeholder management. This means engaging in conversation, seeking explanations, exchanging perspectives, and being willing to enter difficult conversations. If these things are not done through direct, personal dialogue, it simply will not work.«*

*Dr. Matthias Krämer, Head of Corporate Communications,  
Siemens Healthineers*

They influence how information flows, how visibility is allocated, and how economic and social interactions are organized (Van Dijck, 2020; Degen & Gleiss, 2025; Zander, 2025). This power is often asymmetrical and opaque, rooted in control over data, algorithms, and ecosystem governance rather than direct coercion.

On the organizational side, internal influence structures are being reconfigured by the combined effects of hybrid work, digital technologies, and changing employee expectations. Although opportunities for fully remote and hybrid work have declined, hybrid arrangements remain the dominant model across Europe, accompanied by a growing mismatch between employees' strong preferences for remote work and the limited opportunities available (Burbridge, 2025). In hybrid and virtual settings, traditional indicators of hierarchical authority become less visible and, in practice, less effective. Research therefore points to the growing relevance of relational power, understood as the capacity to influence others through trust, recognition, access to information, and social exchange (Soga et al., 2022). However, the expansion of digital monitoring and surveillance tools introduces new power imbalances, demonstrating that influence is not only redistributed, but also contested (Burbridge, 2025).

## RELEVANCE FOR CORPORATE COMMUNICATIONS

Changes in power distribution create challenges and opportunities for communication leaders and their teams:

- ▶ **Conceptual leaps:** Communication professionals must constantly review and rethink established ideas about information processing, media use, and opinion building.
- ▶ **Relationship management:** Shifting power networks alter the relevance of actors and institutions, requiring communicators to continuously map and engage with stakeholders in ways that strengthen collaboration and influence.
- ▶ **Communication strategies and activities:** Depending on how power is distributed, some communication approaches may become more effective while others may encounter greater challenges.
- ▶ **Internal communication and leadership:** Communication leaders need to establish processes and formats that both support and channel informal networks and digital relationships within their organizations.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR COMMUNICATION LEADERS AND PROFESSIONALS

- 1 Invest in relational power:** In distributed environments, relational power increasingly determines who can mobilize attention, coordination, and commitment (Soga et al., 2022). Building relational power involves establishing trust, granting access to information, recognizing contributions, and encouraging social interaction across teams and departments.
- 2 Identify and support facilitators in your team:** Influence often gravitates toward individuals who connect people, align contributions, and enable collaboration, regardless of their formal role. Facilitators play a critical role in generating collective intelligence by integrating diverse expertise and fostering trust within teams (Zaki, 2025).
- 3 Critically reevaluate and map stakeholder networks:** Communication leaders should regularly map and reassess their stakeholder networks to maintain situational awareness. This includes evaluating whether existing engagement strategies align with organizational goals and determining if established relationships require renewed attention or adjustment.
- 4 Foster adaptability and relational resilience:** In contemporary organizations, power is increasingly situational, fluctuating across projects, networks, and technological contexts. Therefore, communication teams should invest in adaptability to respond to shifting priorities, workflows, and external pressures. Resilient influence emerges less from control and more from the ability to reconfigure relationships as conditions change (Jones, 2025; Soga et al., 2022).

## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- ▶ How can communicators establish and uphold stakeholder relations as traditional media and networks weaken?
- ▶ With smaller teams, how much should communication units focus on personal engagement to sustain trust?
- ▶ How can stakeholder relations and influence be tracked effectively, and how many resources should be allocated to this?

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## FURTHER READING

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**Big tech's overpowering influence: Risks to markets and your money.** J. Osman (2024). Forbes. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/jimosman/2024/06/30/big-techs-overpowering-influence-risks-to-markets-and-your-money/>

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## 5. STRATEGIC SUBTRACTION

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### INCREASING VALUE BY DELIBERATE REMOVAL AND SIMPLIFICATION

Organizations may underperform relative to their competitors for a variety of reasons, one of which is excessive internal complexity. Especially in organizations that have grown organically over time, layers of processes, roles, technologies, and governance mechanisms tend to accumulate. This complexity puts a strain on an organization's attention and decision-making capacity, negatively affecting key functions such as market adaptation, value creation processes, and human resource management (Beyer & Ullrich, 2022). As complexity increases, organizational energy is often dispersed across a growing number of low-impact activities rather than concentrated on initiatives that generate strategic value. For example, a recent study found that knowledge workers spend nearly half of their workday on tasks they perceive as low-impact, suggesting a significant misallocation of effort and attention (Wrike, 2024). Furthermore, although many organizations recognize that an excess of initiatives obscures strategic priorities and hinders execution, they often struggle to terminate projects to free up resources and managerial focus (Nieto-Rodriguez, 2025).

Digital transformation further intensifies this complexity. While digital technologies enable new ways of working and collaborating, organizations often approach transformation by adding new tools, platforms, and routines without removing outdated technologies or practices.

This additive focus increases complexity by allowing new routines to coexist with legacy systems rather than replacing them (Zimmer et al., 2023). According to Adams et al. (2021), these patterns persist because they are rooted in a fundamental cognitive tendency: People tend to default to additive solutions when asked to improve a system or solve a problem. Subtractive alternatives are often overlooked, even when they would be more effective.

#### Additive bias

Additive bias is the cognitive tendency of humans to solve problems by adding elements, such as tasks, features, or initiatives, while overlooking the option of removing existing ones. Adding feels intuitive and efficient, while subtracting requires more deliberate thought and conscious reflection (Neroni, 2025). Because additive strategies are used more frequently, they become more accessible over time. Unless subtraction is explicitly considered, individuals and organizations tend to equate improvement with "more". Overcoming this bias requires metacognitive awareness – the ability to question underlying assumptions and habitual patterns of thinking. Doing so can enhance cognitive flexibility and creative problem-solving, increase organizational efficiency, and support more sustainable practices (Neroni, 2025).

Strategic subtraction provides a deliberate counterpoint to this bias. The concept is not new. As early as 1996, Michael Porter – one of the world’s most influential management thinkers – emphasized that the essence of strategy is knowing what not to do. Strategic subtraction involves more than eliminating distractions; it also requires decisions to terminate processes and the range, features, variants of products, and services that no longer deliver value.

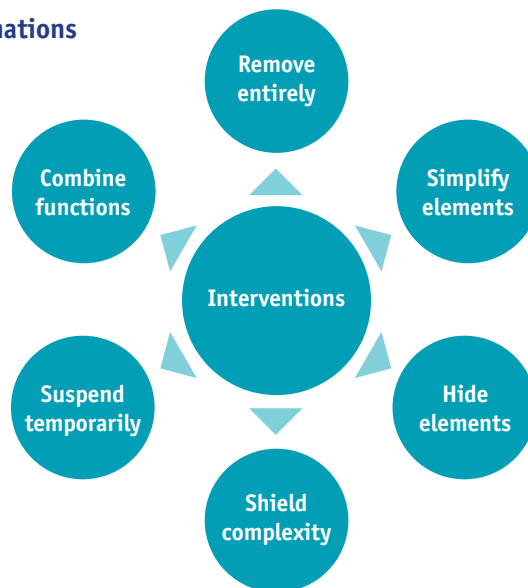
However, subtraction should not be confused with indiscriminate cost-cutting. Although eliminating waste and streamlining operations can help organizations respond to uncertainty, focusing solely on efficiency can produce fragile systems that lack resilience and visibility (Govindarajan et al., 2025). Effective strategic subtrac-

tion requires intentional, carefully designed interventions rather than reactive reductions. The focus should be on reducing the use of time and resources, while maintaining the ability to adapt. At the same time, activities must remain visible and appealing to key stakeholders (Govindarajan et al., 2025).

When organizations consistently apply subtraction, energy, budgets, and talent flow toward fewer, higher-value initiatives, accelerating delivery and sharpening strategic focus. Instead of hindering performance, doing less – deliberately and strategically – can improve clarity, motivation, and organizational effectiveness (Nieto-Rodriguez, 2025).

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### Six core subtractive transformations



Source: Adapted from Govindarajan et al., 2025

### RELEVANCE FOR CORPORATE COMMUNICATIONS

Strategic subtraction presents multiple opportunities and possibilities for communication leaders and their teams:

- ▶ **Mandate and portfolio:** Communication departments face a growing need to review and renegotiate their responsibilities and deliverables, ensuring that priorities are aligned with corporate goals.

- ▶ **Operating model:** The adjustment of planning policies, success criteria, incentives, processes, and platforms is a prerequisite for focusing on less rather than more.

- ▶ **Communication activities:** There is an increasing demand to measure and evaluate communication output, outcomes, and impact using frameworks designed around strategic subtraction, ensuring that every activity adds meaningful value.



»For the past two years, we've used the OKR method, sharing our outcomes and priorities with the executive board every six months. This approach has enabled our communications team to work in a more data-driven manner, focus on clearly prioritized topics rather than "nice-to-have" activities, and measure their impact. At the same time, this approach strengthens the strategic position of corporate communications within the company and fosters a greater understanding of its role.«

**Salvatore Ruggiero**, Vice President Marketing & Communication, Schott

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR COMMUNICATION LEADERS AND PROFESSIONALS

- 1 Foster a culture of subtraction:** Treat the decision to stop, pause, or reprioritize communication initiatives as a positive strategic action, not a failure. Leaders should recognize and celebrate these choices to signal that reducing low-impact activities creates value.
- 2 Embed subtraction into core processes:** Instead of making a one-time decision, incorporate strategic subtraction into planning and prioritization. Always make continuation a conscious choice to prevent unnecessary projects from cluttering portfolios and diluting focus.
- 3 Align strategic priorities with daily work:** Use agile frameworks, such as OKRs (Objectives and Key Results), to connect high-level communication strategy with everyday team activities. This helps to maintain a clear focus on impactful activities and strengthens the strategic position of corporate communications within the organization.

## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- ▶ How can communication teams embrace the idea that less activity and complexity can boost impact?
- ▶ How can communicators manage clients' expectations when simplifying requires cutting "standard" services?
- ▶ Should corporate communications lead a cultural shift in organizations by emphasizing focus and subtraction as drivers of clarity, credibility, and success?

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**ACADEMIC SOCIETY**  
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The Academic Society for Management & Communication is a non-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 professors from 5 leading universities and more than 50 international corporate partners.

The Academic Society initiates practical, forward-looking research projects. These extensive, multidisciplinary studies are designed to support the ongoing profes-

sionalization of corporate communications. In recent years, more than 40 research projects have been carried out in areas such as virtual corporate communications, digitalization, value creation, and diversity. In 2020, the Academic Society started the research series Communications Trend Radar. On an annual basis, five key trends in the areas of management, society and technology are identified. This year's Communication Management Radar represents a continuation of the Communications Trend Radar. Through an optimized methodological approach – including earlier involvement of practitioners – and a broader thematic focus, the Communication Management Radar provides a platform for dialogue, inspiration, and the scientifically grounded advancement of communication practice. 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.

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