

From commitment to communication: a roadmap for strategic communication of corporate digital responsibility

Yijing Wang

Erasmus University Rotterdam, Rotterdam, The Netherlands, and

Alexandra Schwinges

*Department of Communication Science, University of Amsterdam,
Amsterdam, The Netherlands*

Abstract

Purpose – This article introduces a theoretically grounded and practice-oriented roadmap to guide communication professionals in translating corporate digital responsibility (CDR) from organizational commitment into effective communication practice. It seeks to clarify CDR communication as a distinct communicative domain and to offer actionable guidance.

Design/methodology/approach – This conceptual article synthesizes interdisciplinary literature and develops a process-oriented framework. This strategic roadmap comprises four interrelated steps designed to guide communication professionals in their contribution to ethical and accountable digital governance.

Findings – The proposed roadmap consists of: (1) mapping and engaging stakeholders, (2) co-shaping ethical foundations, (3) framing and embedding CDR, and (4) monitoring, learning and adapting. Conceptually, these steps function as a heuristic for theorizing how CDR is communicatively constructed, contested and institutionalized. Thereby, the framework addresses the complexity, volatility and ambiguity of digital environments and also serves as a strategic roadmap for communication practitioners to anticipate reputational risks and legitimacy challenges, and to build trust among stakeholders.

Originality/value – This approach positions CDR communication as a dynamic and participatory practice capable of navigating the ethical and regulatory challenges of a volatile digital age and engaging in responsible CDR communication. For communication researchers, this conceptual roadmap contributes to ongoing debates in communication management and provides a heuristic for future theory development and empirical research in the field.

Keywords Corporate digital responsibility, Strategic communication, Stakeholder engagement, Digital governance, Public relations, Crisis communication

Paper type Conceptual paper

1. Introduction

The development and adoption of digital technologies, including artificial intelligence (AI), has been profoundly transforming organizations and our societies. This digital transformation has redefined how we work, create and interact, but they also raise pressing questions and risks of, for example, deepfakes and identity theft (Kumar *et al.*, 2025). In these complex and uncertain times (Winkler *et al.*, 2025), public expectations for ethical digital practices are rapidly evolving and the ethics of organizations across both for- and nonprofit sectors are subject to increasing scrutiny (Kunz and Wirtz, 2024; Merbecks, 2024; Wirtz *et al.*, 2023). Traditionally, such expectations for ethical conduct have been addressed through corporate social responsibility (CSR), which has



guided organizations' responsibilities toward social and environmental issues. However, the increasing pervasiveness of technology and AI challenges the sufficiency of CSR and communication frameworks in their current form, as they only partially capture the ethical implications of data use, algorithmic decision-making and digital infrastructures (van der Merwe and Al Achkar, 2022). As a result, there is a growing need to extend CSR into the digital domain.

These challenges have given rise to the concept corporate digital responsibility (CDR), which can be generally understood as "the set of shared values and norms guiding an organization's operations with respect to the creation and operation of digital technology and data" (Lobschat *et al.*, 2021, p. 876), thus explicitly addressing opportunities and risks associated with the digital transformation. While CDR has been studied in several disciplines, including business economics (e.g. Merbecks, 2024), marketing (e.g. Kunz and Wirtz, 2024) and sustainability research (e.g. Weber-Lewerenz and Traverso, 2025), most research focused on how organizations should commit to CDR and how to measure CDR (see, e.g. Cheng and Zhang, 2023; Merbecks, 2024; Yang *et al.*, 2025). Little attention has been paid to how organizations can best communicate their CDR engagement to various stakeholders – despite the fact that, as Lobschat *et al.* (2021) assert, part of a successful CDR implementation is "clearly formulating and communicating specific CDR norms to all stakeholders of an organization" (p. 882). It implies that CDR should not be simply viewed as commitment to internal policies or legislative compliance but that the rise of digital technologies and its impact on societies warrants special consideration in the development of a CDR framework embracing both commitment to responsible digital practices and communication thereof.

Understanding CDR from a communication perspective is crucial for driving positive change in the face of unprecedented challenges arising from technological disruptions such as AI for at least several reasons. First, communication professionals are uniquely placed at the intersection of sensemaking and sensegiving. In context of AI, for example, communication professionals are situated "at the apex of responsibility for AI use and AI mistakes", resulting in their "dual role of AI users and AI explainers for the field" (Bowen, 2024, p. 2). Despite this, AI developers demonstrated a significant "lack of awareness" regarding the role of communication professionals in addressing the ethical dimensions of AI (Bowen, 2024, p. 10). At the same time, the primary responsibility for how digital technologies and AI are developed, governed and used within organizations typically lies with functions such as IT, human resources and senior leadership, which own technical development, employee training and governance rules. The distinctive contribution of communication is therefore complementary rather than primary: it helps make digital responsibilities intelligible and meaningful to internal and external audiences and supports the alignment of stakeholder values around them. Whether and how internal communication shapes the way employees and other stakeholders actually engage with digital tools remains an open empirical question, to which we return in our research agenda (see Section 4.2). Where organizations provide digital products and services, communication – particularly in marketing and consumer-facing functions – can also help explain ethical responsibilities, risks and limitations to users, even as everyday practices and dominant platforms strongly shape how people ultimately use these technologies. Second, strategic communication enables proactive engagement with emerging digital risks (Yue *et al.*, 2024). Identifying such risks – such as data misuse or algorithmic bias – is, in the first instance, a cross-functional task that draws on technical, legal and governance expertise. The distinct contribution of communication lies in what follows: framing identified risks in ways that are intelligible to diverse stakeholders, situating them within the organization's responsibilities and engaging stakeholders in dialogue whose feedback can, in turn, help surface and refine the organization's understanding of those risks. This forward-looking communicative approach provides an essential foundation for building strong readiness (Jin *et al.*, 2024, 2025), in order to engage with emerging technologies in the face of evolving regulatory pressures and ethical uncertainties. Third, in an era shaped by institutional distrust (Edelman, 2025), trust has become a core asset for organizations. Public trust in an organization's digital practices is earned through transparent communication thereof – making

communication management central to building and maintaining this trust (Asa and Nautwima, 2026; Jelovac *et al.*, 2022) and upholding reputation (Oduro *et al.*, 2025). Although the risks are evident, many companies fail to prioritize good CDR practices or communicate transparently (Kunz and Wirtz, 2024). Thus, examining CDR from a strategic communication perspective is essential to understanding how communication professionals can effectively articulate their organization's digital responsibility commitments and navigate the ethical complexities of digital transformations.

Against this backdrop, this article advances a conceptual and process-oriented framework for CDR communication, positioning communication both as a constitutive element of CDR and a reporting function thereof. By outlining four interrelated steps that communication professionals and researchers can use as a heuristic, we contribute to communication management scholarship in two key ways. First, our article extends existing research on CSR communication by clarifying the conceptual foundations of CDR communication by synthesizing insights from interdisciplinary CDR research and integrating them with core theories from communication scholarship. Building on this synthesis, our article positions CDR in relation to CSR and provides a clear definition of CDR communication, thereby establishing CDR as a distinct yet related communicative domain that addresses challenges specific to digital technologies. Second, we develop a process-oriented framework that theorizes how organizations communicatively construct and embed CDR across stakeholder relationships and organizational practices, while demonstrating how existing communication theories need to be reinterpreted and extended to account for the dynamics of the digital environment.

2. Strategic CDR communication

2.1 Clarifying the conceptual foundations of CDR

Before organizations can meaningfully engage in CDR communication, they must first develop a clear and context-sensitive understanding of what the concept entails within their specific operational and sectoral environments. Such an understanding depends on the establishment of a shared conceptual foundation; in its absence, CDR initiatives risk becoming fragmented, inconsistent or reduced to symbolic gestures. To contribute to this foundational clarity, we synthesize insights on CDR to understand how it is defined and theorized across disciplinary domains. Notably, none of the reviewed studies originates from the field of communication, indicating a significant gap in the literature. Given that the legitimacy of CDR practices is inherently communicative (e.g. relying on narrative framing and stakeholder engagement) (Lobschat *et al.*, 2021), this absence presents a valuable opportunity for communication scholars to contribute to a more robust, practice-oriented understanding of how organizations make sense of and build trust around their digital responsibilities.

The disciplinary lens significantly shapes how CDR is conceptualized and how the definitions differ in emphasis. For example, business ethics and management (e.g. Tóth and Blut, 2024; Vasist and Krishnan, 2025) emphasize the normative dimensions of CDR, framing it as a set of ethical obligations that guide firms in navigating digital transformation responsibly. These definitions are often rooted in normative ethical theory or stakeholder theory, positioning CDR as an extension of corporate accountability. Marketing and service research (e.g. Wirtz *et al.*, 2023) approach CDR through the lens of digital service ecosystems. These studies stress fairness, customer trust and the protection of user data in service-oriented settings, highlighting how CDR becomes operationalized in consumer-facing digital interactions. Information systems literature (e.g. Zhao and Qiu, 2025; Cheng and Zhang, 2023) focuses on governance mechanisms, including decentralized systems and the dual dimensions of digital responsibility: digitized responsibility (e.g. data collection and storage) versus digitalized responsibility (e.g. the ethical use of data in decision-making). Digital governance and policy studies (e.g. Jelovac *et al.*, 2022; Covucci *et al.*, 2024; Zimmer *et al.*, 2023) broaden the focus to include institutional arrangements, privacy rights, security protocols and the development of digital trust. Here,

CDR is framed not only as an internal organizational matter but also as a societal imperative tied to public values and regulatory legitimacy. Despite these differences across disciplinary domains, it is evident that a strong convergence exists across fields: Most definitions center on shared values and norms guiding the creation, operation and impact of digital technologies and data practices (e.g. [Covucci et al., 2024](#); [Lobschat et al., 2021](#)). Key recurring principles include privacy, fairness, transparency, accountability, digital trust and long-term social impact (e.g. [Jelovac et al., 2022](#); [Korneeva et al., 2024](#)), though the operationalization of these principle remains context- and discipline-dependent.

While most articles define CDR in broad ethical terms, some contributions offer more structured conceptual tools to guide implementation at the organizational level. For example, [Wirtz et al. \(2022\)](#) and [Hartley et al. \(2024\)](#) introduce the *CDR calculus*, a decision-making model that evaluates trade-offs between digital innovation and ethical responsibility. It is particularly applicable in AI-intensive service sectors, where ethical dilemmas are embedded in algorithmic operations and automated decision-making. Meanwhile, [Covucci et al. \(2024\)](#) propose a *CDR manifesto* comprising seven foundational principles, such as promoting societal well-being, ensuring equitable access and minimizing environmental impact. This manifesto acts as a normative roadmap for organizations aiming to embed CDR into corporate culture and governance systems. It is also among the few sources to explicitly connect CDR to broader planetary and intergenerational responsibilities. Both conceptual tools – CDR calculus and CDR manifesto – move beyond abstract definitions, provide actionable guidance for embedding CDR into corporate strategy and emphasize the importance of cultivating a CDR-oriented organizational culture ([Wirtz et al., 2022](#); [Covucci et al., 2024](#)). However, they largely overlook the communicative dimension of CDR. It goes without saying that the development of CDR culture inherently relies on communication practices such as how organizations legitimize and engage stakeholders around their digital responsibilities. Therefore, we argue that strategic communication is not a peripheral concern but a central mechanism through which CDR gains meaning and credibility both within an organization and in the public sphere. It enables organizations to build and maintain trust by aligning their digital practices with stakeholder expectations and societal values, particularly in the face of dynamic regulatory pressures and ethical uncertainties.

Additionally, several studies position CDR in relation to CSR, either at an abstract level or through an in-depth comparison of the two theoretical concepts. For example, some articles (e.g. [Tóth and Blut, 2024](#); [Lobschat et al., 2021](#); [Oduro et al., 2025](#)) view CDR as extension of CSR, emphasizing shared concerns with voluntary ethical commitment and responsible value creation in the process of digitalization. In other words, CDR emerges in response to the unique scale and velocity of the transgressive impact of digital transformation ([Lobschat et al., 2021](#); [Sharon and Gellert, 2024](#)), and “takes into account the ethical opportunities and challenges of digitalization” ([Herden et al., 2021](#), p. 17). Other articles (e.g. [Yang et al., 2025](#); [Cheng and Zhang, 2023](#); [van der Merwe and Al Achkar, 2022](#); [Carl et al., 2024](#); [Trittin-Ulbrich and Böckel, 2022](#); [Weber-Lewerenz and Traverso, 2025](#)) engage in a more direct comparison between CDR and CSR, highlighting overlaps and distinctions of the two theoretical concepts: While both concepts involve voluntary commitments to societal and stakeholder interests, CDR explicitly addresses risks and challenges unique to digitalization, such as algorithmic bias, data ethics and platform power, making it uniquely positioned at the intersection of technological accountability and ethical decision-making in digital ecosystems ([Covucci et al., 2024](#); [van der Merwe and Al Achkar, 2022](#)). As such, CDR addresses novel challenges such as data commodification, algorithmic discrimination or platform power asymmetries ([Herden et al., 2021](#); [Lobschat et al., 2021](#)). These studies thereby assert that CDR is not a simple extension of CSR but an increasingly indispensable domain in the digital age.

2.2 CDR as a distinct communicative domain

As detailed in the previous section, existing literature from adjacent fields provides valuable conceptual foundations for understanding CDR but offers limited insights into its *communicative* dimension. Research on CSR communication provides a strong foundation for bridging this gap but is alone insufficient for CDR for several reasons. First, CDR extends beyond the scope and stakeholder engagement of traditional CSR frameworks, which bears implications for CDR communication practice (Table 1). This comparison emphasizes that while CSR traditionally concerns environmental, social and governance (ESG) practices, CDR does this too (Herden *et al.*, 2021; Zhao and Qiu, 2025) but also goes beyond these and concerns itself with socio-technical dilemmas (e.g. Trittin-Ulbrich and Böckel, 2022; Wirtz *et al.*, 2022), volatile regulatory contexts (van der Merwe and Al Achkar, 2022) and public demands for data and AI transparency (Yang *et al.*, 2025). As such, the communicative requirements for CDR go beyond reporting and reputation management but call for anticipatory, participatory and multi-stakeholder engagement strategies (Korneeva *et al.*, 2024; Trier *et al.*, 2023) that reflect the complexity and ethical uncertainty of the digital age.

Second, several emerging trends are constantly re-shaping how CDR must be approached. One notable development is the increasing regulatory pressure, particularly in the European context, where supranational laws like the general data protection regulation (GDPR) and the

Table 1. Comparison of CDR and CSR: overlaps, differences and implications

Dimensions	Corporate social responsibility (CSR)	Corporate digital responsibility (CDR)	Implications for CDR communication practice
<i>Conceptual scope</i>	A normative and strategic concept involving corporate responsibility toward social, environmental and governance (ESG) sustainability	A (self-)regulatory concept guiding the ethical creation, use and governance of digital technologies and data across their lifecycle	Frame CDR clearly and consistently to avoid confusion with CSR/ESG; ensure definitions are adapted to and consistent across organizational context
<i>Basis for engagement</i>	Driven by ethical obligation, stakeholder pressure, regulatory compliance (e.g. CSRD) and reputational goals	Driven by emerging risks of the digital transformation (AI, data, algorithmic bias), digital trust and new regulations (e.g. AI Act)	Build proactive CDR narratives rather than reacting to regulation or crisis; integrate digital ethics into core communication
<i>Meaning of social license to operate</i>	Based on long-standing expectations for ethical conduct, often tied to community and environmental impact	Based on public trust and heterogeneous expectations in digital governance, requiring transparency, fairness and algorithmic accountability	Position CDR as a foundation for digital legitimacy; communicate clearly how digital systems are governed and risks managed
<i>Stakeholders</i>	Communities, NGO's, employees, regulators, investors	Includes CSR stakeholders, plus data subjects, tech developers, might include non-human actors (algorithms, models)	Expand stakeholder mapping; engage digitally literate publics and nontraditional actors in dialogue and co-creation
<i>Role of communication</i>	CSR communication can be either normative (value-driven) or instrumental (reputation-focused); risks being performative	CDR communication must emphasize transparency, digital trust and ethical tech governance and frame risk, fairness and accountability	Shift from reporting to sensegiving; embrace two-way, anticipatory and participatory communication that builds digital trust and accountability

AI Act provide individual control over personal data and require organizations to transparently communicate risks related to the implementation of AI models. This reflects a broader shift to anticipatory compliance, in which organizations demonstrate ethical leadership and digital accountability ahead of formal regulation but in anticipation of it. At the same time, growing scrutiny of “AI” or “technology”-washing – superficial claims of digital ethics ([van Maanen, 2022](#)) – call for a deep alignment of what is being operationalized within organizations and what is communicated. For communication professionals, heightened media scrutiny means that CDR must be communicated transparently and defensibly, as journalistic inquiries can rapidly expose inconsistencies.

Third, despite growing interest across domains, several ambiguities shape both scholarly and practical understandings of CDR communication. While the scholarly debate on the conceptual overlap of CDR with CSR is still ongoing, we witness an increasing entanglement of digital and environmental agendas, where public discussions on digital sustainability or tech’s carbon footprint demonstrate the complexity and multi-dimensionality of the digital transformation and are tangent to CSR and ESG ([MIT News, n.d.](#); [Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development \[OECD\], 2023](#)). There is no consensus on what CDR includes or excludes and definitions range from narrow to broad. These conceptual ambiguities are mirrored by ambiguity over who, within organizations, is responsible for digital responsibility. In practice, this responsibility is distributed across functions such as IT, legal, human resources, CSR and communication, and which of them takes the lead is shaped primarily by organizational-design and micro-political considerations – such as the bundling of related tasks, unit size and the relative influence of particular leaders – rather than by conceptual debates alone. The relationship may even run in the opposite direction, with established institutional arrangements influencing which conceptual framings gain traction. We therefore advance it as a conceptual proposition, rather than an empirical claim about current practice, that the cross-cutting and stakeholder-facing nature of CDR offers strategic communication an opportunity to take on a coordinating, sense-making role that supports cross-functional and consistent messaging – a proposition that itself warrants empirical investigation (see [Section 4.2](#)). Further, in the context of CDR, the concept of transparency and transparent communication goes beyond mere information disclosure but includes the navigation of opacity in inherently complex, automated and algorithmic systems. For example, opening the “black box” that is AI-driven decision-making may not be technically or legally feasible, but even if information is disclosed, it may not be understandable or meaningful to nonexpert audiences. As such, transparent communication in CDR puts emphasis on strategic intelligibility – communicating in ways that make digital technologies, risks and ethical trade-offs understandable, accessible and collaborative to stakeholders with a differing degree of digital literacy ([Buhmann and Fieseler, 2021](#)).

Accordingly, communication professionals may acknowledge the parallels that CDR shares with CSR but must treat CDR communication as a distinct domain to target the novel risks and challenges of the digital age. Without these, CDR communication risks mirroring CSR communication’s shortcomings and might remain performative, siloed and disconnected ([van der Merwe and Al Achkar, 2022](#)). Based on these insights, we define CDR communication as

the strategic and purposeful process through which organizations articulate, frame, and engage stakeholders around their current and anticipated responsibilities related to the development, use, and governance of digital technologies and data.

The digital transformation is shaped by opportunities and ambiguities, which underline the need for a strategic roadmap that equips communication professionals with the conceptual clarity, theoretical underpinnings and tools to frame, embed and lead CDR communication efforts.

3. A roadmap for strategic CDR communication

This conceptual paper develops a theoretically grounded strategic roadmap to support organizations in translating CDR from a normative commitment into effective communication practice. The roadmap consists of four interrelated steps – mapping and engaging stakeholders, co-shaping ethical groundwork, framing and embedding CDR, and monitoring, learning and adapting – which together provide a framework for operationalizing CDR communication (see Figure 1).

The roadmap was developed by synthesizing the interdisciplinary CDR literature reviewed in Section 2 with established theory from communication and strategic management, and by organizing these insights into a staged process. We acknowledge that staged, process-oriented models of this kind are common and deliberately generic, which is precisely what makes them broadly transferable across communication tasks. The contribution here is therefore not the stage logic as such, but its reinterpretation for CDR: each step is specified to address the volatility, opacity and contested legitimacy that characterize digital environments, as elaborated below.

3.1 Mapping and engaging stakeholders

Effective strategic CDR communication starts with identifying *who* matters, *how* they matter and *what* they value in an increasingly digitalized landscape. While traditional CSR

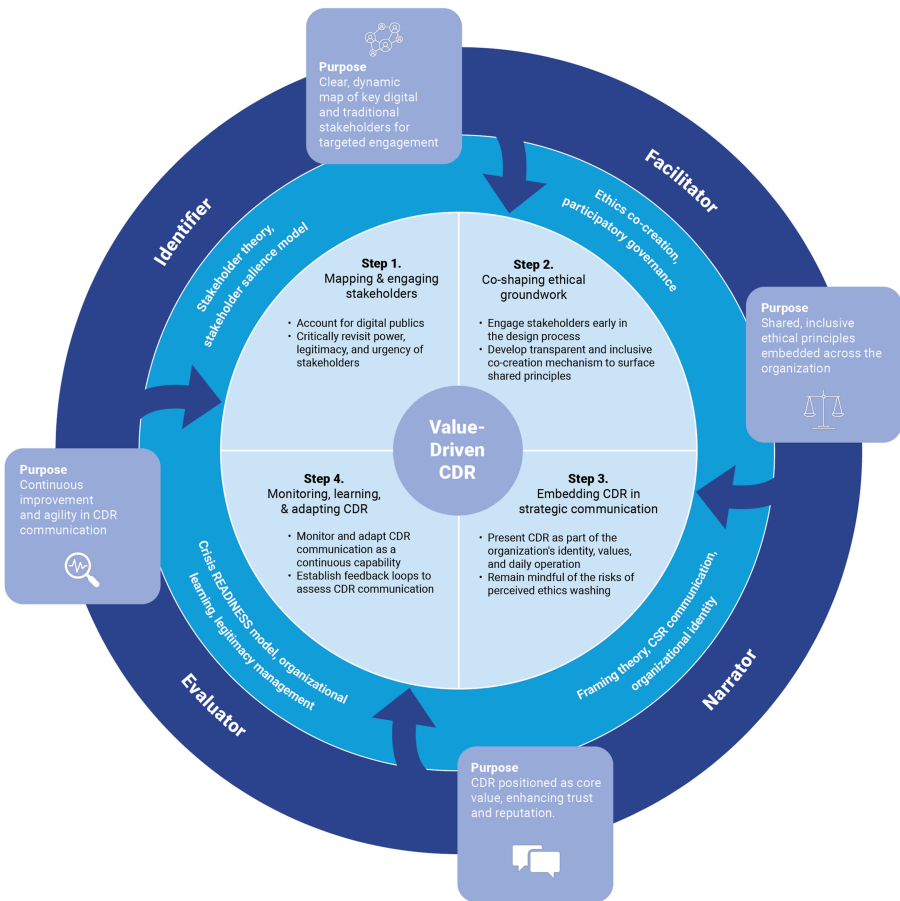


Figure 1. A roadmap for strategic communication of CDR

stakeholders, such as communities, NGOs, employees, regulators and investors, remain relevant, CDR adds new layers of stakeholder complexity. Stakeholder expectations have evolved in the digital age, and public relations professionals must go beyond traditional stakeholder mapping to recognize new and amplified voices whose influence often arises not from formal authority but from network effects. CDR, ultimately, is about *shared* norms and values (Lobschat *et al.*, 2021), which relies on “efforts of stakeholders such as individuals, corporations, or public institutions to contribute to a sustainable, more inclusive, fair, and value-based digital society” (Trier *et al.*, 2023, p. 463). Research shows that stakeholders today have heightened and diversified expectations, including personal data collection (Mihale-Wilson *et al.*, 2022), digital inclusion and accessibility (Yang *et al.*, 2025) and affordability and practical access (Carl *et al.*, 2024).

This stage draws primarily on stakeholder theory and the stakeholder salience model, and the role of identifier extends these perspectives to account for other, newer actors. Importantly, there is a critical shift in stakeholder mapping to account for digital publics and algorithmically amplified actors, such as influencers, whistleblowers, platform users or online communities. Those stakeholders might not hold formal standing, yet they hold influence in shaping discourses around digital trust and accountability (Kemper and Kolkman, 2019; Zarzycka, 2024). News media, for example, increasingly serve as watchdogs (Schwinges *et al.*, 2023), investigating opaque platforms and corporate practices – an oversight that audience also demand more actively, particularly toward Big Tech companies (Schwinges *et al.*, 2025). This means for communication practitioners that CDR communication cannot rely on controlled, one-directional narratives. Instead, they must anticipate and engage with a data-literate, participatory and often critical public, also in recognition that there is no algorithmic accountability without critical audiences (Kemper and Kolkman, 2019).

To guide this process, the widely recognized and applied stakeholder salience model (Mitchell *et al.*, 1997) offers a well-established framework to identify and prioritize stakeholders based on their power, legitimacy and urgency – one that can be reinterpreted for CDR. Power in digital contexts is more distributed and networked, often amplified by algorithms. Stakeholders like platform influencers, tech regulators or whistleblowers can become powerful not through formal standing but through viral reach, control of data flows or unpredictability (Winkler *et al.*, 2025). Further, power might also need to be understood as control over data and infrastructure, algorithms or regulatory authority. In turn, *legitimacy* may involve stakeholders like data subjects – users whose personal data is collected and processed –, platform users or digital rights NGOs who have ethical claims over privacy, security and fairness, even if they lack institutional authority (Schultz and Seele, 2020; Verma and Garg, 2024). In a volatile digital environment, urgency also possesses an unprecedented dynamic. *Urgency* can be suddenly intensified by viral exposure or media investigations that can trigger immediate reputational crises, independent of legal or financial impact. Formerly invisible stakeholders like gig workers or communities affected by biased algorithms can quickly gain urgency.

By critically revisiting this framework, communication practitioners can classify and prioritize stakeholder groups more accurately, while remaining sensitive to the dynamic nature of digital crises. In terms of stakeholder prioritization, we see a power asymmetry, as Big Tech often overshadow smaller stakeholders. Communication practitioners might run into legitimacy gaps, as some stakeholders might lack formal legitimacy but gain it through public trust and new expectations toward digital rights (Yang *et al.*, 2025) and related expectations toward companies’ responsibilities in protecting those. And lastly, there is dynamic urgency as digital risks can quickly escalate. Considering these new challenges enables CDR communication to move away from generic stakeholder engagement to context-aware dialogue that reflects these shifts in power relations, legitimacy gaps and real-time urgency of the digital age. Mapping and prioritizing stakeholders, however, is only the first step.

3.2 Co-shaping ethical groundwork with stakeholders

Following the first step, we argue that establishing CDR as a credible and enduring organizational practice requires the co-shaping of ethical foundations with stakeholders who are most affected by or have legitimate claims regarding the organization's digital operations. In the digital context, this includes traditional CSR actors as well as newer, digitally empowered stakeholders discussed in 3.1, whose influence often stems from network effects, viral reach or control over data flows rather than formal authority (Kemper and Kolkman, 2019). Engaging such actors early in the ethical design process ensures that the resulting principles address emerging concerns such as algorithmic bias and digital accessibility, while also responding to the dynamic urgency that can arise from viral exposure or investigative reporting (Schwinges *et al.*, 2023). Co-creation mechanisms (e.g. stakeholder dialogues, citizen panels, participatory design workshops and multi-sectoral advisory boards) can surface shared principles reflecting broad consensus on fairness, autonomy, inclusivity and sustainability (Covucci *et al.*, 2024; Wirtz *et al.*, 2023). These processes should be intentionally inclusive of both formally recognized stakeholders and those whose legitimacy derives from public trust or ethical claims, even if they lack institutional standing. This not only fosters legitimacy but also clarity and vision (Winkler *et al.*, 2025) by aligning organizational norms with diverse and evolving stakeholder expectations (Lobschat *et al.*, 2021; Yang *et al.*, 2025).

This stage draws on theories of participatory governance, stakeholder co-creation and deliberative approaches to organizational communication, which position communication professionals as facilitators of ethical groundwork. To ensure these ethical foundations are value-driven rather than compliance-led, organizations must integrate them across departments and ecosystems – from IT governance to customer-facing services. Embedding CDR values horizontally prevents ethical responsibility from being siloed within communication (Van der Merwe and Al Achkar, 2022) and equips the organization to respond to ethical dilemmas in real time, particularly those involving AI-driven decision-making (Vasist and Krishnan, 2025). Cultural and geographic diversity further complicates the ethical landscape, as principles such as data privacy may be universally acknowledged yet differently interpreted under varying regulatory contexts, such as the GDPR in Europe versus sector-specific self-regulation elsewhere (Jelovac *et al.*, 2022). Meaningful co-shaping thus requires culturally sensitive framing and local adaptation of digital responsibility guidelines, while upholding universal ethical commitments (Buhmann and Fieseler, 2021).

For communication professionals, this approach has clear practical relevance: By engaging both traditional and newly salient digital stakeholders in co-shaping ethical foundations, they can anticipate reputational risks and address legitimacy gaps and thereby foster digital trust. Moreover, building relationships with data-literate, participatory and often critical publics helps turn transparency into strategic intelligibility, making governance processes understandable and relevant across varying levels of digital literacy (Buhmann and Fieseler, 2021). In doing so, CDR becomes not a static code of conduct, but a living, evolving framework co-owned by the organization and its stakeholders, enabling ongoing feedback and mutual accountability in a rapidly changing digital environment.

3.3 Framing and embedding CDR in strategic communication

Once organizations have identified who their stakeholders are and how to best engage them, communication professionals assume the role of narrator to frame and embed CDR meaningfully into strategic communication to achieve clarity and vision (Winkler *et al.*, 2025). This is not just about what is said, but how CDR is presented as part of the organization's identity, values and daily operation, both internally and externally. We may assume that, as prior studies on the effectiveness of CSR communication demonstrate, just any CDR communication does not automatically benefit the company's social responsibility reputation (Viererbl and Koch, 2022).

Following framing theory, CSR communication and organizational identity theories, communication professionals may recognize that framing CDR practices is a complex matter. On the one hand, compliance with regulations like the GDPR or the AI Act is a critical baseline that signals legal credibility and (self-regulatory) governance capacity, in line with existing definitions of CDR (Jelovac *et al.*, 2022; Merbecks, 2024; Weber-Lewerenz and Traverso, 2025). However, if CDR is only framed as compliance, there is a risk that it will be seen as box-ticking exercise that lacks real moral authority or innovation leadership. Similarly, framing CDR purely as risk management may reassure investors but is unlikely to inspire genuine digital trust among stakeholders, which is one of the goals of CDR (Jelovac *et al.*, 2022). Drawing from CSR research, evidence demonstrates the benefits of positioning corporate responsibilities as moral responsibilities, framing it as normative and ethical commitments that connect to core company values and the larger purposes of the business (Merbecks, 2024; Wirtz *et al.*, 2023; Yang *et al.*, 2025). This moral framing, however, is not without its challenges. On the positive side, highlighting the ethical underpinnings of CDR helps address critical stakeholders' expectations for companies (Yang *et al.*, 2025) and supports internal sensemaking. For example, by highlighting moral values that drive CDR implementation, moral frames signal the company's moral character and address the ethical concerns rooted in the digital transformation (Tóth and Blut, 2024; Verma and Garg, 2024). This is something that might be driven by ethical consideration of, e.g. AI practitioners, about themselves and other stakeholders (Orr and Davis, 2020). However, organizations must remain mindful of the risks of perceived ethics-washing if moral commitments are not backed by credible actions and governance (van Maanen, 2022). Alternatively, one could highlight the economic benefits of responsible digital practice, presenting a business case for CDR and its benefits for reputation and financial income (Hartley *et al.*, 2024; Oduro *et al.*, 2025).

In a practical sense, this means that CDR needs to be embedded within mission statements, codes of conduct, executive messaging and governance structures, so that it is seen as a natural extension of the organization's norms, values and identity. A majority of prior literature shows that shared values and norms (Vasist and Krishnan, 2025; Tóth and Blut, 2024; Yang *et al.*, 2025; Lobschat *et al.*, 2021; Zimmer *et al.*, 2023), principles (Wirtz *et al.*, 2023; Oduro *et al.*, 2025; Covucci *et al.*, 2024; Verma and Garg, 2024), as well as internal governance structures (van der Merwe and Al Achkar, 2022) play a foundational role. But embedding CDR goes beyond slogans and involves building a supportive internal culture through clear communication, digital literacy training, CDR-specific but inter-departmental committees and tangible artefacts that guide ethical behavior (Verma and Garg, 2024; Wirtz *et al.*, 2023).

Externally, CDR can be strategically positioned as both connected to and distinct from broader CSR or ESG narratives. Organizations may align CDR with sustainability reporting or ESG disclosures because stakeholders increasingly expect digital responsibility to reinforce existing environmental and social commitments (Herden *et al.*, 2021; Weber-Lewerenz and Traverso, 2025). The goal is to use consistent language that shows how digital responsibility complements but not duplicates existing responsibility pillars. Meanwhile, embedding CDR as a dedicated section or pillar within sustainability reporting can demonstrate that the company understands and proactively addresses the unique risks and opportunities of the digital transformation (Carl *et al.*, 2024; Cheng and Zhang, 2023; Trüttin-Ulbrich and Böckel, 2022; Wirtz *et al.*, 2022). These tactics serve to establish the organization's leadership voice and that may enable it to gain capital (Prah *et al.*, 2023).

These choices come with different effects. Framing CDR effectively means signaling digital trust and reliability (Jelovac *et al.*, 2022). Positioning an organization as a transformational thought leader enhances organizational agility and digital transformation (AlNuaimi *et al.*, 2022). To safeguard relationships with investors, organizations can draw on tools like the CDR calculus (Hartley *et al.*, 2024) to assess risks and benefits and communicate trade-offs transparently. Importantly, framing is not a one-size-fits-all approach and is not static, but it must adapt to dynamic digital risks, stakeholder expectations and legitimacy gaps.

This may mean that communication professionals combine compliance, risks and moral responsibility frames flexibly and credibly, with an eye toward continuous monitoring and learning.

3.4 Monitoring, learning and adapting CDR communication

Based on the three steps of the roadmap mentioned above, it is evident that CDR should be understood as an adaptive and iterative practice that evolves alongside technological innovation, shifting regulations, emerging legitimacy gaps and changing stakeholder expectations. As discussed in [Sections 3.1](#) and [3.2](#), these expectations now come from both traditional actors and newly salient digital stakeholders such as influencers, whistleblowers, online communities and data rights NGOs, whose influence can rapidly escalate through shaping discourses around digital trust and accountability ([Kemper and Kolkman, 2019](#); [Zarzycka, 2024](#)). In line with the crisis READINESS framework, which emphasizes anticipation and responsiveness ([Jin et al., 2024, 2025](#)), organizational learning theory and legitimacy management, the monitoring and adaptation of CDR communication should be approached as a continuous capability rather than a one-off initiative. This perspective positions communication professionals as evaluators, not only to detect emerging issues but also to assess whether framing choices (e.g. compliance, moral responsibility or business case) remain credible and resonant with diverse stakeholders and recalibrate narratives and engagement strategies in real time.

Accordingly, measuring the impact of CDR communication becomes an important step in the process and requires attention to both perceptual and behavioral outcomes. For example, corporate legitimacy, understood as the alignment between organizational actions and societal norms, provides an important indicator of whether CDR messages are perceived as credible and resonant ([Ellerup and Thomsen, 2018](#)). Additional indicators may include changes in stakeholder trust, willingness to engage in dialogue, advocacy behaviors and sentiment patterns in digital discourse and media coverage ([Schwinges et al., 2023](#)). Given the fast-paced nature of digital crises, these indicators should also be sensitive to sudden shifts in power, urgency or legitimacy (in relation to the stakeholder salience model discussed in [Section 3.1](#)) triggered by viral events or investigative reporting.

To support ongoing learning, organizations can establish feedback loops that collect and analyze input from diverse sources, such as stakeholder focus groups, social listening, ethics audits and media monitoring ([Kunz and Wirtz, 2024](#)). Importantly, these feedback loops should integrate voices from both formally recognized stakeholders and informal but influential digital publics, ensuring that co-created ethical foundations (see [Section 3.2](#)) remain relevant and actionable over time. Embedding these mechanisms into governance structures ensures that insights are acted upon systematically, aligning with the adaptive dimension of the READINESS model ([Jin et al., 2025](#)). It is worth mentioning that a critical element of this learning process is strengthening the AI literacy of communication teams, enabling them to better understand and explain the digital systems their organizations adopt and use. Tools such as the COMM-AIT test [Leipzig University \(2025\)](#), provide a validated framework for assessing knowledge, application skills and ethical awareness regarding AI in communication. By integrating such assessments into CDR monitoring and adaptation, organizations can enhance their ability to identify risks, craft informed messages and maintain credibility in complex digital environments.

Finally, maintaining accountability in light of emerging challenges (e.g. generative AI misuse, algorithmic bias or privacy breaches) requires transparency about both achievements and shortcomings, along with clear explanations of corrective actions. Openly communicating these aspects helps strengthen legitimacy and foster stakeholder trust, even when organizations are under heightened scrutiny ([van Maanen, 2022](#)). Grounded in robust monitoring and continuous learning, as well as a high level of AI literacy, CDR communication can then function as a dynamic practice that navigates the ethical and regulatory complexities of the digital age.

4. Discussion

4.1 Limitations of the roadmap for strategic CDR communication

This article offers a structured, theory-informed roadmap for communication professionals to approach CDR communication, where synthesized insights from stakeholder theory informs stakeholder mapping and engagement, integrated digital governance literature guides the embedding of ethical foundations into the organization and the crisis READINESS model demonstrates adaptive strategies. The roadmap positions CDR as a strategic communication practice that integrates stakeholder mapping, co-creation of ethical foundations, framing and continuous monitoring. While developed for CDR specifically, several limitations of the roadmap warrant acknowledgement. First, the roadmap is conceptual and, while informed by theoretical and empirical evidence from CSR and emerging CDR literature, it has not yet been systematically tested across diverse organizational contexts. Second, CDR itself remains a developing field with persistent ambiguities, particularly around its scope and the operationalization of meaningful transparency in the digital domain (Buhmann and Fieseler, 2021). Third, the roadmap assumes that organizations have adequate resources, expertise and leadership commitment to map both traditional and newly salient digital stakeholders, engage them in co-shaping ethical foundations, and monitor and adapt communication strategies. Finally, because CDR operates in a rapidly evolving environment of technological innovation, shifting regulations and dynamic stakeholder expectations, the roadmap should not be treated as a fixed blueprint. It is better understood as a flexible framework: a starting point for inclusive dialogue and adaptive learning that can evolve alongside digital transformation.

4.2 A research agenda for strategic CDR communication

This roadmap highlights the need for more robust empirical research on CDR as a distinctive domain within communication research that has mostly been looked at through a conceptual lens. We need to validate CDR as a strategic communication construct and clarify how it is similar to – but importantly distinct from – well-established frameworks such as CSR or ESG communication. Future research should revisit and expand core communication theories, such as legitimacy, transparency and trust, to examine how these concepts need to be reinterpreted in the context of digital responsibility (Buhmann and Fieseler, 2021). A key gap emerges regarding how stakeholders form expectations not only about what organizations do in terms of their digital responsibility, but also about how they communicate these efforts. What counts as effective CDR communication? Which communication strategies yield which outcomes? Addressing these questions will require the development of stakeholder-centric indicators and meaningful metrics to evaluate CDR communication success.

Further, as the public increasingly turns toward organizational skepticism and distrust (Edelman, 2025), one valuable avenue is the potential of CDR communication to enhance organizational trust. Understanding the potential of CDR communicate to enhance or even erode organizational trust is critical, particularly when trust increasingly depends on the governance of digital technologies in the organizational context and the credibility of how CDR is communicated (Jelovac *et al.*, 2022).

Future research should also consider the contextual factors of CDR communication, exploring how it is implemented across different industries, regions or regulatory environments. The field of communication research can draw on the rich theoretical and methodological CSR tradition in communication scholarship (Aronson *et al.*, 2025; Kim and Ferguson, 2018) and expand it to the CDR context with qualitative interviews or case studies, and large-scale quantitative studies to map patterns and test best practices.

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Corresponding author

Alexandra Schwinges can be contacted at: a.schwinges@uva.nl