
Editorial 31.5: From stakeholders to communicative actors: agency, relationships and responsibility in corporate communication

Corporate
Communications:
An International
Journal

661

Corporate communication has traditionally focused on organizations and the stakeholders, *publics*, employees, consumers and communities with whom organizations communicate. These categories remain useful because they help scholars identify relationships, distinguish organizational constituencies and examine differences in expectations, communication needs and behavior. However, corporate communication has historically privileged organizations as communicative agents. For example, much of the field still implicitly begins with the assumption that organizations send messages to stakeholders or *publics*, and organizations almost always initiate that communication. Even relational approaches can retain the organization as the entity initiating communication. However, an argument can be made that contemporary corporate communication has multiple communicative centers such as employees, executives, practitioners, consumers, activists and *publics* who now produce and circulate communication independently. In other words, formal organizational authority and communicative authority are no longer identical. For example, employees increasingly communicate publicly about organizations, while consumers distribute and reinterpret corporate messages and stakeholders form their own networks through which they produce alternative accounts of organizational behavior. Communication professionals have also gained greater autonomy through digital technologies while simultaneously becoming more dependent on the technological systems through which communication is produced and circulated. Employees can advocate for organizations, criticize them, construct professional identities independently of them or refuse to participate in organizational narratives altogether. *Publics*, meanwhile, can amplify corporate communication far beyond its intended reach or make organizational messages visible for reasons that organizations neither intended nor control.

Corporate communication, therefore, increasingly takes place among multiple communicative actors. This does not mean that organizations have ceased to matter as centers of communicative power, nor does it mean that communication has somehow become democratized merely because more people can speak. Rather, the changing communication environment requires closer examination of communicative agency, which can be examined by extending Lasswell's (1948) questions about who communicates, what is communicated, through which channels and with what effects to ask the following questions: who can communicate, under what conditions, with what degree of autonomy, through which resources and technologies and with what consequences. Such a perspective extends longstanding debates about relationships, stakeholders, voice and participation. It also introduces a more difficult question: if contemporary corporate communication involves increasingly distributed forms of agency, how should the field understand the relationship between agency, power and responsibility?

From stakeholders to actors

Stakeholder theory provided an important corrective to narrowly managerial understandings of organizations by recognizing that organizational decisions affect, and are affected by, multiple groups (Freeman, 1984). Public relations and corporate communication subsequently developed increasingly sophisticated approaches to *publics*, relationships and stakeholder



Corporate Communications: An
International Journal
Vol. 31 No. 5, 2026
pp. 661-667
© Emerald Publishing Limited
e-ISSN: 1758-6046
p-ISSN: 1356-3289
DOI 10.1108/CCJ-09-2026-412

communication. Relationship management, for example, shifted attention away from communication as message production toward the quality of relationships between organizations and their *publics* (Ledingham, 2003). On the other hand, internal communication research similarly challenged simplistic understandings of employees as a homogeneous internal audience. Welch and Jackson (2007), for example, argued for a stakeholder approach to internal communication that recognizes multiple employee constituencies and communicative relationships. These developments were relevant because they moved the field beyond models centered primarily on organizational information transmission, toward a more relational understanding of employees as differentiated internal stakeholders. Nevertheless, the language of stakeholders and *publics* can still imply that people occupy relatively stable positions around an organization. They become employees, consumers, community members, investors or activists and are subsequently studied in terms of organizational strategies for communicating with them. Contemporary communication environments make these boundaries increasingly difficult to maintain: an employee can simultaneously be an organizational member, a professional brand, an online content creator and an external source of information about an employer. For example, a consumer can become a highly visible commentator on corporate conduct; members of the public can redistribute organizational communication while adding interpretations that alter its meaning, and communication practitioners can use their individual professional visibility to speak beyond formal organizational channels. The communicative role of an individual, therefore, cannot always be inferred from their formal stakeholder category. This is why it may be useful to think more explicitly in terms of communicative actors. The term shifts attention from *what people are in relation to an organization* toward *what they can do communicatively*. It directs attention toward action: speaking, sharing, advocating, interpreting, resisting, withholding, representing and circulating communication and it also makes relationships more, rather than less, important.

Agency as relational

Communicative agency should not be understood only as individual freedom to speak because people's willingness and ability to communicate are shaped by their relationships with organizations and other organizational actors. Organizational support, trust, identification, leadership, workplace culture and perceptions of inclusion can all affect whether individuals participate, advocate, innovate, challenge or remain silent. This is particularly visible in organizational settings.

Employee literature has long distinguished between the formal opportunity to communicate and employees' willingness to exercise that opportunity. Employees may possess channels through which concerns can theoretically be expressed while nevertheless concluding that speaking is personally risky, professionally pointless or culturally inappropriate (Morrison, 2011). Listening, therefore, matters just as much as speaking. I have previously asked whether organizations are truly listening rather than simply creating more opportunities for communication (Topić, 2023a). This distinction remains important because a communicative environment can contain extensive channels, platforms and opportunities for participation while still concentrating meaningful communicative authority in relatively few hands.

Agency is relational: individuals become more or less able to act communicatively partly because of the relationships and environments within which they operate. This also explains why workplace culture deserves greater attention in corporate communication research (Topić-Rutherford and Chmiel, 2026). Culture communicates expectations about appropriate behavior, authority and belonging even when those expectations are not formally articulated (Schein and Schein, 2017; Topić, 2024). In my research on public relations workplaces in England, informal interaction and apparently ordinary workplace banter contributed to gendered understandings of professional behavior and belonging, which in turn affected

perceived opportunities for career progression (Topić, 2021, 2023c). Such communication illustrates why organizational participation cannot be understood solely through the availability of formal channels or policies: informal communication and workplace behavior also influence participation and organizational outcomes.

Communication may be open in principle and constrained in practice. Research on gender in public relations similarly demonstrates that numerical presence does not automatically translate into equal organizational power or leadership opportunities (Topić *et al.*, 2020). This distinction is essential when discussing communicative agency because increasing the number of voices present in an organization does not necessarily make those voices equally consequential. The question is, therefore, not simply *who can speak* but also *who is heard, who is believed, who can speak without disproportionate risk and whose communication has organizational consequences* (Morrison and Milliken, 2000; Morrison, 2011).

Employees as public communicators

One particularly important consequence of distributed communicative agency is the changing position of employees who have traditionally occupied a somewhat unusual position in corporate communication. In other words, employees are simultaneously organizational members and important communicative intermediaries between organizations and external publics.

Digital and professional platforms have expanded this role considerably. Employees increasingly possess their own audiences. Digital platforms allow individuals to construct visible identities that overlap with but are not reducible to, organizational identity. Employees can advocate for organizations, communicate professional expertise, build personal brands and develop networks whose value may extend beyond their current employment. This changes the relationship between employee communication and corporate communication.

Employee advocacy cannot simply be treated as another channel of organizational promotion. Advocacy has value partly because the employee is perceived as possessing an identity distinct from the organization's formal communication machinery. If advocacy becomes entirely scripted, the very independence that contributes to its credibility may disappear. This creates an organizational tension; however, organizations may benefit from employee communicative agency while simultaneously wanting to manage it. The same tension exists when employees communicate critically: organizations cannot plausibly celebrate employee authenticity only when employees say favorable things. A serious understanding of communicative agency must, therefore, include the possibility that actors use communication in ways that conflict with organizational objectives. This is one reason why contemporary corporate communication should be cautious about treating employee advocacy, engagement and influence exclusively as resources to be activated. Employees are not organizational media: they are communicative actors whose relationship with organizations influences (but does not fully determine) their communicative behavior.

Technology and the redistribution of agency

Digital transformation intensifies these questions. I have previously argued that discussions of digital transformation need to remain focused on humans rather than treating technology as an autonomous force that simply transforms communication (Topić, 2023b). This becomes even more important with the increasing use of artificial intelligence (AI) in communication practice. AI is frequently discussed through efficiency: content can be generated more quickly, information can be analyzed more extensively, audiences can be segmented more precisely and routine communication tasks can be automated. However, these developments are also questions of agency: Who makes the communicative decision when an AI system recommends a strategy? Who authors communication produced through generative systems? Who is accountable when communication is inaccurate, biased or misleading?

What happens to professional expertise when communicative labor becomes increasingly distributed between human practitioners and technological systems?

Research into AI in communication management has already demonstrated that practitioners perceive significant opportunities alongside substantial ethical, professional and knowledge-related challenges (Zerfass *et al.*, 2020). The next stage of research should go further: rather than asking how AI changes communication practice, researchers should examine *how AI redistributes communicative agency*.

Some forms of agency may expand: junior practitioners may gain access to capabilities previously requiring specialist expertise; small organizations may be able to produce communication at a scale once available only to organizations with substantial resources; other forms of agency may contract; professional decisions may become increasingly shaped by algorithmic recommendations; creative work may become standardized around technological outputs; organizational expectations may change as AI increases the speed at which communication can theoretically be produced, and so on. Technology, therefore, does not simply increase or decrease agency; it redistributes it. The consequences are unlikely to be identical across organizational hierarchies, professional groups or social categories. This is particularly significant because technology is often discussed as though access alone produced empowerment. Digital communication has repeatedly demonstrated the limitations of this assumption. Visibility is uneven, platform architectures privilege particular communication practices and algorithmic systems mediate what becomes visible. Technological agency is consequently inseparable from communicative power.

Publics and the circulation of information

Distributed agency is equally visible outside organizations. Traditional communication models often imply that organizations control the distribution of their own messages while digital platforms make that assumption increasingly difficult to sustain. Organizations may originate communication but *publics* influence whether it circulates. Sharing, commenting, remixing and contextualizing corporate communication can substantially alter its reach and meaning. Corporate messages may become visible because audiences admire them, condemn them, ridicule them or consider them morally significant. Circulation, therefore, represents its own form of communicative agency. This distinction also raises questions about how corporate communication evaluates success: visibility cannot automatically be equated with persuasion, engagement cannot automatically be equated with support and sharing cannot automatically be interpreted as endorsement. As corporate communication becomes increasingly dependent on audience circulation, organizations must pay greater attention to why *publics* choose to make particular communication visible. This reinforces the importance of moving beyond transmission models. Communication does not simply travel from organizations to *publics*; it enters communicative environments in which other actors decide what to do with it.

Silence as communicative agency

There is, however, a danger in equating agency entirely with increased communication. Voice, participation and visibility are commonly presented as positive developments. In many circumstances they are. Historically marginalized organizational actors have frequently struggled precisely because they lacked meaningful opportunities to speak or because their communication was ignored. Yet agency can also involve choosing not to communicate. Silence has often been interpreted negatively in organizational communication: as absence, disengagement, suppression or failure to respond (Morrison and Milliken, 2000; Pinder and Harlos, 2001). These interpretations are important, particularly where employees or *publics* remain silent because speaking carries risk. But not all silence is imposed. Organizations, practitioners and individuals can strategically choose not to enter particular communicative

exchanges. They can refuse to comment, decline to amplify controversy or decide that responding would give additional legitimacy or visibility to a claim. This complicates common assumptions about communication. If communicative agency means the capacity to make meaningful choices about communicative action, then agency must include the choice not to speak. The distinction between choosing silence and being silenced is, therefore, essential. A powerful organization refusing to respond to criticism possesses a different form of agency from an employee who remains silent because challenging a manager threatens their career. Both may appear as an absence of communication but the conditions producing that absence are fundamentally different. Corporate communication research should consequently examine silence relationally and structurally rather than treating it simply as a communication deficit. Who has the power to remain silent? Who is expected to explain? Who can refuse communicative participation without penalty? Who is interpreted negatively when they do not speak? These questions bring communicative agency directly into questions of power.

This distinction between imposed and intentional silence has become increasingly important in communication research. Organizational scholarship has traditionally examined silence primarily in relation to employees withholding information, concerns or opinions, often because organizational conditions make speaking appear risky or ineffective (Morrison and Milliken, 2000; Pinder and Harlos, 2001). Public relations and corporate communication research, however, has increasingly recognized that silence can also represent a deliberate communicative choice. Le et al. (2019), for example, demonstrated that organizations can use different forms of strategic silence in crisis communication and that the consequences depend partly on why silence is adopted and how it is subsequently managed. Archetti (2022) similarly argued for a broader understanding of silence in public communication, showing that silence cannot always be reduced to a simple absence of speech. These approaches are useful because they move the discussion away from the assumption that more communication is necessarily better communication. Silence can indicate exclusion and powerlessness but it can also represent choice, resistance, restraint or strategy. The analytical problem is, therefore, not to decide whether silence is inherently positive or negative but to establish the conditions under which silence occurs, who controls it and what communicative consequences follow.

Agency as responsibility

Greater communicative agency also generates greater responsibility. This applies to organizations, practitioners, employees and *publics*, although responsibilities differ according to power, role and circumstance. Communication professionals face particularly significant questions because digital technologies have expanded their capacity to create, target and distribute communication. AI further extends these possibilities. Greater technical capacity, however, should not be confused with greater ethical legitimacy. Strategic communication has always involved questions of influence and organizational interest (Hallahan et al., 2007). Digital technologies intensify rather than resolve these tensions: the ability to personalize communication does not automatically justify every form of personalization, just as the growing ability to collect and analyze data does not remove privacy concerns. Similarly, automating communication does not remove responsibility for its consequences. Increased technological capacity may expand what communication professionals are able to do but it does not resolve the ethical question of what they should do.

Communicative agency, therefore, needs to be connected to responsibility. This principle also applies to organizations seeking advocacy from employees. Encouraging employees to become visible organizational advocates creates responsibilities toward those employees. Organizations cannot reasonably expect workers to mobilize personal identities and professional networks on behalf of organizational objectives without recognizing the risks and labor involved. Similarly, organizations promoting openness and voice acquire responsibility for how dissenting communication is treated. Agency without consequences for organizational listening risks becoming symbolic participation.

Toward a research agenda for communicative agency

A communicative-agency perspective opens several directions for corporate communication research. First, researchers should pay greater attention to differences between access to communication and communicative power. Having a platform, channel or opportunity to speak does not mean possessing equivalent influence. Second, agency should be examined relationally because advocacy, engagement, innovation, voice and silence are not simply personal characteristics. They emerge partly from organizational relationships, leadership, culture and perceptions of support. Third, corporate communication should investigate movement between stakeholder roles. Employees increasingly become external communicators; consumers become distributors of corporate messages; professional communicators develop personal brands; and organizational actors participate simultaneously in multiple communicative networks. Fourth, technological change should be analyzed in terms of how it reallocates communicative possibilities and constraints. AI in particular requires research into authorship, professional autonomy, expertise, accountability and unequal access to technological resources. Fifth, silence deserves greater conceptual attention. The field has understandably emphasized voice, dialogue and participation but communicative agency also includes decisions about when not to communicate. Research must distinguish strategic non-participation from silencing and exclusion. Finally, corporate communication should examine responsibility alongside agency. The ability to communicate does not exist independently of organizational power, professional ethics or social consequences.

The themes represented in this issue demonstrate the increasing complexity of these questions. Research examines organizational support and innovation, leadership, informal communication, diversity and organizational relationships, stakeholder categorization, employee advocacy and influence, AI-mediated communication and employee engagement, ethical practice, strategic silence and the circulation of corporate communication. These themes point toward a broader shift in corporate communication: stakeholders are not simply endpoints of organizational strategy; employees are not merely internal audiences; *publics* are not simply receivers of corporate messages; communication practitioners are not neutral transmitters of organizational decisions. All are communicative actors, although they do not possess equal communicative resources or power.

The task for corporate communication research is, therefore, not simply to identify new channels through which organizations can communicate with stakeholders but to understand an increasingly complex environment in which multiple actors communicate about, through, for, with and sometimes against organizations. Recognizing agency is the first step; understanding how that agency is structured, constrained and made consequential should be the next.

Martina Topic-Rutherford

References

- Archetti, C. (2022), "When public relations can heal: an embodied theory of silence for public communication", *Public Relations Inquiry*, Vol. 11 No. 1, pp. 37-56, doi: [10.1177/2046147X211014095](https://doi.org/10.1177/2046147X211014095).
- Freeman, R.E. (1984), *Strategic Management: A Stakeholder Approach*, Pitman, Boston.
- Hallahan, K., Holtzhausen, D., van Ruler, B., Verčič, D. and Sriramesh, K. (2007), "Defining strategic communication", *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, Vol. 1 No. 1, pp. 3-35, doi: [10.1080/15531180701285244](https://doi.org/10.1080/15531180701285244).
- Lasswell, H.D. (1948), "The structure and function of communication in society", in Bryson, L. (Ed.), *The Communication of Ideas*, Harper & Brothers, New York, pp. 37-51.

- Le, P.D., Teo, H.X., Pang, A., Li, Y. and Goh, C. (2019), "When is silence golden? The use of strategic silence in crisis communication", *Corporate Communications: An International Journal*, Vol. 24 No. 1, pp. 162-178, doi: [10.1108/CCIJ-10-2018-0108](https://doi.org/10.1108/CCIJ-10-2018-0108).
- Ledingham, J.A. (2003), "Explicating relationship management as a general theory of public relations", *Journal of Public Relations Research*, Vol. 15 No. 2, pp. 181-198, doi: [10.1207/S1532754XJPRR1502_4](https://doi.org/10.1207/S1532754XJPRR1502_4).
- Morrison, E.W. (2011), "Employee voice behavior: integration and directions for future research", *Academy of Management Annals*, Vol. 5 No. 1, pp. 373-412, doi: [10.5465/19416520.2011.574506](https://doi.org/10.5465/19416520.2011.574506).
- Morrison, E.W. and Milliken, F.J. (2000), "Organizational silence: a barrier to change and development in a pluralistic world", *The Academy of Management Review*, Vol. 25 No. 4, pp. 706-725, doi: [10.5465/amr.2000.3707697](https://doi.org/10.5465/amr.2000.3707697).
- Pinder, C.C. and Harlos, K.P. (2001), "Employee silence: quiescence and acquiescence as responses to perceived injustice", *Research in Personnel and Human Resources Management*, Vol. 20, pp. 331-369, doi: [10.1016/S0742-7301\(01\)20007-3](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0742-7301(01)20007-3).
- Schein, E.H. and Schein, P.A. (2017), *Organizational Culture and Leadership*, 5th ed., Wiley, Hoboken, NJ.
- Topić, M. (2021), "Fluffy PR and 'comms girls': banter, social interactions and the office culture in public relations in England", *International Journal of Organizational Analysis*, Vol. 29 No. 5, pp. 1321-1336, doi: [10.1108/IJOA-09-2020-2423](https://doi.org/10.1108/IJOA-09-2020-2423).
- Topić, M. (2023a), "Editorial 28.1: are we truly listening?", *Corporate Communications: An International Journal*, Vol. 28 No. 1, pp. 1-5, doi: [10.1108/CCIJ-01-2023-171](https://doi.org/10.1108/CCIJ-01-2023-171).
- Topić, M. (2023b), "Editorial 28.2: digital transformation and humans", *Corporate Communications: An International Journal*, Vol. 28 No. 2, pp. 169-175, doi: [10.1108/CCIJ-03-2023-172](https://doi.org/10.1108/CCIJ-03-2023-172).
- Topić, M. (2023c), *Workplace Culture in Mass Communication Industries*, Routledge, London.
- Topić, M. (2024), "Editorial 29.3: workplace culture", *Corporate Communications: An International Journal*, Vol. 29 No. 3, pp. 281-284, doi: [10.1108/CCIJ-05-2024-181](https://doi.org/10.1108/CCIJ-05-2024-181).
- Topić, M., Cunha, M.J., Reigstad, A., Jelen-Sanchez, A. and Moreno, Á. (2020), "Women in public relations (1982-2019)", *Journal of Communication Management*, Vol. 24 No. 4, pp. 391-407, doi: [10.1108/JCOM-11-2019-0143](https://doi.org/10.1108/JCOM-11-2019-0143).
- Topić-Rutherford, M. and Chmiel, M. (Eds) (2026), *Leadership and Workplace Culture in Public Relations Industries*, Routledge, London.
- Welch, M. and Jackson, P.R. (2007), "Rethinking internal communication: a stakeholder approach", *Corporate Communications: An International Journal*, Vol. 12 No. 2, pp. 177-198, doi: [10.1108/13563280710744847](https://doi.org/10.1108/13563280710744847).
- Zerfass, A., Hagelstein, J. and Tench, R. (2020), "Artificial intelligence in communication management: a cross-national study on adoption and knowledge, impact, challenges and risks", *Journal of Communication Management*, Vol. 24 No. 4, pp. 377-389, doi: [10.1108/JCOM-10-2019-0137](https://doi.org/10.1108/JCOM-10-2019-0137).