

Exploring and assessing issue communication – issue communication practices and consequences of issue response strategies for organizational reputation and legitimacy

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Abstract

Purpose – Although issue management has received ample attention, changes in the media landscape and increased societal scrutiny are currently challenging organizations' communicative handling of issues. This raises the question of how communication professionals currently perceive and communicatively deal with issues, and what impact issue response strategies have when organizations are addressed regarding their involvement in an issue.

Design/methodology/approach – We explore issue communication perceptions and practices by communication professionals in two focus groups. A subsequent experimental study assesses the consequences of issue response strategies for corporate reputation and legitimacy and examines to what extent this relationship can be explained by skepticism while taking issue phase into account.

Findings – Although most issue communication practices (still) resemble earlier descriptions, the focus groups also indicate the importance of timing and medium of issue communication. The experiment shows that organizations are better off responding to an issue than not responding at all. Organizations should choose for an accommodative or adaptive response to positively impact reputation and legitimacy, and should be aware of the phase of an issue. Remarkably, these empirical differences only apply for a sustainability issue, not for a social issue.

Originality/value – The focus group study illuminates current issue monitoring and communication practices in today's challenging media and societal landscape. The subsequent experiment enhances our understanding of a sub-field of issue communication: the communicative options of organizations when they are the addressed actor in issues.

Keywords Issue communication, Reputation, Legitimacy, Focus groups, Experiment

Paper type Research paper



Introduction

Although “issues” in the organizational environment are a timeless phenomenon, the urgency to managerially and communicatively handle them has increased over time (van der Meer and Jonkman, 2021; Mahoney, 2021). Since the 1970s, in which the management of issues by organizations emerged, the field has gone through several developments; following changes in society, the media landscape and organizational management (Illia and Colleoni, 2023; Jaques, 2012; Waymer and Heath, 2023). The communicative handling of issues is currently – again – in flux; mainly as a consequence of two developments.

First of all, while news and social media often serve as platforms for the communicative construction of issues (Vos *et al.*, 2014), the media landscape is in a process of profound change. Mediatization, i.e. the impact of media logic, has changed the visibility and portrayal of organizations in media content (van der Meer and Jonkman, 2021). Digitalization has lowered the threshold for stakeholders, citizens and activists to voice and amplify their evaluations of organizational issue-handling. This challenges communication by organizations: They can exert less control in these online “arenas” (Badham *et al.*, 2023). The changes in the media landscape may also challenge a central element in the understanding and empirical study of issues: The idea of issue lifecycles. These changes enable quick transitions of issues from their latent or emerging phase to an active or crisis phase, in which the pressure on the organization is higher (Illia and Colleoni, 2023).

Second, society increasingly expects organizations to take responsibility (Holmström, 2020), for instance on social (e.g. equal payment, social inequality and #MeToo) and sustainable topics (e.g. environmental pollution by companies, single-use plastics). These are also listed as important strategic issues by communication professionals (Zerfass *et al.*, 2020). Communicative participation in issue arenas to discuss such issues with stakeholders provides organizations with branding and norm-setting opportunities, but can also be threatening to organizational legitimacy and reputation (Vos *et al.*, 2014). These threats arise from public skepticism regarding the “gap” between organizational talks and actions related to issues identified by the public (Vos *et al.*, 2014; Waymer and Heath, 2023).

Since the media landscape, stakeholder expectations and the practice of communicatively dealing with issues have changed over the years (Holmström, 2020; Jaques, 2012) and given that issue monitoring and environmental sensitivity are generally recognized as tasks and traits of communication professionals (Strauß and Jonkman, 2017), the question arises how communication professionals currently perceive and communicatively deal with issues.

In addition, it is relevant to examine the consequences of organizations’ communicative approaches on public perceptions of the organization when they are the addressed actor in issues. A number of studies explicitly addressed rhetorical (Heath, 2006) or communication strategies used in issue arenas (Luoma-aho *et al.*, 2013; Lock, 2020; Jacobs *et al.*, 2021). Organizations can feel “forced” to respond, which makes “issue response strategies” a subcategory of the practice of issue communication. Although the enhancement of legitimacy and reputation are core goals of strategic communication in general and have received ample academic attention, also in relation to issues (Choi *et al.*, 2024), yet, to our knowledge, analyses of issue *response* strategies did not explicitly focus on the impact of those strategies on legitimacy and reputation. Furthermore, the quicker transitions between issue phases can influence communication professionals’ issue communication approaches and the consequences of issue response strategies. We therefore first investigated in a focus group study (1) how communication professionals perceive “issues” in the current media and societal landscape and which practices they use to monitor and communicatively handle issues in different issue phases; and subsequently experimentally tested (2) how issue response strategies impact public perceptions of the organization when they are the addressed actor in different issue phases.

Theoretical framework

Issues as strategic communication challenges

Jaques (2009, 2012) observed that in efforts to define an “issue”, three themes often emerged: “Disputation”, referring to public differences in viewpoints, “expectation”, conceptualizing an issue “as a gap between the actions and performance of an organisation and the expectations of its stakeholders and the public” (Jaques, 2012, p. 37) and “impact” to the consequences of the matter for the organization. In addition, Waymer and Heath (2023) emphasize the rhetorical aspects of issues and discuss the content of the dispute in great detail: Issues concern contestable matters related to policies, values, identity, place and facts. We follow Mahoney (2021) and Waymer and Heath (2023) who echo earlier mentioned aspects: An issue contains a disagreement or contestation as a central element, is strategic given the risk of organizational impact, is located outside the organization and can be raised deliberately by self-interested actors.

Issue *management* can be described as: “the management of organizational and community resources through the public policy process to advance organizational interests and rights by striking a mutual balance with those of stakeholders” (Heath, 2006, pp. 67–68). We focus on the narrower concept of issue communication. Ideally, issue management and therefore issue communication is proactive (Jaques, 2012). However, in today’s challenging media and societal landscape, an organization can also be forced in an issue by other actors which enforce a communicative response (Hellsten *et al.*, 2019; Luoma-aho and Vos, 2010). We label this specific type of issue communication “issue response strategies” that refer to the communicative strategies that organizations can deploy in response to issues in which they are addressed as an actor.

Issue response strategies

Although a number of studies explicitly empirically analyzed communication in issue arenas (Luoma-aho *et al.*, 2013; Lock, 2020; Jacobs *et al.*, 2021), we miss an explicit assessment of issue response strategies related to “forced” issues. Hence, potential strategies can be derived from related fields, such as crisis communication (given the relatedness between the concepts), webcare (as organizations are also forced to respond, albeit in a different context) and public affairs (given its focus on the organization’s relation with socio-political topics).

First, in all situations in which organizations are addressed, they have the choice whether to respond or not. From the field of webcare, it is known that no response is detrimental for corporate reputation (e.g. van Noort *et al.*, 2015). Second, if an organization decides to respond, several strategies can be derived from the field of crisis communication. Although we consider issues as less severe in terms of its consequences for the organization and impact on its stakeholders, we do see the value of crisis communication strategies for issue response strategies, as “issues bear the potential risk of emerging in a severe crisis” (Koch *et al.*, 2019, p. 4). Another important similarity is that organizations are presented with the choice to either deny or accept their *involvement in the issue*. A first potential communication strategy is therefore associated with the first position: A *defensive strategy*, in which the organization downplays or denies the connection between the organization and the issue, or aims to shift the responsibility (Coombs, 2007; van Noort *et al.*, 2015).

The acceptance of involvement in the issue is related to the subsequent choice that organizations have to make in their response when being addressed: The fields of crisis communication, webcare and public affairs describe the degree to which organizations are open for meeting the perceived “demands” of the issue, or stakeholders involved in that issue (Coombs, 2007; Mezmar and Nigh, 1995; van Noort *et al.*, 2015). If the organization is willing to accept its involvement and/or responsibility towards the issue, it can respond in an *accommodative* manner which is more favorable for the organization’s reputation than a defensive strategy (van Noort *et al.*, 2015).

Organizational responses to external problems can go beyond mere communicative involvement related to a single case. They can bring along substantive actions, for instance, policy changes or reflection on organizational practices (see also [Bouwman and Berens, 2024](#)). Here, the organization takes the issue as a starting point to review its own practices and, where possible, permanently adapts them toward the new norms ([Meznar and Nigh, 1995](#); [van Ruler and Verčič, 2005](#)). Such an adaptive communication strategy could impact reputation and legitimacy most favorably, since organizations this way not only *show* but also substantively *take* responsibility by changing their processes to solve the issue ([Meznar and Nigh, 1995](#); [van Ruler and Verčič, 2005](#)).

Issue phases

Research into the effectiveness of response strategies in webcare and crisis communication does not generally take the development of the negative event into account, while issues are generally seen as dynamic. They have the potential to grow from a more latent stage in which pressure on the organization is low to a highly salient topic for organizations. The issue-attention cycle by [Downs \(1972\)](#) distinguishes between the pre-problem phase – an unacceptable social situation with (yet) low salience arises – and the peak phase – in which the inappropriate situation receives more public attention and awareness increases rapidly ([Downs, 1972](#)). [Illia and Colleoni \(2023\)](#) adapted previous conceptualizations of issue lifecycles, including early phase issues (potential and emerging issues), and current issues or crises (with higher pressure on the organization). Although issue dynamics and life cycles are issue-specific ([Mahoney, 2021](#)), the distinction between these phases is an important aspect of issue communication, as both media salience and pressure on the organization affect the organization's strategic communication options.

The consequences of issue communication

Reputation is often a key target of strategic communication efforts ([Coombs, 2007](#); [Mahoney, 2021](#)) and can be defined as “a collective representation of a firm's past behaviour and outcomes that depicts the firm's ability to render valued results to multiple stakeholders” ([Fombrun, 2000](#), p. 243). It has been shown that issues can offer organizations reputational benefits, for example, by giving organizations the opportunity to position themselves as thought leaders ([Cornelissen, 2020](#)). However, involuntary participation in issue arenas can also lead to reputational and legitimacy concerns ([Mahoney, 2021](#); [van der Meer and Jonkman, 2021](#); [Vos et al., 2014](#)). Legitimacy refers to “a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions.” ([Suchman, 1995](#), p. 574). Legitimacy has nowadays become a discursive construction that can be affected by issue communication ([Choi et al., 2024](#); [Holmström, 2020](#)).

In addition, a key challenge of organizations' issue communication is to overcome stakeholder skepticism, since organizations' communication about environmental and societal topics can activate stakeholders' perceptions of skepticism ([Du et al., 2010](#); [Montgomery et al., 2024](#)). A defensive strategy could activate feelings of skepticism, because organizations could come across as only feeling forced to communicate for reputation management purposes (e.g. [Huibers and Verhoeven, 2014](#)). Furthermore, given that issue management rose as a response to public skepticism ([Waymer and Heath, 2023](#)), defensive strategies might give stakeholders the impression that organizations do not take their concerns seriously, activating skepticism. We expect that skepticism might be less activated when an accommodative strategy is used because of its customer-centered approach, and minimized after exposure to an adaptive strategy where the organization shows most explicitly their intentions to truly avoid such issues in the future ([Montgomery et al., 2024](#)).

Research questions and hypotheses

The first goal of this study is to explore communication professionals' issue communication practices in the current media and societal landscape by asking (1) how they perceive "issues" and (2) which practices they use to monitor and communicatively handle issues in different issue phases.

The second goal is to examine the impact of organizations' issue response strategies. Based on webcare and crisis communication research (e.g. [van Noort et al., 2015](#)), we expect different effects of the four discussed issue response strategies on stakeholder perceptions:

- H1.* The evaluation of corporate reputation and legitimacy are dependent on the organization's issue response strategy in such a way that (a) an adaptive response strategy will be evaluated most positively, followed by (b) an accommodative response strategy, and subsequently (c) a defensive response strategy. A no response (d) will lead to the lowest scores on reputation and legitimacy.

Based on insights derived from CSR literature ([Du et al., 2010](#); [Montgomery et al., 2024](#)), the expected different effects of issue communication strategies can be explained by stakeholders' perceptions of skepticism:

- H2.* The impact of the defensive, accommodative and adaptive response strategy can be explained (mediated) by perceptions of skepticism in such a way that (a) a defensive strategy will induce higher feelings of skepticism compared to the accommodative strategy, while (b) the adaptive strategy will induce lower feelings of skepticism compared to the accommodative strategy, which in turn impacts the evaluation of corporate reputation and legitimacy.

How the issue communication strategies are perceived by the public may depend on the issue phase. [Skarmeas and Leonidou \(2013\)](#) showed that consumers develop skepticism toward an organization when a response is formulated due to increased public attention and pressure. A response in the peak phase of an issue could therefore be perceived as more insincere compared to a response in the pre-problem phase, resulting in negative perceptions of the organization ([Skarmeas and Leonidou, 2013](#)). Hence, we predict that response timing will impact the relation of response strategy on skepticism:

- H3.* The mediated effect of response strategies via perceived skepticism will be moderated by the response timing in such a way that this effect will be stronger if the issue response strategy is deployed in the peak phase.

Lastly, to improve the experimental study's generalizability and exclude effects related to a specific issue topic, the impact of the strategies in the two issue phases will be tested among two different issue types. Consequently, we will explore the following research question:

- RQ1.* Does issue type affect corporate reputation and legitimacy differently?

Study 1*Method*

Two online focus groups of 1.5 h were organized in June and September 2022, each consisting of five communication professionals. These ten practitioners (five females, five males) were recruited via a Dutch association for communication professionals [1] and by the authors via LinkedIn. They varied in the organizations they work(ed) for (public sector, private sector, agencies or combinations of that), and their number of years of experience in functions in which strategic and issue communication was part of their job. Participants provided informed consent, agreed with the online recording and transcription and signed a non-disclosure form to

ensure confidentiality of the topics discussed during the focus groups. Ethical clearance of the study was provided by the ethical committee of the Amsterdam School of Communication Research (2022-CC-15312).

Three main topics were discussed on the basis of a structured protocol: (1) experiences with and perceptions of issue communication (including perceptions of what defines an “issue”); (2) issue monitoring and communication strategies in the pre-problem phase and (3) issue communication strategies in the peak phase. The data analysis was guided by the research questions and theory. First, we applied an open coding strategy on the transcriptions in Atlas.ti, resulting in 345 unique codes, for instance “issue definition: Positioning yourself in a positive manner” and “stakeholder dialogue”. These codes were analyzed to group them into second order concepts (Gioia *et al.*, 2013), such as “link with society/location dimension” (regarding the issue definition) and “(no) media involvement” (regarding issue communication in the peak phase). Consequently, we could come up with aggregate dimensions, i.e. the identified sub-phases as mentioned below [2].

Results

Exploring and defining “issues”. The discussion of issue definitions among the practitioners allowed us to compose a definition of “issues” along three dimensions. The first dimension is the *location* dimension, focusing on the place where an issue is debated. For instance, issues were described as a societal debate, topic or matter: “Discussion emerges about a societal theme, and it is expected that your organization takes a stance” (R8). Thus, this dimension refers to a topic being discussed in the societal realm, located in the environment of the organization.

Second, issues can have *positive and negative implications for the organization*. Issues can be placed on a continuum from “opportunity” to “threat” – in terms of their perceived positive or negative impact on the organization’s license to operate and reputation. One side of this continuum is characterized by its normatively positive angle, referring to the organization’s ability to see issues as an opportunity (R6) and, thus, to create issues (R3) “that allow you to score” (R6): “You position it, you try to promote it, you try to put it on the agenda” (R3). The other end of this continuum concerns the perceived negative consequences of an issue for the organization, often in terms of reputation or license to operate: “Does it hurt your business” (R2) or organizational values that are under pressure (either financially or moral; R9).

Third, we identified the *demarcation* dimension, referring to how an issue differs from related concepts. Issues and crises were mostly discussed in terms of temporality and phases: Crisis are more acute (R9) whereas issues are always there and can grow every now and then (R1). An organization’s degree of control is lower in a crisis (R9). One participant noted that if issues are conceptualized “positively”, the difference with a crisis is clearer (R10). Another characteristic that participants mentioned, was that issues go through “different stages ranging from opinion formation to opinion expression” (R7), and can eventually turn into a crisis (R3; R9) or “if they [crises] go on for a longer time, they also become an issue that you need to handle” (R7), thus, discussing the relationship between both concepts, which also reflects the differences between issue phases.

Issue communication: three phases. Three phases were identified in issue communication: The pre-monitoring, monitoring and post-monitoring phase [3]. We mainly zoom in on insights related to communication strategies, whilst paying less attention to other topics that emerged from the data (Gioia *et al.*, 2013).

Pre-monitoring phase. This phase concerns the strategic considerations involved in *setting up* issue monitoring and management, substantively focused on issues that have a link with the organization. The participants indicated that good internal embedding and support within the organization (especially from the board) for issue handling are of great importance in the practice and set-up of issue monitoring (R4; R8; R7).

Monitoring phase. Issue monitoring is facilitated by monitoring tools and includes a range of activities such as determining search terms, early recognition of issues, tracking existing issues over time, setting up a dashboard and monitoring procedure, monitoring “sources” of issues, for instance (social) media coverage, stakeholders and activism. Communication professionals prefer to act early: Early issue management can keep issues “smaller” and the professionals indicated that they oftentimes already observed developments in society that could raise an issue (R6; R7). They also stressed on intra-organizational cooperation (R6).

Post-monitoring phase. Here, we distinguish issue communication in the pre-problem phase from issue communication in the peak phase. Regarding issue communication about “regular” issues that are not (yet) in the peak phase, participants indicated that once a *specific issue* has emerged, interpretation, sense-making and analysis begin, which reflects aspects of scenario-thinking (R8). An important part of this issue analysis is determining the level of organizational involvement: Who can be considered as the “issue owner”, how does it affect the organization (e.g. the tasks or operations), what role did and does the organization have in this issue? (R1; R5; R8). Determining the “tipping point” is a key task here, for instance, when the organization’s name is mentioned in relation to an issue (R8) or when the issue dynamics change (R7), but involved actors can interpret the tipping point differently (R6).

After initial sense-making, strategic decision-making starts. A number of choices emerges, in which the scope of the issue plays a central role, which helps those involved in issue communication to clarify their task. In addition, participants expressed some key issues in issue communication strategy formation: Positioning (R4; R5) and goal clarity: Does the organization, for instance, want to give a twist to the discussion (R9) or want to become an issue owner (R4), i.e. to strengthen the association between issue and organization? Collaboration with the public affairs department was also mentioned as a strategy to either solve or minimize an issue (R6).

If an issue reaches the peak phase, how do participants describe their issue communication strategies? A recurring point was that although peak phase issues are often characterized by public discussion and media attention, issue communication certainly does not always take place through the media: “You just have to see the press release and media contact as one of the options, I think, and certainly not one that you always have to deploy” (R8). Instead, personal communication and dialogues with those involved in the issue (R6; R7) were also mentioned as a strategy. Also the “embrace strategy” was mentioned: Taking stakeholders very seriously while they think that they were not taken seriously, giving them the room to tell their side of the story, defining a common interest together (R3). In contrast, also the “do not respond while you are criticized” strategy was mentioned (R7).

In addition, professionals mentioned process communication (R3), the importance of constant and proactive communication (R1), as well as asking the industry association to provide the communication (R9). Furthermore, classical aspects of communication were mentioned such as “the sum of channels, sources, messages, and timing” (R3). Furthermore, the ambivalent role of reputational considerations is striking: On the one hand, reputation and license to operate are important drivers of issue communication, but on the other hand, it was shared that preventing negative impact on citizens and stakeholders are most important (R3), and “for me, reputation can be the consequence, but it is not the in the lead” (R4).

Conclusion

We noted that issue phase or timing was both a planned theme of discussion as well as a recurrent topic during the focus groups. The notion of “phase” seems to be intrinsically connected to what an issue entails: The “demarcation dimension” reflects elements of “issue

phase”, as issues can turn into crises – and communication professionals seem to want to manage issues in an early stage rather than wait until they are highly salient for reasons of control. This finding reinforced our choice to include issue phase in the design of the experiment, and more specifically how timing impacts the relation between response strategies and skepticism, and in turn reputation and legitimacy.

Study 2

Method

Design and procedure. We conducted an online experiment conforming to a 4 (response strategy) x 2 (issue phase) between subjects design. After their consent, participants were randomly assigned to one of the eight experimental conditions. Scenarios were developed for a sustainability issue and a social issue; participants were exposed to both issue types within the same condition. After each scenario, they filled out a questionnaire in which corporate reputation, legitimacy and skepticism were measured. To avoid sequence effects, the two issue types were shown in a random order, always distinguished by a filler and attention task. In the final part of the questionnaire, we again conducted an attention task. Here, we also asked participant’s affinity with both issue types, and their demographics. The average duration of the experiment was 20 min. The study received ethical clearance of the Research Ethics and Data Management Committee of Tilburg School of Humanities and Digital Sciences (REDC2022.60a) and was preregistered in OSF (https://osf.io/p49rf/?view_only=7297d55b69ed4737aac95a1fd25da2c9) [4].

Participants. In order to obtain a diverse sample that approaches representativeness of the Dutch population, we asked Dynata, a recruitment agency where people can participate in scientific research for a small fee, to recruit a sample. The final sample [5] consisted of 481 participants of whom 50.9% identified themselves as woman, and 49.1% as man. Regarding their age, 21.2% was between 18 and 29 years old, 20.2% between 30 and 39 years, 22.9% between 40 and 49 years, 20.0% between 50 and 59 years and 15.6% between 60 and 69 years. One participant preferred not to say their age (0.2%). The education level of half of the participants was a university of applied sciences or academic Bachelor’s or Master’s degree (47.4%), the other half of the sample indicated to have a lower education level (52.0%). Three participants preferred not to say their education level (0.6%). The participants lived all over the Netherlands [6].

Materials. Context. To increase the study’s ecological validity, it took place in the context of news coverage in newspapers. Although social media have gained an important role in the current media landscape, “traditional” news media are particularly important when it comes to political and societal topics: Legacy media (still) play an important role in issue agenda-setting (Farjam and Dutceac Segesten, 2024). A common means for Dutch citizens to put issues on the agenda is by submitting a letter to the newspaper. In the Netherlands, submitted newspaper letters are popular: one of the biggest national newspapers, Algemeen Dagblad, receives about 80 letters a day and publishes a selection of them in the newspaper (van der Schrier, 2019).

Issue types. The sustainability issue concerned a fictitious chemical plant that was accused of water pollution. The social issue type described the accommodation of staff of a high-tech company in a tight housing market. The issues had in common that they affect citizens’ physical environment, but the companies did not act illegally.

Participants were first presented to an overall description of the scenario in which they read general information about the (fictitious) organization, the products they make and its procedures regarding the issue at hand. Next, the manipulation of issue phase was shown by means of the submitted letter in the lay-out of a newspaper. Subsequently, one of the four response strategies was shown, accompanied by a description that the newspaper decided to provide the reader with an update one week after the initial letter.

Issue phase. In the pre-problem condition, the letter was submitted to a local newspaper with a small reach. The letter contained a signature of only one person (a local citizen). The letter in the peak phase, in contrast, was submitted to a national newspaper with a large reach and was food for discussion on other media channels as well (e.g. television, social media). The submitted letter was signed by a united group of people and interest groups.

Response strategy. In the no response condition, the newspaper stated briefly that the organization did not respond to the submitted letter. In the defensive condition, the organization communicated that no substantive changes were made because they did not act illegally, and because their method was used in other countries too. In the accommodative condition, the organization still did not make any substantive changes on the basis of the same reasons, but they did communicate more empathetically, and stated that the topic at hand has their high priority. A similar communication style was used in the adaptive strategy. In this response the organization also disclosed plans for changing policies on the short term. All materials were in Dutch and can be found in our preregistration.

Measurements. Corporate reputation. Corporate reputation was measured with 13 items selected from the 19-item scale of Fombrun *et al.* (2000). From the original scale, some dimensions were removed because the scenario did not provide enough information to evaluate them. Participants rated statements on a seven-point scale ranging from “totally disagree” to “totally agree” (Sustainability: $\alpha = 0.96$, $M = 3.82$, $SD = 1.26$; Social: $\alpha = 0.96$, $M = 4.53$, $SD = 1.09$).

Legitimacy. The measure of legitimacy was composed of three dimensions: pragmatic (three items), moral (six items) and cognitive (three items) (Alexiou and Wiggins, 2019) (Sustainability: $\alpha = 0.96$, $M = 3.80$, $SD = 1.32$; Social: $\alpha = 0.95$, $M = 4.31$, $SD = 1.16$).

Perceived skepticism. We used the items of the dimensions “disbelief” (three items), and “mistrust” (five out of six items) of Tan (2002) to measure skepticism (Sustainability: $\alpha = 0.83$, $M = 4.09$, $SD = 0.97$; Social: $\alpha = 0.86$, $M = 3.64$, $SD = 1.05$).

Manipulation checks. To check the manipulation of issue phase, we posed the statement “I think the discharge from [organization] has come to the attention of many people”. The manipulation of response strategy was checked with four items, such as “In this response, the organization aims to be open to topics that are alive in the area” which addresses specific characteristics of the response strategies.

Results

Manipulation checks

Participants saw marginal differences between the pre-problem and peak condition for the sustainability issue ($M = 4.86$, $SD = 1.51$ versus $M = 5.09$, $SD = 1.38$, $t(469.851) = -1.773$, $p = 0.077$) and the social issue ($M = 4.69$, $SD = 1.40$ versus $M = 4.90$, $SD = 1.46$, $t(479) = -1.603$, $p = 0.110$). These differences were for both issue types in the intended direction.

The manipulation check of the response strategies revealed for both issue types a significant main effect of response strategy (Sustainability: $F(3,477) = 11.052$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.065$; Social: $F(3,477) = 19.376$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.109$). *Post-hoc* comparisons with Bonferroni correction showed that the manipulations were partly successful; meaning that some expected differences between strategies were found as intended, but not all. Almost similar patterns were found for the sustainability and social issue type: The no response condition did not differ from the defensive response (Sustainability: $M_{dif} = -0.306$, $p = 0.764$; Social: $M_{dif} = -0.222$, $p = 1.000$), but did differ from the accommodative response strategy (Sustainability: $M_{dif} = -0.711$, $p = 0.002$; Social: $M_{dif} = -0.703$, $p < 0.001$) and adaptive strategy (Sustainability: $M_{dif} = -1.081$, $p < 0.001$; Social: $M_{dif} = -1.303$, $p < 0.001$). Furthermore, the defensive condition scored equally high as the accommodative response (Sustainability: $M_{dif} = -0.406$, $p = 0.252$; Social: $M_{dif} = -0.481$, $p = 0.054$), but

was lower than the adaptive response strategy (Sustainability: $M_{dif} = -0.776$, $p < 0.001$; Social: $M_{dif} = -1.081$, $p < 0.001$). Finally, for the sustainability issue no significant difference was found between the accommodative and adaptive response strategy ($M_{dif} = -0.370$, $p = 0.387$), but participants did observe differences between these strategies for the social issue ($M_{dif} = 0.600$, $p = 0.007$).

Thus, the manipulation checks revealed that the manipulations were not fully successful since the issue response strategies that were only slightly different in their wordings did not yield significant differences, but the manipulations seemed to be more successful for the issue phases and the strategies that diverged more markedly. There was no reason to assume that participants did not understand the experimental materials (participants' assessment of comprehensibility of both issues: Sustainability: $M = 5.33$, $SD = 1.32$; Social: $M = 5.43$, $SD = 1.34$), nor did they consider the issues as unimportant (participants' assessment of issue importance: Sustainability: $M = 6.10$, $SD = 1.17$; Social: $M = 5.40$, $SD = 1.38$) [7].

Hypotheses testing. The mean scores and standard deviations per issue type and assessed variable are shown in Table 1.

Effects response strategies. To test whether response strategies differ in their impact on corporate reputation and legitimacy (H1), we conducted per issue type a oneway ANOVA with response strategy as the independent variable (four levels: defensive, accommodative, adaptive or no response), and either reputation or legitimacy as the dependent variable. For the sustainability issue, the findings revealed a significant effect of response strategy on reputation ($F(3,477) = 3.292$, $p = 0.020$, $\eta^2 = 0.020$) and legitimacy ($F(3,477) = 3.065$, $p = 0.028$, $\eta^2 = 0.019$) [8]. The no response condition led to lower scores compared to the accommodative and the adaptive response strategy on reputation ($p = 0.036$ and $p = 0.036$, respectively), and a similar pattern seems to be found for legitimacy ($p = 0.079$ and $p = 0.024$ respectively). In contrast, the same statistical analyses for the social issue revealed no significant effects for response strategy on reputation ($F(3,477) = 0.341$, $p = 0.796$, $\eta^2 = 0.002$) nor legitimacy ($F(3,477) = 1.068$, $p = 0.362$, $\eta^2 = 0.007$).

Thus, the results for (only) the sustainability issue partly confirm H1d, since the accommodative and adaptive response strategies tend to deviate from the no response condition on corporate reputation and legitimacy. However, no significant difference with the defensive response condition was found nor a difference between mutual response strategies (H1a, H1b, H1c).

Moderated mediation of skepticism and issue phase. The mediating effect of skepticism (H2) and the moderating effect of issue phase (H3) was analyzed with PROCESS model 7

	<i>N</i>	Skepticism	Legitimacy	Reputation
<i>Sustainability issue</i>				
- No response	120	–	3.51 (1.41)	3.54 (1.33)
- Defensive	120	4.13 (1.00)	3.78 (1.46)	3.76 (1.38)
- Accommodative	123	3.99 (0.93)	3.92 (1.19)	3.98 (1.17)
- Adaptive	118	4.15 (0.97)	3.99 (1.15)	3.97 (1.10)
<i>Social issue</i>				
- No response	120	–	4.29 (1.16)	4.58 (1.10)
- Defensive	120	3.59 (1.14)	4.20 (1.30)	4.45 (1.28)
- Accommodative	123	3.73 (0.98)	4.29 (1.17)	4.51 (1.06)
- Adaptive	118	3.58 (1.01)	4.46 (0.97)	4.57 (0.87)

Note(s): Participants' evaluation of skepticism was only measured for the participants who were exposed to either the defensive, accommodative or adaptive response strategy

Source(s): Created by authors

Table 1.
Mean scores (standard deviations between brackets) per issue type for the response strategies on the dependent variables and mediating variable of the study

(Hayes and Little, 2018). Sequential coding was used to compare the accommodative strategy with the defensive strategy (X1), and the adaptive strategy with the accommodative strategy (X2).

For the *sustainability* issue, Table 2 summarizes the model and its effects on either corporate reputation or legitimacy. An accommodative response strategy lowers perceptions of skepticism compared to a defensive strategy. A significant indirect effect on corporate reputation as well as legitimacy through skepticism appeared for the response in the pre-problem phase, but not in the peak phase. More specifically, for X1 both the index for moderated mediation and the indirect effect were significant; for X2 the indirect effect was also significant but the index included zero. Thus, we do not have enough evidence to claim a full moderated mediation, but it can be concluded that in the pre-problem phase the deployment of an accommodative response strategy is most beneficial for organizations. Furthermore, it seems that organizations should be hesitant in the deployment of an adaptive response strategy in this phase. Hence, both H2 and H3 are not supported by the data.

	Response strategy	Issue phase	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i>	95% BCa CI
<i>Skepticism</i> ($R^2 = 0.02, F(5, 355) = 1.31, p = 0.260$)						
			−0.901	0.397	0.024	[−1.680, −0.122]
			0.756	0.402	0.061	[−0.035, 1.547]
			−0.252	0.177	0.154	[−0.600, 0.095]
			0.508	0.249	0.042	[0.020, 0.997]
			−0.394	0.250	0.115	[−0.886, 0.097]
<i>Reputation</i> ($R^2 = 0.31, F(3, 357) = 54.31, p < 0.001$)						
			−0.702	0.056	0.000	[−0.811, −0.592]
Direct effect	X1		0.125	0.131	0.342	[−0.133, 0.382]
	X2		0.098	0.132	0.457	[−0.161, 0.357]
Indirect effect	X1	Pre-problem	0.275	0.136	–	[0.010, 0.553]
	X1	Peak	−0.081	0.114	–	[−0.307, 0.145]
	X2	Pre-problem	−0.254	0.122	–	[−0.501, −0.016]
	X2	Peak	0.023	0.120	–	[−0.212, 0.260]
<i>Index moderated mediation</i>	X1	Index	−0.36, bootSE 0.18, −0.707, −0.009]			
<i>Index moderated mediation</i>	X2	Index	0.28, bootSE 0.17, [−0.057, 0.635]			
<i>Legitimacy</i> ($R^2 = 0.22, F(3, 357) = 33.48, p < 0.001$)						
			−0.611	0.062	0.000	[−0.732, −0.490]
Direct effect	X1		0.053	0.145	0.717	[−0.233, 0.338]
	X2		0.165	0.146	0.258	[−0.122, 0.452]
Indirect effect	X1	Pre-problem	0.240	0.116	–	[0.010, 0.469]
	X1	Peak	−0.071	0.102	–	[−0.287, 0.114]
	X2	Pre-problem	−0.221	0.108	–	[−0.432, −0.007]
	X2	Peak	0.020	0.106	–	[−0.183, 0.230]
<i>Index moderated mediation</i>	X1	Index	−0.31, bootSE 0.16, [−0.635, −0.011]			
<i>Index moderated mediation</i>	X2	Index	0.24, bootSE 0.15, [−0.061, 0.535]			
Note(s): <i>N</i> = 361						
X1 represents the comparison between the accommodative and defensive response strategy. X2 represents the comparison between the adaptive and accommodative response strategy						
Source(s): Created by authors						

Table 2.
Output of the
moderated mediation
analyses for the
sustainability issue on
either the dependent
variable corporate
reputation or
legitimacy

Remarkably, we only found significant differences between conditions for the sustainability issue type, not for the social issue. This answers RQ1. Table 3 shows that for the *social* issue, no significant direct nor indirect effects were found for either reputation and legitimacy. Only a significant relation appeared between skepticism and the two dependent variables, which was similar for the sustainability issue.

Discussion and conclusion

This study aimed to explore issue communication perceptions and practices by communication professionals, as well as the consequences of different issue response strategies for the activation of skepticism per issue phase, and in turn for organizational reputation and legitimacy.

The focus groups among communication professionals reflect that “issue communication” is a prominent topic in communication practice, and that practitioners engage in several activities to monitor (see also Strauss and Jonkman, 2017) and communicatively handle issues. Their description of “issues” reflects aspects mentioned

	Response strategy	Issue phase	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i>	95% BCa CI
<i>Skepticism</i> ($R^2 = 0.01$, $F(5, 355) = 0.39$, $p = 0.858$)						
X1 → skepticism			0.060	0.431	0.889	[−0.788, 0.908]
X2 → skepticism			0.111	0.437	0.801	[−0.750, 0.971]
Phase → skepticism			0.034	0.192	0.859	[−0.344, 0.412]
X1 * Phase → skepticism			0.052	0.270	0.846	[−0.479, 0.584]
X2 * Phase → skepticism			−0.168	0.272	0.538	[−0.702, 0.367]
<i>Reputation</i> ($R^2 = 0.33$, $F(3, 357) = 58.11$, $p < 0.001$)						
Skepticism → reputation			−0.592	0.045	0.000	[−0.680, −0.503]
Direct effect	X1		0.143	0.115	0.214	[−0.083, 0.368]
	X2		−0.028	0.115	0.806	[−0.255, 0.198]
Indirect effect	X1	Pre-problem	−0.067	0.121	–	[−0.308, 0.167]
	X1	Peak	−0.098	0.109	–	[−0.311, 0.122]
	X2	Pre-problem	0.034	0.120	–	[−0.204, 0.277]
	X2	Peak	0.133	0.098	–	[−0.061, 0.322]
<i>Index moderated mediation</i>	X1	Index	−0.03, bootSE 0.16, [−0.352, 0.295]			
<i>Index moderated mediation</i>	X2	Index	0.10, bootSE 0.15, [−0.211, 0.402]			
<i>Legitimacy</i> ($R^2 = 0.19$, $F(3, 357) = 28.11$, $p < 0.001$)						
Skepticism → legitimacy			−0.472	0.053	0.000	[−0.575, −0.368]
Direct effect	X1		0.154	0.134	0.253	[−0.110, 0.417]
	X2		0.107	0.135	0.430	[−0.158, 0.371]
Indirect effect	X1	Pre-problem	−0.053	0.099	–	[−0.245, 0.144]
	X1	Peak	−0.078	0.089	–	[−0.260, 0.094]
	X2	Pre-problem	0.027	0.096	–	[−0.156, 0.220]
	X2	Peak	0.106	0.080	–	[−0.052, 0.267]
<i>Index moderated mediation</i>	X1	Index	−0.02, bootSE 0.13, [−0.292, 0.238]			
<i>Index moderated mediation</i>	X2	Index	0.08, bootSE 0.12, [−0.160, 0.328]			
Note(s): $N = 361$						
X1 represents the comparison between the accommodative and defensive response strategy. X2 represents the comparison between the adaptive and accommodative response strategy						
Source(s): Created by authors						

Table 3.
Output of the
moderated mediation
analyses for the *social*
issue on either the
dependent variable
corporate reputation or
legitimacy

by [Jaques \(2012\)](#) and [Mahoney \(2021\)](#). The demarcation dimension that we identified also reflects the academic discussion on the distinction between crises and issues (e.g. [Illia and Colleoni, 2023](#); [Jaques, 2009](#)), which is also more implicitly echoed in the distinction between issue phases: To what extent is an issue in the peak phase (still) different from a crisis? A striking finding was the focus on non-mediated or direct communication with stakeholders in the peak phase.

One could wonder if issue communication is an activity that needs its own label, or is a subdiscipline of strategic communication and/or crisis communication ([Koch et al., 2019](#)). Indeed, many activities mentioned by the focus group participants can be performed under those labels. However, if we put our findings into the perspective of the changing organizational environment, with developments such as mediatization and increased scrutiny of organizational practices – it becomes clear that addressing stakeholders' needs and maintaining a good reputation and legitimacy require specific communication strategies, which are designed to meet society's changing expectations of the role of organizations, also regarding issues ([Holmström, 2020](#); [van der Meer and Jonkman, 2021](#); [van Ruler and Verčič, 2005](#)).

Based on the experiment, we can conclude in general that organizations are better off responding to an issue than not responding at all. Though, when organizations respond, they should avoid a defensive strategy but choose for an accommodating or an adaptive response instead because these strategies lead to equally high ratings on reputation and legitimacy. Reflecting on the activation of skepticism, it is relevant to take the issue phase into account, especially the pre-problem phase: If organizations decide to respond in the pre-problem phase, they would be wise to adopt the accommodating strategy. These findings correspond to knowledge in the fields of webcare and crisis communication, where it has been shown that a no response strategy is more detrimental for an organization's reputation compared to a response, and an accommodative response strategy is more favorable than a defensive strategy (e.g. [van Noort et al., 2015](#)). An adaptive response strategy, however, has not been examined in these fields, which marks one of the differences between those fields and the field of issue communication.

Remarkably, our empirical differences only apply for the sustainability issue, not for the social issue. This is striking, because the issues had in common that they affect citizens' physical environment, but the organizations did not act illegally. Presumably, the topics discussed in both scenarios varied in (media) salience which should be investigated in a future study. With regard to the manipulation checks we conducted in the current study, not all intended manipulations were accurately identified by participants although the experimental conditions were based on clear operationalizations stemming from theory. For the current study, we state that the results should be interpreted with caution and more research is needed to examine how the manipulations can be operationalized and tested in a more distinctive way, without harming the validity of the study.

Overall, this research paper illuminates current issue monitoring and communication practices in today's challenging media and societal landscape as well as the consequences of issue response strategies per issue type and phase. These findings enhance our understanding of a sub-field of issue communication: The communicative options of organizations when they are the addressed actor in issues.

Notes

1. Which also provided funding for the research; see acknowledgments and funding.
2. Results of both studies have also been reported in a Dutch-language profession-oriented whitepaper on the topic of issue communication, written for the funding organization involved. In that paper, we mainly focused on the aspects relevant for communication professionals ([Jacobs and Liebrecht, 2023](#)).

3. This does not imply that issue communication is a linear process that was/is followed in exactly this order by the participants or that mentioned actions only take place in these phases.
4. Following reviewers' feedback and progressive insights, we deviated from some aspects of the preregistration. This concerns the redundancy of a second research question, the formulation and statistical test of some hypotheses and the selected items for the manipulation check of response strategy.
5. After the invitation of Dynata, 679 potential respondents opened the link to the online experiment, but 158 participants did not finish the questionnaire. In addition to our preregistered exclusion criteria, participants were also excluded if they indicated high personal experiences in one or both topics ($n = 18$), to ensure the assessment of the consequences of issue communication for the general public.
6. No *a priori* differences between conditions occurred with respect to participants' gender ($\chi^2(7) = 4.15$; $p = 0.763$), age ($\chi^2(42) = 39.02$; $p = 0.602$), education level ($\chi^2(49) = 59.12$; $p = 0.153$) and geographical location ($\chi^2(77) = 79.26$; $p = 0.408$).
7. We decided to refrain from dropping participants before hypotheses testing. This is because removing participants who failed a manipulation check after an intervention can bias the results. For example, it is unclear whether and how the exclusion of participants inflate or deflate the results, making it difficult to predict or correct the impact of findings (e.g. Aronow *et al.*, 2019). Scholars therefore advise to restrict analyses to attentive participants (e.g. Varaine, 2023), which we already covered by excluding participants from the dataset who failed both attention checks. Consequently, we maintained the full sample to test the hypotheses.
8. For both ANOVAs, Levene's test was significant (reputation: $F(3,477) = 3.352$, $p = 0.019$; legitimacy: $F(3,477) = 5.039$, $p = 0.002$). Therefore, we used the Games-Howell correction for the *post-hoc* comparisons.

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