COMMUNICATION INSIGHTS

IT'S ALL ABOUT CONTENT

Strategic topic management in agile organizations

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

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Note: Throughout this report, all gender-specific terms are to be considered to refer to both the feminine and the masculine form – except when referring to a particular person.

EDITORIAL

The digital transformation has increased demands and pressure but has also brought about opportunities for corporate communications. Due to the changing media landscape and the changes in stakeholders' media use, corporate communications must target stakeholders' needs. It must operate quickly and well-coordinated while simultaneously meeting the requirements for resource efficiency. Opportunities result from new ways of directly communicating with audiences via owned media, which force organizations to think and work like media producers and to efficiently and effectively align their communication content.

Topic-based Strategic Communication is how many (particularly large) organizations address media change, the varied communication behavior of stakeholders, and the requirements of cost-effectiveness. This requires a cross-functional, fast, and flexible collaboration of different communication units; to do so effectively and efficiently, many organizations have changed or are changing their internal structures and processes. This is accompanied by a transformation towards greater agility – a topic that was discussed in the previous issue of Communication Insights. Several organizations have established newsrooms that organize and manage their topic-based communication, while others rely on strategic topic planning and content production without having a physical newsroom.

Despite its relevance to communication practice, research on the management of content and topics is scarce. The current publication helps to fill this gap by unveiling how organizations manage topics in their strategic communication management. It presents the results of a comprehensive study executed by a research team at the University of Vienna headed by Dr. Jens Seiffert-Brockmann and myself and supported by Neda Ninova-Solovykh and Daniel Wolfgruber. The results are primarily based on 35 in-depth interviews with representatives from fourteen organizations.

This study is part of the joint research project "Corporate communications in agile organizations" initiated by the Academic Society for Management & Communication and carried out by the Universities of Leipzig, Münster, and Vienna. Many thanks go to Karen Berger from the Academic Society for her essential support, and to all our interview partners who devoted their time and energy to providing us with in-depth insights into their practical work.

We hope you will enjoy reading this sixth issue of Communication Insights and will benefit from it in your work.

» It's the topics – and the stories told around them – that inform, inspire, and integrate. Make sure to manage topics well so they can become your strategic assets. «

Dr. Sabine Einwiller
Professor of Public Relations Research
University of Vienna, Austria

STRATEGIC TOPIC MANAGEMENT IN AGILE ORGANIZATIONS: KEY FINDINGS

▶ **Central contribution:** This study is the first to explore how organizations apply topic management as a strategic approach to corporate communications. Although a growing number of companies have started to rethink and reorganize their strategic communication management toward stronger topic orientation, these developments have not been analyzed in a broad context so far. The study not only offers insights into the working practices of numerous companies but also aims to systemize and explain their different strategic approaches focusing on the structures and processes implemented, the tools used, and the demands placed on staff and leadership. The research project is part of the larger research program "Corporate Communications in Agile Organizations" by the Academic Society for Management & Communication.

▶ **Topic-based Strategic Communication (TSC)** is the management of narratives and media content that are critical to the corporate strategy and that define the identity of the organization in the stakeholders' perceptions. (p. 10-13)

▶ **External & internal drivers:** The evolution towards topic-based communication is driven primarily by digitalization and the subsequent changes in the media landscape and in stakeholders' media use; it is also driven by the need for communications to become more integrated, networked, efficient, and flexible. (p. 7-9)

▶ **Three types:** The ways organizations manage TSC vary greatly, yet three broad types can be distinguished: 1) Topics are managed within traditional organizational structures and processes (Traditional way). 2) Topics are managed in a new cross-departmental function, which adds new structures and processes to the old (Additive TSC). 3) Topics are managed in a completely restructured communication function, usually organized as a corporate newsroom, that takes care of both long-term planning and daily communication efforts (Integrated TSC). (p. 14-18; see also the case studies on p. 25-34)

▶ **Roles & responsibilities:** The strategy team is responsible for aligning business and communication strategy; topic managers are responsible for developing the topics and

What's Your Story?

messages; media managers are responsible for adjusting the content to the channels; an editor-in-chief is responsible for coordinating within the newsroom; and service functions are responsible for producing videos, images, etc. Quite often, one person may take on different roles and responsibilities. (p. 22-24)

▶ **Collaboration & coordination:** TSC requires close collaboration and coordination. This is achieved through a tight schedule of meetings, from daily morning briefings to quarterly strategy meetings. In addition, internal networking and informal exchange are key to gaining and exchanging relevant information. Collaboration and coordination are supported by digital sharing and communicating tools, which foster transparency. (p. 19-21)

▶ **Competencies & mindset:** Communications employees are increasingly expected to have general competencies instead of being experts, with an open mindset that fosters continuous learning, collaborating, and sharing knowledge. Communication leaders need to enable and empower employees, instead of managing and controlling them. (p. 22-24)

▶ **Change process:** TSC is implemented through a change process, where structures, processes, and organizational culture change. In all the organizations studied, this change process is ongoing. With such change comes increased agility, which is demonstrated in aspects as employee empowerment, new leadership culture, collaboration, trial and error, speed, flexibility, transparency, open-mindedness, network thinking, trust, and the use of new technologies. (p. 14-18)

▶ **Conclusion and implications:** The organizations that participated in the study are generally very positive about Topic-based Strategic Communication and its associated changes. They report more transparency, efficiency, collaboration, stakeholder engagement, and communication effectiveness. However, the challenges should not be underestimated. These challenges include increased yet fair distribution of workload, performance evaluation, questioning of leadership, and motivating non-communication employees to collaborate. (p. 35-36)

METHODOLOGY

This issue of Communication Insights presents the findings of the research project "Management of Communication Contents and Topics". It was conducted by the University of Vienna in 2018-2019 and is part of the larger research project "Corporate Communications in Agile Organizations" initiated by the Academic Society for Management & Communication in 2017. (see p. 39)

This research included the following steps:

1 The first phase of the project was marked by a systematic **literature review** of both academic and practitioner-oriented literature on content, messages, issues, topic management, and corporate newsrooms. This provided an overview of the existing knowledge on these concepts in academia and the practical understanding and applications of topic/content management and newsroom concepts. The literature review also informed the process of developing questions for the interviews in phase two as well as the selection of organizations.

2 In the second phase, we conducted **35 in-depth interviews** with representatives of **14 organizations** based in Germany and Austria from July 2018 to July 2019. To cover a wide spectrum of approaches to Topic-based Strategic Communication (TSC), organizations (mainly large private companies) from different sectors and levels of advancement in the field were selected, creating a heterogeneous group. Some of the organizations in the sample are considered pioneers in TSC, with well-established structures in terms of corporate newsrooms, while others were still in the early stages of implementing relevant structures and processes.

To include a broad range of perspectives, we chose interview partners who were employed at different hierarchical levels and in different functions. Of the interview partners, eight were top-level communication managers (heads of communication), 18 were part of middle management within TSC (e.g., head of content management, head of production, head of channels), and nine were employees without a management function (e.g., topic and channel managers). The interviews included questions about the process of developing TSC, the goals and challenges, the organizational structures and workflow management, and the tasks and competencies.

3 Based on the interviews and material provided, we developed **case studies** for some of the organizations. Four case studies are presented here. (p. 25-34)

Companies that participated in the study

Thirty-five in-depth interviews with representatives of fourteen organizations based in Germany and Austria have been conducted by the University of Vienna to discuss their strategic approaches to topic management.

WHAT DRIVES THE CHANGE?

EXTERNAL AND INTERNAL DRIVERS OF CHANGE TOWARDS TOPIC-BASED STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION

Globalization, digitalization, outside-in orientation: rapid changes in the social communication landscape force companies to rethink their approach to corporate communications and to react to the challenges posed by internal and external drivers of change. The following chapter will outline these main drivers and how they require communications departments to become more efficient, effective, flexible, and agile as well as to improve their speed and coordination when managing topics.

External drivers of change

In the age of real-time, globalized, digital communication, companies have come to understand that they need to evolve in the ways they manage communication needs. Despite how approaches differ in coping with the rapid changes in the communication landscapes in recent decades, they all have one feature in common: the topics and the corresponding content are more than ever the center of organizational attention.

In the 20th century, media outlets and their main agents – journalists – had been the gatekeepers to and the agenda setters of the public sphere. Companies allocated a certain amount of resources to make their media relations thrive and to satisfy the needs of journalists and media outlets. Public relations departments worked to earn their media presence.

The advent of **internet and communications technologies (ICT)** has brought about a new era for corporate communications. Today, the **digitalization** of the public sphere has opened up vast new realms of possibilities for companies to tell their stories in channels and media they themselves own. As a Director of Communications notes: *"Our wiggle room is bigger these days. Ten years ago, we had about 1,200 requests via email and 400 via telephone every month. We put a lot of effort into responding to these requests. Today it happens that I go an entire week without talking to a journalist."* Gradually, companies are filling the void that journalists left and exploring the new realms of digital communication.

The ongoing digitalization represents another major challenge. **Reaction times** have plummeted since the introduction of the internet. Where communicators used to orient themselves towards the copy deadlines of mass media, they have now entered a world with a **constant flow of information**, 24/7. This whole process involved several developments, including changing media usage, shrinking public attention spans, the emergence of new media landscapes dominated by tech giants, and globalized communication in real time. For international corporations, the sun literally never sets; stakeholders are found in Asia, Africa, the Americas, Australia, and Europe, and wherever they are, they want to not only talk but also have their topic heard and to join the discussion.

According to a Head of Media Relations, the conclusion is apparent: If *"you look at these challenges from a practical point of view, you quickly arrive at the newsroom. Why? Because newsroom thinking is topic-centered. That means it is not our job anymore to fill channels just for the sake of filling channels. Now we have our core topics, which we display on all channels, in different stories, but with one core message. We need to tell the same message with different voices, in different channels, in different stories. Only a newsroom can do that."*

Internal drivers of change

Traditionally, corporate communications has been organized into stakeholder groups (like employees, journalists, customers, and investors) and specific media (like the employee magazine or the website). Communications with customers has generally been considered part of marketing, and investor relations has frequently been located in the finance department. Such organizational structures create **silos** that rarely integrate with one another. The result: one function often does not know what another is doing. This easily leads to message misalignments and even contradictions.

It also creates **parallel processes and a doubling of work**, which is not only inefficient but may also annoy internal partners, who receive a request one day from an editor of the employee magazine and the next day from a press spokesperson on the very same topic. One Head of Corporate Communications remembers the situation before a corporate newsroom was established at his company:

> *»We had internal communications and we had external communications, and it was apparent that many colleagues suffered. One day we realized, it all makes no sense. We are doing things twice and three times, we had to change something.«*

Tightly connected to the silo structure is the problem of **rigid hierarchies**, which required employees to follow an internal chain of command where every piece of content had to be authorized by a supervisor. This slowed down the publishing process and became a serious challenge when the overwhelming speed of digital communication, especially on social media platforms, required immediate responses.

At the same time, **budgets** have been limited, forcing communications departments to work more efficiently with a reduced workforce. In turn, reduced labor usually also means new structures, as one senior manager points out: *"In 2013, a corporate program came into effect that meant that we had to reduce 40% of our staff. Before, we had around 250 people. With 40% less personnel, you can hardly operate in the existing structures. And that is why we decided to do away with the classical structure of departments like press relations, sponsoring, internal communication, etc. and organize ourselves differently."*

Rethinking corporate communications

All these internal and external factors demanded that corporate communications be reconsidered. Processes had to be adapted to the new realities inside and outside the organizations. As a result, communications departments needed better coordination, more flexible structures and processes, increased efficiency and effectiveness, and topicality – in short, they had to become more agile. In terms of managing topics and content, this has led many companies to adopt **Topic-based Strategic Communication** in newly-established **newsroom structures**.

Drivers for Topic-based Strategic Communication

| External factors | · Digitalization
· Speed
· Changes in media use
· Rising expectations
· Battle for attention | · Parallel processes
· Scarcity of resources
· Silos
· Rigid hierarchies
· „Content is king" | Internal factors |

Need for more agility
Better coordination, flexibility, efficiency & effectiveness, velocity

Solution
TOPIC-BASED STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION

ⓘ **AT A GLANCE**

- Digitalization, the battle for attention, mounting time pressure, and changes in stakeholders' media use are important external drivers of changes in corporate communications. Stakeholders expect organizations to provide them with relevant information that suits their information needs, instead of assailing them with over-the-top advertising messages.

- Internally, parallel structures, silo-thinking, scarce resources, and rigid hierarchies have rendered past approaches to organizing communications ineffec-

tive. These demands and pressures drive reorganization and a focus on the content – or topics – instead of the channels.

- Digitalization entailed new possibilities for companies to become publishers of content themselves.

- These factors have led many companies to adopt newsroom-like structures to better cope with such challenges and to introduce a Topic-based Strategic Communication approach.

WHAT IS TOPIC-BASED STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION?

INTRODUCING A NEW APPROACH FOR CORPORATE COMMUNICATIONS TO MANAGE TOPICS AND CONTENTS

Topic-based Strategic Communication (TSC) helps to meet the communication challenges faced by organizations in our present-day information society. It puts content at the center of every communication effort and follows the guideline 'content first, channel second'. This chapter explains the concept of TSC and how to develop relevant content and topics.

The power of storytelling

Over the course of millennia, people have come to understand the importance of storytelling and the power of harnessing stories. In our modern information and communication society, organizations are essentially storytellers (Boje, 1991). Stories are about a core idea, told through events or experiences related to that idea. To captivate audiences, stories must be interesting and relevant to those who are listening. Therefore, companies need to understand what constitutes an interesting topic. So many communicators ask themselves: What makes a topic relevant to us and to our stakeholders? Here are some answers from our interview partners:

▶ *"A topic needs to be derived from the corporate strategy, and it must be relevant."* (Head of Content Management)

▶ *"A topic is a topic for us if it is relevant to our stakeholders and relevant to our strategic point of view. A topic can then be a certain project, a technology, or a product – a topic can take many different forms."* (Member of Strategic Communication Management)

▶ *"To me, a topic is something that is relevant but also current, because not everything that is relevant is also current. That is, relevant for humans maybe, but also for our company, because we only talk about topics with which we can make a meaningful contribution."* (Communication Manager)

Topic-based Strategic Communication: A new approach

Clearly, relevance is the litmus test for what constitutes a topic in corporate communications. Topics have always been important: companies have long scrutinized topics that provide a threat or an opportunity and that need to be addressed, either immediately or at a later point (Issues Management). Similarly, content has always been present when companies talk about products, services, and themselves. However, modern TSC is different from "traditional" media relations, public relations, and communication management in three important ways:

① Storytelling is now a core discipline in the communications department. Previously, companies put their products and services at the center of communications, praising their qualities and benefits to customers. Instead, communication about products and services need to fit into a bigger picture, one provided by visions, missions, and strategies. Another Head of Communication states: *"We provide products of fantastic quality to customers. But product-centered communication does not work anymore. Today, we tell the story in terms of productivity, modern workplace, how we help people, users, our customers, in order to become more productive. That is our mission, and we do not do things that do not contribute to our mission."*

2 The **process of topic identification** is largely **strategy-driven and systematic**. This means that the communications department develops core topics from the corporate strategy and the company's vision as the basis of further developing a topic hierarchy. At OSRAM (see case study, p. 26-27), their topic wheel embodies the company's topic hierarchy, as Johanna Gebert, strategic communication manager, explains: *"The inner ring of the wheel consists of our four areas of competence. The middle ring represents the focus topics, into which we translate our competencies. And at the outer ring are all our sub-topics that relate to these overarching topics."*

3 The **entire process** itself is much **more strongly integrated and coordinated** than before. Since stories need to be consistent, the organization must engage in active process management by drawing up new rules and principles. While some companies enable their employees to take control of the process themselves – i.e., the company is "letting go of the communication process", as one expert phrases it – others create project teams to more actively accompany and steer the process.

> *» Press releases would talk about trivial stuff, like 'Look, our product now has three percent less power consumption.' Nobody cares about that anymore. «*

Currently, more and more companies realize that the communications department is not the single source of information or creativity in terms of planning communication activities. **"Content is king"** is not an empty phrase, but rather an essential part of the corporate reality that is increasingly determining the strategic communication management process (Mast, 2019). With regard to TSC, this has two important implications:

▶ Communications employees must be open to more **cooperation** with colleagues from other departments who specialize in certain topics or who have interesting inputs due to their operational involvement in different business areas. They also need to **listen better** to what happens outside the company and what is relevant to society and stakeholders.

▶ **Functional changes** are also implied. When TSC becomes a company-wide matter, communication units acquire an important steering function in terms of information collection and content coordination. This has enormous potential to bring communication closer to the strategic management of the company.

Developing relevant topics

Topics are at the core of communication. Communications departments take on the work of collecting, prioritizing, and coordinating these topics. This requires great networking efforts and close alignment with corporate strategy, which provides the opportunity of bringing communication closer to strategic management.

The topic development process is multidimensional and highly dynamic. The graphic on p. 12 gives an overview of the key sources and multiple levels of "topic genesis". In general, topics can be found in the internal and external corporate environments and are derived by combining a top-down and a bottom-up approach. This results in a topic architecture, which forms the basis of TSC.

DEFINING TOPIC MANAGEMENT

A few examples from the expert interviews

1 "For us, topic management is a systematic development of topics in the sense that it is defined by a core story, its messages, its distribution, and the orchestration of these messages in the different owned and earned channels. It is a holistic approach."

2 "We understand topic management as a form of agenda setting, i.e. how can we more actively set the topics we want to set."

3 "To us, topic management is to think about communication from the viewpoint of topics. That means we have a global topic architecture with our core topics, which we want to distribute across our global channels. Starting from this viewpoint, we define our activities. That is exemplary topic management to me: prioritizing topics and driving those topics beyond isolated activities together with all our communicators worldwide."

Our research-based definition

Synthesizing the interviews results, we have defined Topic-based Strategic Communication as the systematic management of strategically critical narratives, stories, and media content that define the identity of the organization in the eyes of its stakeholders and publics.

(Seiffert-Brockmann & Einwiller, 2020)

Topics originating from the internal corporate environment

Internally, topics can be selected and developed in a short-, mid-, or long-term process, which corresponds with the level of origin and the abstractness of the topics. The main drivers here are management from a top-down perspective and employees as bottom-up topic initiators.

The top-down topic cascade starts from the highest management level

▶ **Strategy level:** The corporate strategy constitutes the starting point for the communication strategy, which lays out the overall topics of strategic importance. It contains the main focus topics and the key messages that provide the guiding communication framework. These topics are long-term and general in nature, and they are usually revised annually at most. Thus, they stay on the top of the topic architecture. Typical examples include: digitalization, environment and sustainability, social engagement, or safety.

▶ **Operational level:** Building on the main strategic topics, the topic architecture contains numerous sub-topics that aim to put the general topics in concrete terms. They originate from the day-to-day operations of the company and its business divisions; therefore, the sub-topics are largely related to the actual activities and special competences of the organization.

At this level, various projects, events, and occasions are not necessarily assigned to a certain topic but are a fixed part of the communications calendar and therefore automatically lead to concrete communication actions.
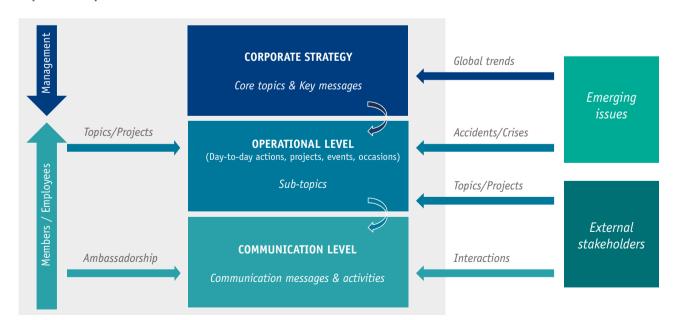
▶ **Communication level:** At the lowest level of the topic architecture, the sub-topics produce visible output in the form of communication measures via different channels. These can be grouped in topic-oriented projects or executed as individual activities.

Employees are valuable sources of bottom-up driven topics

Topics can emerge in bottom-up processes, and companies are increasingly attempting to enable and motivate their employees to participate actively in the topic development process. Still, initiatives of this kind usually influence the lower levels of topic development and only in exceptional cases reach the strategic level, which is regarded as a responsibility of management. As a general rule, bottom-up ideas are assigned to already-existing topics.

▶ **Topics and projects proposals:** In their everyday work, employees (especially those outside communications) experience situations, engage in projects, and trigger different initiatives that may have high communication value. For example, one interview partner reports that a group of part-time female

Topic development: Internal and external sources

Topics from the internal and external corporate environment are derived by combining a top-down and a bottom-up approach. This results in a topic architecture, which forms the basis of Topic-based Strategic Communication. (© Seiffert-Brockmann & Einwiller, 2020)

employees had started an information exchange via email in order to keep their colleagues on maternity leave updated. From a communications perspective, this was relevant for the social engagement and employer branding. In addition, employees can report on their working processes as well as on personal and team achievements, adding valuable insights to the collection of topics at the operational level.

▶ **Ambassadorship:** Employees can become active communicators; by engaging in social media in particular, they can not only promote certain topics to a broader audience but also bring in new topics from outside the company. This may play an important supportive function in the outside-in approach, which many companies already consider vital for TSC.

Topics originating from the external corporate environment

In TSC, the outside-in perspective is mainly driven by the external environment. Here, the ability to listen to, monitor, and respond to external developments is a decisive success factor for companies implementing TSC. External drivers can be divided into two groups: emerging issues and stakeholder inputs.

▶ **Emerging issues:** These are events that happen independently of specific stakeholder groups and still impact the company's affairs. Accidents, critical situations, and crises influence topics at the operational level, as they require expert assessment and timely reaction, with subsequent communication measures following. At the same time, major global trends (demographic and climate changes, resource efficiency, electric mobility, smart technologies, etc.)need to be constantly monitored and recognized on the highest level. After their strategic potential and relevance to the core business are closely examined, certain trends are adopted as strategic corporate topics to reflect positively on the company's public appearance. Through consistent TSC, companies can help set the agenda for future discussions and even become opinion leaders.

▶ **Stakeholder inputs:** External stakeholders can also have a say in the topic development process. At the operational level, topics that are high on the stakeholders' agendas, particularly common projects, can provide significant impetus. At the communication level, direct and social media-mediated interactions should be attentively analyzed for potential topics of strategic interest.

Which topics are worth communicating?

When selecting from a plethora of topics that continuously come up, organizations must take on the difficult task of finding a balance between topics that are relevant to them and topics that interest broader audiences. Here, three elements are key:
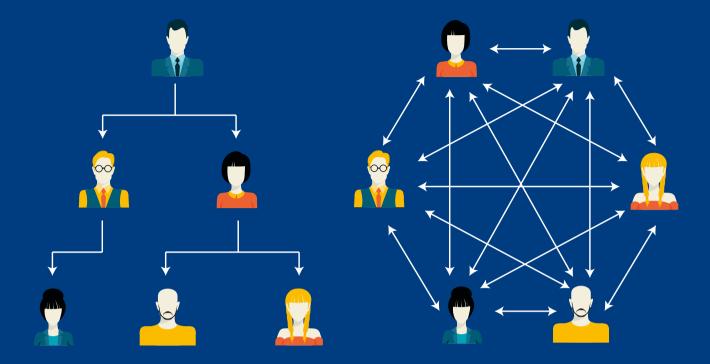
① The company's business value and its positioning are the central point of reference.

② Topics need to be closely aligned with stakeholder interests and needs.

③ To ensure attention to a topic and its related messages, thematic relevance, topicality, and a degree of attractiveness and innovation are key.

Topics are worth adopting when they are high in **business, stakeholder, and news value.**

ⓘ AT A GLANCE

- Topic-based Strategic Communication (TSC) harnesses the power of storytelling. For corporations, it is essential to identify topics and stories that arouse stakeholders' interest while conveying the organization's key messages.

- The entire process of topic management has become much more systematic and strategy-driven, aligning the communication strategy with the corporate strategy.

- There are different ways – bottom-up and top-down – to derive relevant topics for TSC. The topic development process should take external issues and stakeholders'

expectations into consideration as well as corporate topics and employee input.

- Topics worth communicating are news highly valued by the business and its stakeholders.

- Communication departments engaging in TSC cooperate very closely with other corporate and business units and coordinate their topics and stories. They should achieve a high level of integration to ensure consistent communication throughout the organization.

NEWSROOM STRUCTURES
ORGANIZATIONAL FORMS, EXPECTATIONS, AND SUCCESS FACTORS

Introducing Topic-based Strategic Communication (TSC) into organizations is accompanied by a change process. Existing structures and procedures need to be analyzed and adapted, or new ones have to be put in place. Many corporations chose to introduce a Newsroom Light or a full-fledged Corporate Newsroom. This chapter explains the different organizational forms, expectations of newsrooms, and success factors for implementation.

Organizational forms of Topic-based Strategic Communication

In essence, there are three distinct approaches to organizing content and topic management: the traditional model, the Newsroom Light, and the Corporate Newsroom (see graphic, p. 15).

Traditional model
The "traditional model" was first implemented before the advent of Internet communication technologies, where corporate communications was largely compartmentalized into communication sub-units such as media relations, public relations, public affairs, and so on. Accordingly, communicators worked almost solely in their field of expertise, and teams operated largely independent of each other.

The digital age has challenged this traditional model for the reasons discussed in the section titled "What drives the change?" (p. 7-9). Organizations are reacting to new communication technologies by adapting their communications structures and processes to fit the new reality. At the same time, pressure on communications departments has been mounting for them to organize their operations more efficiently and effectively.

However, not all companies have embraced the same model or approach to topic management. Every organization has to come up with an individual solution that is suited to the challenges and problems that are unique to it. Still, in the 14 organizations

studied in this research, two major concepts emerged that can be distinguished from one another and from the traditional approach to corporate communications: the Newsroom Light and the Corporate Newsroom.

Newsroom Light

The Newsroom Light model tries to integrate two conflicting motives. On the one hand, communicators in these organizations are aware that old structures can no longer adequately meet today's communication challenges. On the other hand, for various reasons (e.g., organizational culture, resources, size, low public profile) full-fledged structures of TSC as found in Corporate Newsrooms cannot feasibly be introduced. Therefore, the Newsroom Light concept attempts to marry the best of both worlds, updating the existing corporate communications structure by introducing additional structures and processes in addition to the traditional ones.

Two subtypes of the Newsroom Light model can be distinguished:

1 A separate, discrete unit assumes the role of a steering committee, which is largely occupied with coordinating and integrating communication efforts across the organization. This can be achieved when at least one representative from each relevant sub-unit of communication is delegated to be part of the newsroom team. This team can be seen as the decision-making authority in topic selection and management. Here, the relevant topics are collected, discussed, and evaluated, but the real production and distribution processes are left to the individual communication units.
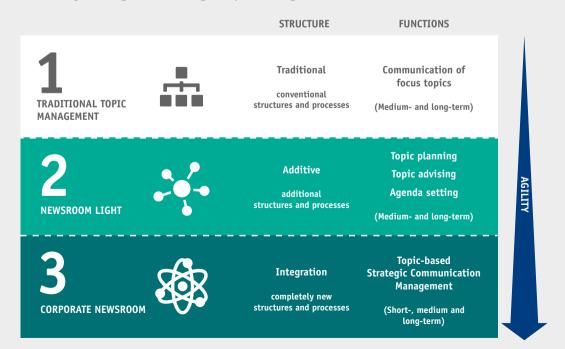
2 Representatives of the different communication units assume topic- or channel-centered duties in addition to their primary responsibilities. A "light" version of a newsroom (usually not physical in form) is implemented, which addresses planning, conceptual, production, and distribution tasks as well as focuses on medium- to long-term topic management. Here, topic expertise, the respective fields of communication, and communication channels play an important role in determining who will work on which project.

To summarize: while the traditional silo structure is not abandoned in the Newsroom Light model, the boundaries between the silos are softened, and a great deal of importance is placed on information exchange and cross-functional collaboration.

Corporate Newsroom

The Corporate Newsroom model completely adopts topic-centered communication. All corporate communications must contribute to the company's mission, and all messages need to relate to the core topics derived from corporate strategy. The focus in the Corporate Newsroom model shifts from a channel-dominated distribution of content to a holistic approach where communication must be orchestrated to be successful. *Ideally*, Corporate Newsrooms do away with silo structures and rigid job descriptions, and these principles are

Three ways to organize strategic topic management

		STRUCTURE	FUNCTIONS
1 TRADITIONAL TOPIC MANAGEMENT		**Traditional** conventional structures and processes	**Communication of focus topics** (Medium- and long-term)
2 NEWSROOM LIGHT		**Additive** additional structures and processes	**Topic planning** **Topic advising** **Agenda setting** (Medium- and long-term)
3 CORPORATE NEWSROOM		**Integration** completely new structures and processes	**Topic-based Strategic Communication Management** (Short-, medium- and long-term)

AGILITY

To implement a more advanced approach to a Topic-based Strategic Communication both structural and procedural changes are necessary. With this, also the level of agility increases. (© Seiffert-Brockmann & Einwiller, 2020)
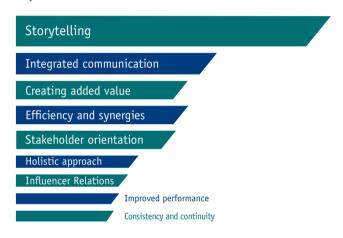
applied to the entire communication department. While expertise in certain topics and mastering content production skills are still highly valued in corporate newsrooms, every employee is expected to consider all potential communication channels and to be able to utilize them all. Consequently, in theory there are no specialists, either for topics or for communication channels. This means that employees' *"profiles become wider, because one has to do more tasks and be a generalist"* as one communication manager notes.

► **Storytelling** is by far the issue mentioned most often. All organizations recognize the importance of narrating content in stories. Through stories, the organization makes itself visible as one interview partner remarks: *"With our topics, our stories, our view, we position ourselves in public, make the stories of our employees and our projects more tangible and perceptible."*

► A second important expectation focuses on **integrated communication** and adopting a **holistic approach of corporate communications.** According to a Chief Communication Officer, corporate communications

Reasons for implementing a newsroom

- Speed and topicality
- Consistency
- Digitalization
- Active agenda setting
- Reputation
- Establishing new formats
- Globalization
- Professionalization

Expectations of newsrooms

- Storytelling
- Integrated communication
- Creating added value
- Efficiency and synergies
- Stakeholder orientation
- Holistic approach
- Influencer Relations
- Improved performance
- Consistency and continuity

Reasons for implementing a newsroom

The reasons for introducing Newsroom Light or Corporate Newsroom structures are depicted in the figure above, which clearly shows that speed and topicality are the main drivers of the change. The need to communicate faster is a major factor in all the companies that participated in this study. This need for speed is fueled by the insight that organizations must react to the challenges of digitalization and globalization and to the requirement to appear consistent in public. Active agenda-setting is an important motivator, especially for those with Newsroom Light approaches.

Expectations of newsrooms

When new structures are introduced, many expectations arise. We asked the communication experts about their expectations when the new approach was adopted and a clear picture emerged (see figure above):

is in a unique position: *"The only corporate function that really considers topics holistically and connects them with each other is communications. To fulfill that task, from strategic planning to operational execution, is a great challenge."* Integrated communication is an inevitable consequence of today's social environment, which mandates the *"integration of messages and topic clusters and interlinking with brands, over time and from local to global"*, as another Head of Communication agrees.

► Three more objectives appear to be important: creating **added value**, realizing more **efficient operations** and **synergies**, and a more thorough **stakeholder orientation**. In terms of stakeholder orientation, one Head of Media Relations describes this development as a sheer necessity: As a result, creating added value is an important expectation that is both outward- and inward-looking, as it provides external stakeholders with worthwhile offers and demonstrates internally that the communications department generates returns on investments.

» By now, publics roam through innumerable channels and they expect channel-specific offers that are tailored to their needs and interests. Stakeholder expectations have changed dramatically. «

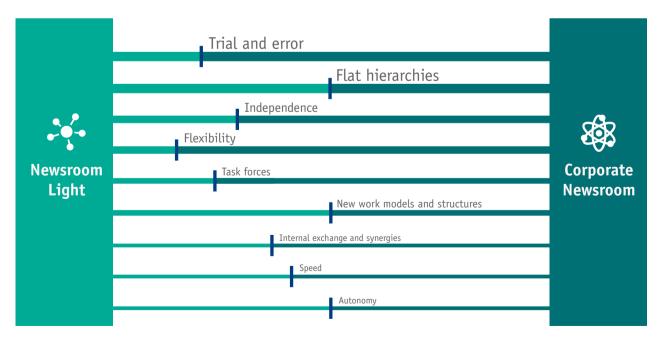### Newsrooms - The road to agility?

When we analyzed the interview data and compared the managers' perceptions, it became clear that the different newsroom structures reflect the level of agility (see figure below). Compared to the Newsroom Light approach, the Corporate Newsroom relies much more on flat hierarchies and flexible processes and work environments, as well as on independent project teams. Even though newsroom light companies do not usually feature flat hierarchies, they strongly aspire to implement them. Hence, while corporate newsrooms live flat hierarchies, newsroom light companies mostly just talk about them.

The gap begins to close considering the need for internal exchange and synergy creation. A work environment of trial and error is important to both approaches; however, it is embraced much more by Corporate Newsrooms. Similarly, both newsroom types rely on the implementation of new work models and structures and see the need for operational speed. This indicates that companies incorporating a Newsroom Light model reflect on further developing their structures.

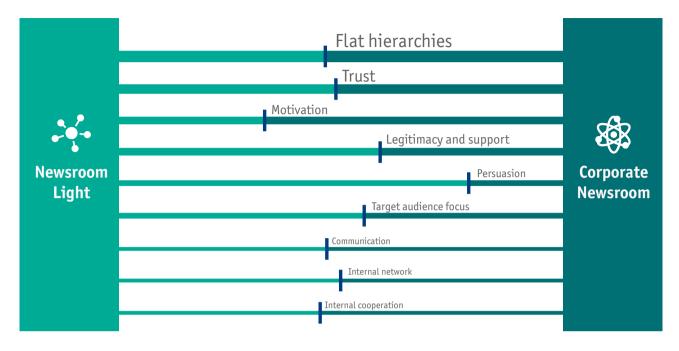### Success factors for implementing a newsroom

Experts agree that flatter hierarchies play an important role in successfully establishing TSC (see figure on p. 18), regardless of which approach is used. Trust of and among employees is indispensable, as is internal cooperation, communication and networking, and a clear focus on target audiences. Minor differences can be found in the level of motivation (or lack thereof) between the two approaches and in the urgency of legitimacy and support for the newsroom. Newsroom Light companies report more struggles in securing employee engagement and more emphatically highlight the importance of support by the top management. Accordingly, these companies demonstrate a greater need to persuade their workforce to embrace the change process.

How important are elements of agility for different types of newsrooms?

The graph shows which elements of agility are considered important in the interviews with the experts from Newsrooms Light and Corporate Newsrooms. (The bigger the letters are and the longer the lines, the more important consider newsroom communication employees the aspects of agility.)

Success factors for implementing a newsroom

The graph gives an overview of the different factors responsible for a successful newsroom implementation and the extent to which they are considered important by experts from Newsrooms Light and Corporate Newsrooms.

ⓘ AT A GLANCE

- There are three distinct approaches to organizing topic management: the traditional model, the Newsroom Light, and the Corporate Newsroom. Whereas the traditional model upholds the silo structure of the different communication teams, the newsroom models blur or even abandon team boundaries and increase cross-functional collaboration.

- Employees with different backgrounds cooperate closely in a virtual or physical newsroom to identify relevant topics and plan communication activities together.

- Newsroom models adopt a topic-centered approach. That means that the focus shifts from a channel-domi-

nated view to a content-dominated view. Topics come first, the appropriate channels second.

- The need for velocity and topicality are the two reasons mentioned most often for introducing a Newsroom Light or a Corporate Newsroom.

- Newsroom concepts go hand in hand with agile work models: flat hierarchies, flexible processes, independent project teams, and a new corporate culture.

- Key factors for successfully implementing a newsroom are flat hierarchies, trust, internal cooperation, communication and networking, plus a clear focus on target audiences.

NEWSROOM PROCESSES
COORDINATION, MEETING STRUCTURES, AND TOOLS

Apart from implementing new organizational structures, adapting agile processes is key when setting up a newsroom. Communication departments need to decentralize power, hand decision-making to the project groups, and set up cross-functional teams. The following chapter will, therefore, explore new meeting formats for strategy decisions and for managing workflow, the new role of project teams, and adequate digital tools to support processes.

Meetings as the focal point for coordination and strategic decisions

Meetings are the focal point of all coordination efforts in newsroom structures, although the function of meetings has somewhat changed in comparison to the pre-newsroom era. As companies adopt more agile methods and flatten their hierarchies, meetings have developed into a new form of gathering where employees of different levels have the chance to actively participate. Jointly they decide upon, prioritize, and coordinate communication efforts and strategies. The trend towards co-creation and involving ever larger groups of people is one reason why 'soft' skills and leadership skills are ranked so highly among professionals.

One topic manager describes the new meeting atmosphere as following: *"I am daring to speak now. These meetings really became much more transparent. Before, we had these morning calls, it felt like in church. There was dead silence, nobody dared to even cough. It felt like Sunday service, with the press officer reading the press statements out loud and that was it. But now, you go in and it is a discussion. As simple as that. It is a wonderful development."* This open and participatory nature is not only true for daily routine meetings but also for long-term strategy gatherings.

At another company, the strategy meeting is not at all an upper-management event, as one representative emphasizes: *"Twice a year we have a strategy meeting. Not only is the CEO present and the Head of Corporate Communications, but the team leaders and content managers also participate to look at the communication strategy and adapt it if necessary."*

Managing the workflow: Editorial conferences and morning briefings

The same change can be observed at the steering level. In **topic conferences and editorial meetings**, editors jointly control and manage the flow of content, prioritize topics, distribute resources, and pitch new projects within the strategic framework set by the strategy meeting. These meetings occur between weekly and monthly, depending on the organization. The **daily morning briefing** is the stage for operational coordination, providing knowledge to all employees on a daily basis.

Yet another form of meeting has increased in importance since the introduction of newsroom structures: the personal one-to-one conversation or **four-eye-meeting**. One side effect of silo structures is that sub-units are not only differentiated by content or channels but also physically separated. In open-plan offices, colleagues and team members sit only a few meters apart and are not ensconced in their offices. Information flows more freely through the department and communication is easier, which is reflected in the increase of ad-hoc meetings and four-eye-conversations in corporate newsrooms.

More responsibility for the project team

The coordination process revolves around the project team. In an ideal full-fledged corporate newsroom, project teams are recruited from a staff pool and they dissolve once the project or task is finished. One cannot overemphasize the consequences of this new approach; apart from a few sensitive issues (like CEO statements) senior management no longer exercises full control. **Decision making** and responsibility are delegated to the project teams. This development has a logical consequence: when control mechanisms recede as rigid hierarchies are dismantled, a new mechanism needs to take its place – one that is based on trust and responsibility.

As highlighted above, the need for **trust** increases with organizational agility. Trust decreases costs, since it makes control superfluous; on the other hand, it assumes that employees act responsible and have the relevant expertise and competencies to make the right decisions without consulting senior management. A senior expert stresses the importance of trust: *"Regarding our daily business, there is a huge amount of trust that we as professionals manage topics ourselves in a self-organized, self-responsible*

way. Previously, we had to write an email to the boss and he had to approve. We do not need to do that anymore. We know what to do, the press officer knows what to do, which channels have to be served, who we need to involve."

In essence, the corporate newsroom is based on a system of trust, where the regular workforce is the pillar on which the entire structure rests. Employees work **responsible** and largely self-organized; top management is backing off from direct interference and is concentrating on developing the communication strategy and enabling their staff. However, this realignment is not without risk. Without proper knowledge of management systems and permanent employee training, this participatory process is at risk of failing. The organization can only sustain flat hierarchies and agility if all employees possess comparable amounts of expertise and roughly the same basic set of competencies.
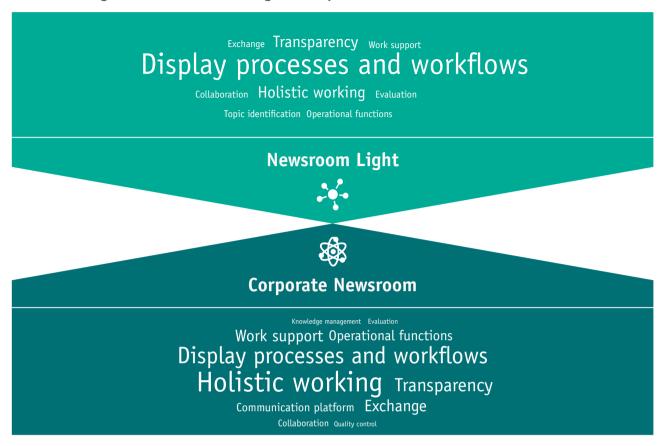
Editorial and collaboration tools

Agile departments need the right tools to organize their processes appropriately. It is thus no surprise that all the companies in our sample use **digital tools** – such as Trello, Slack, Sharepoint, and Scompler – to support their newsroom operations. Due to the specifics of each company, the editorial tools vary widely. However, they all fulfill a variety of tasks that make them indispensable in today's newsroom structures (see figure on p. 21).

The main reason for using digital tools is to **improve the organization of work processes**. In order to avoid the silo structure, every communication manager needs to keep up-to-date on the operations of other employees. Thus, the primary function of these tools is to display processes and workflows, to make them transparent, and to enable exchange between the different staffers – in short, to provide operational support. This entails further collaboration to establish systems of evaluation, knowledge management, or quality control. The following quote expresses the ideal usage of digital tools in companies: these tools *"provide maximum transparency on what everybody is doing. Our teams use it as a working platform, to post updates about the things they are working on so that everybody can know. That is especially helpful for new employees in the sense of knowledge management, they can get up to speed without having to ask dozens of people—you simply read. So, technology helps!"*

In order for digital tools to support processes in the newsroom, the technology must be thoroughly and extensively used. The tools must ensure that everybody has **access to the latest information**. Comparing companies with a Newsroom Light approach and those with a Corporate Newsroom approach shows that tool usage is more frequent in the latter. Given that the opportunity to create a physical corporate newsroom is not available to every company, an intensified use of digital tools might suffice as the first step to creating a virtual corporate newsroom.

Functions of digital tools in Newsrooms Light vs. Corporate Newsrooms

Exchange Transparency Work support

Display processes and workflows

Collaboration Holistic working Evaluation

Topic identification Operational functions

Newsroom Light

Corporate Newsroom

Knowledge management Evaluation

Work support Operational functions

Display processes and workflows

Holistic working Transparency

Communication platform Exchange

Collaboration Quality control

The wordclouds show the importance of digital tools in Corporate Newsrooms and in Newsroom Light approaches. Whereas tools in both newsroom types are equally important to visualize processes and workflows, Corporate Newsrooms apply tools more often to facilitate holistic working and improve transparency.

(i) AT A GLANCE

- Meetings are the focal point of all coordination efforts in newsroom structures. There are many different meeting formats, ranging from long-term strategy meetings to daily stand-up meetings. Often, agile formats or tools are adopted.

- In newsrooms, employees with different expertise and independent of their hierarchical status come together to jointly prioritize relevant topics and stories, and to coordinate communication efforts and strategies. Newsroom workers acknowledge the new openness, the higher level of transparency, and growing possibilities to participate.

- Open workspaces can better facilitate the flow of information and communication among employees.

- Decisions are no longer made only by team leads or senior managers but also frequently by the responsible project team. This, however, requires an atmosphere of trust where top management backs off and gives project teams more responsibility.

- Digital tools help to better organize processes and ensure that all team members have the latest information. They are often a first and indispensable step to creating a virtual corporate newsroom.

NEWSROOM STAFF
NEW SKILLS, ROLES, AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF NEWSROOM EMPLOYEES

The implementation of Topic-based Strategic Communication (TSC) and the accompanying corporate newsroom structures lead to a fundamental change in the roles and competencies of the communication staff. While specific communication expertise, e.g., with regard to certain channels, is still irreplaceable, employees in the communications department need to be able to perform a wider set of functions and fulfill an increasing number of different roles. The following chapter discusses the new roles and competencies needed by newsroom staff.

Wanted: Jacks of all trades

Traditionally, communications workers have been separated into content managers and channel managers, who report to their team manager who in turn reports to the head of the communications unit. The departments were thus compartmentalized into silos that focused on a specific area of expertise and that were managed in top-down hierarchical structures. This compartmentalization proved to be a serious challenge for companies. *"Everything happened in silos,"* as a global communications manager recalls, *"nobody talked to anyone. We had the press relations team, brand communications, other teams – but nothing was interconnected. But of course, in such a huge company as ours, it is essential to talk to one another about content, about topics."* Now, the speed and complexity of modern corporate communications require that employees master a wider range of roles, skills, and competencies.

Even though the boundaries between corporate communications roles have begun to blur, the roles themselves are still very much recognizable. This means that content manager, topic manager, and channel manager are still relevant job descriptions. What is new is that these roles are increasingly performed by one person, as a Head of Communications explains: *"In an ideal world, everybody does everything. We are almost there, that everybody wears two hats. Channel responsibility, or distribution, and content responsibility."*

The data reflect this statement. **Content and channel managers** are by far the most often-mentioned roles, and they occur with each other much more frequently than with any other role. Nevertheless, responsibility for channels and content often coincides with team leadership, the managing editor role (which often rotates within companies), and the classic press officer position.
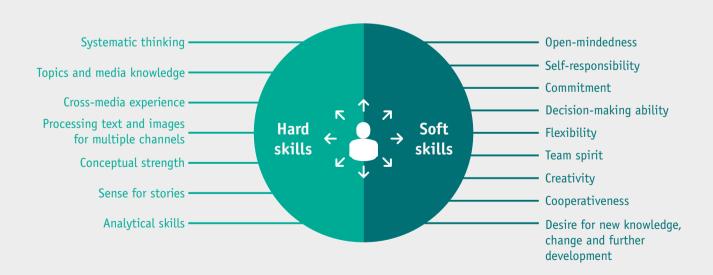
Open-mindedness, responsibility, and systematic thinking: Key skills of newsroom staff

Experts mentioned a wide array of desirable skills and characteristics when asked about the core competencies and traits of today's communicators. With regard to traits, **open-mindedness** was the top priority, followed by the expectation that employees demonstrate a sense of responsibility. Both features are a logical prerequisite for newsroom staffers, since constantly working on new topics and channels requires a certain sense of curiosity. As one Head of Corporate Communications explains, *"You simply have to learn to look outside the box. You need to have an open mind for the needs of other channels in order to solve problems together."* Consequently, open-mindedness and a thirst for new knowledge are the traits that ensure that the communications unit does not revert to silo formation, where everybody only develops his or her signature skills.

Similarly, taking over **responsibility** is necessary because employees are expected to work independently and with minimal supervision. As a senior expert points out, responsibility is key to agile working: *"Agility to me means a lot of responsibility, ownership culture, taking possession of topics and pursuing them resolutely."* However, while responsibility is special in the sense that experts single it out explicitly, it often co-occurs with other feats such as systematic thinking, flexibility, endurance, speed, creativity, and a sense of team spirit.

Mentioning **systematic thinking** frequently reflects an integrated, holistic approach on the structural level. Employees need to be aware of structures and processes, keeping the whole operation in mind while performing their job. As the quote demonstrates, these traits neatly align with agility as a concept.

Skills profile of newsroom communication staff

Systematic thinking —
Topics and media knowledge —
Cross-media experience —
Processing text and images for multiple channels —
Conceptual strength —
Sense for stories —
Analytical skills —

Hard skills **Soft skills**

Open-mindedness
Self-responsibility
Commitment
Decision-making ability
Flexibility
Team spirit
Creativity
Cooperativeness
Desire for new knowledge, change and further development

In the future, all-rounders with general knowledge and experience in various fields will be in much greater demand than specialists. Continuous learning – also from each other – is a key prerequisite for change.

Competence management in newsrooms

In terms of competencies (see figure on p. 23), all experts stress the need for continuous upskilling and training on the job. Unsurprisingly, upskilling is most often related to expertise and to general work competence. (Expertise includes both knowledge about an issue and proficiency in handling technologies and methods.) To keep this expertise up-to-date, **constant training on the job** is needed, which all companies in our sample offer to some degree. Similarly, internal knowledge sharing was highlighted as an important effect of expertise and upskilling. Not only do employees need to continue educating themselves, they also need to act as internal advisers and teachers to their coworkers. Competencies can be divided into two further clusters:

1 **Content production skills:** This entails digital competence in particular. Due to the collapsing distinction among different roles, competencies in all realms of digital media production are in high demand.

2 **Project management and knowledge management skills:** With flat hierarchies and agile work styles, responsibility is more evenly distributed across the workforce. Every member of a project team must be aware of what 'project management'

means and implies, since all members work together as equals for the duration of the project. This also requires developing leadership, so-called soft skills, and team spirit. But most of all it requires the ability to approach projects in a systematic, structured, analytical manner.

Furthermore, employees are required to develop and demonstrate a **sophisticated understanding of all relevant aspects** of their job and work environment – communications, channels, topics, issues, stakeholders, and processes. They need to be able to explain how communication interact with the work of others. Only if employees think for themselves can they work flexibly and avoid costly redundancies.

The development towards agility also blurs boundaries between roles and functions. Many companies still adhere to traditional role distinctions in their communications departments (content manager, channel manager, managing editor, team manager, etc.). However, these roles are no longer tightly attached to specific persons. Most responsibilities rotate through the department and thus, at least in theory, everybody serves as managing editor for a time (except departmental and sub-unit heads). As organizations become more flexible and agile, management asks its employees to follow suit.

ⓘ AT A GLANCE

- The speed and complexity of modern corporate communications require that employees master a wider range of roles, skills, and competencies. Where dedicated experts were previously employed for highly specific tasks, the clear trend is toward all-rounders with diverse sets of skills.

- Traditionally, communicators have been separated into content and channel managers. These roles continue in modern newsrooms but can be performed increasingly by one person. Most responsibilities rotate through the department, with newsroom workers taking over different tasks and responsibilities. To do so, they need a profound understanding of the organization and its environment.

- Among the wide array of desirable skills, experts consider open-mindedness, responsibility, and curiosity as top priorities for engaging with new topics and integrating all relevant stakeholders.

- Continuous upskilling and training are indispensable to keep employees' expertise on content production and project management up to date. This happens not only in external training but also increasingly in peer-to-peer learning schemes within the organization.

FOUR COMPANIES, FOUR DIFFERENT APPROACHES
OR: WHY THERE IS NO SUCH THING AS A UNIVERSAL MODEL

To be successful, topic management requires solutions tailor-made to the specific communication needs, corporate culture, and environment. Some companies have already made significant progress and have even experimented with multiple models. The four case studies presented here – OSRAM, voestalpine, Deutsche Telekom, and Siemens – introduce different practices and illustrate how diverse topic management can be. They can serve as a role model for companies just starting the process. Above all, the case studies also seek to motivate communications employees and managers on their way towards topic orientation.

For a better overview, each organizational form of Topic-based Strategic Communication (see p. 15) is exemplified by two company cases:

⊙ NEWSROOM LIGHT	⊛ CORPORATE NEWSROOM
OSRAM voestalpine	**T·· ·** SIEMENS

OSRAM

OSRAM is a leading high-tech global company based in Munich, Germany. The company is still associated with light bulbs, although it sold its lamp business in 2016. Currently, OSRAM is positioning itself as a high-tech photonic company. Its products are applied in highly diverse ways, ranging from virtual reality to autonomous driving and from smartphones to intelligent networked lighting solutions in buildings and cities. Corresponding with its transformation, OSRAM has identified centralizing corporate communications as a vital strategic step.

OSRAM does not have a classical newsroom, either in terms of a physical place or in terms of structures and processes. However, they do have a well-defined strategic approach towards topics and key corporate messages, developed in large part by Johanna Gebert in her role as strategic communications manager. She explains: *"Topic planning is part of the strategic communications planning and aims to generate higher transparency, better coordination, and a consistent company positioning that reflects our corporate mission and vision. Communication on a random basis cannot be of any benefit, and thus we decided to manage our communications by introducing stronger topic orchestration and target setting."*

Centralizing communication

Two main reasons were given for initiating a collaborative process towards developing a common understanding of topic management. First, before 2017, communication teams used to operate independently from each other. Project management approaches were introduced, but there was room for improvement. Second, it became increasingly evident that the disjunction of the business units resulted in inconsistent communications and competing messaging. Accordingly, corporate topics were structured along their specific needs and target groups; however, certain cross-cutting topics needed combined efforts and stronger commitment. Therefore, it was a logical decision to take steps towards integration.

Essentially, integrated communication was encouraged through new procedures and content. This requires communication experts in the business units to cooperate more closely with the team at the Munich headquarters. Johanna Gebert gives some further insights: *"Our colleagues from the business units who are responsible for trade media relations, for instance, are now more closely involved in the activities of the core press team. This does not mean that they do not have their specialized trade media communication anymore, but in today's structure we work together on comprehensive topics of overall corporate relevance much more intensively than before."* This is possible due to the clear consensus on what the topics are and how each business unit can contribute.

The Topic Wheel

In order to achieve better integration, Johanna Gebert and the Strategic Planning team decided to introduce a clear topic structure building on OSRAM's four key areas of competence that had been distilled in a series of workshops. They aimed to provide a guiding framework for communications planning and execution. The first step was to define distinctive criteria for relevant topics: they need to be important for the stakeholders and simultaneously be fully consistent with and enhance the corporate strategy. Then, a clear dividing line was drawn between the strategic and operational levels as well as between top-down and bottom-up approaches in topic generation. The result was the topic wheel.

The topic wheel consists of three rings: OSRAM's four areas of competence – Mobility, Safety & Security, Connection, and Health & Well-being – are placed at the core and are regarded as long-term strategic topics. Because these areas are relatively abstract, the middle ring contains a number of focused topics that translate these core competences into daily business topics and that highlight their communication value. In the outermost ring, these topics are further specified in the form of sub-topics.

In addition to the rings, four pyramids – one for each area of competence – represent the company's expertise in each corresponding field. These pyramids may include products, technologies, and leading projects.

Johanna Gebert further specifies: *"Viewed as a whole, the topic wheel is always only a snapshot of the topics that are currently important."* Except for the core competences that have been key to OSRAM for the last 100 years, all topics are regularly reviewed in close collaboration with the business units that are the main sources of information and topic ideas. Thus, the topic generation process is primarily bottom-up and is centrally managed with a medium- to long-term perspective. In addition, the operational level can also contain smaller, short-term topics and projects related to day-to-day business. Examples of these are different occasions, conferences, and crisis situations where the communications teams need to respond ad hoc.

Increasing flexibility and responsibility
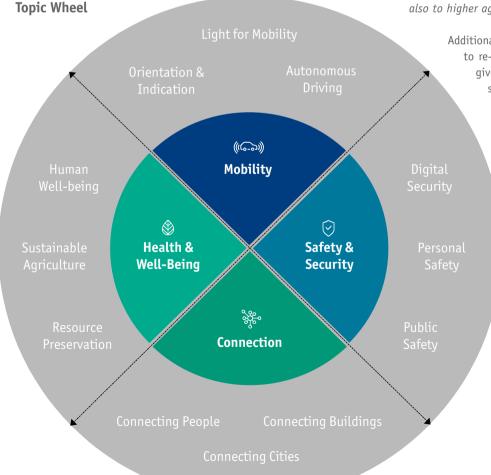
To further facilitate the coordination process, an editorial conference is held once every week and is open to all communicators worldwide. Here, the different teams can exchange information, give feedback, and decide which topics should be handled by various business units and which should be upgraded to a corporate level.

Strategic topic planning at OSRAM with the Topic Wheel

What is important about OSRAM's approach is that there are no predetermined topic owners who undertake cross-project coordination or consulting tasks. Usually, the one who brings in a new idea becomes the project owner. Therefore, it could be argued that the communications management is clearly integrated but the execution of communication activities is decentralized. With this approach comes a much greater responsibility for the individual teams, which is recognized as beneficial progress: Gebert says, *"We succeeded in getting rid of those rigid approval processes that we used to have earlier. This naturally led to more velocity and flexibility and also to higher agility."*

Additionally, first attempts have been made to re-organize the project work and to give the leadership role not necessarily to the team managers but to employees who are actively involved in the operational work and who have profound knowledge relevant to the specific project work.

The first two layers of OSRAM's topic wheel with its areas of expertise and focus topics

voestalpine

Voestalpine AG is a leading global technology group headquartered in Linz, Austria. The company focuses on product and system solutions using steel and other metals in technology-intensive industries and niches. Since 2015, a separate unit for communication planning has been operating within the group's communications department, applying traditional newspaper editing principles and practices.

voestalpine's newsroom is the result of a change project initiated in 2014. Back then, management and communications employees realized that they were wasting valuable resources instead of using synergies and focusing on the truly important communication platforms. As a result of the change project, the number of corporate channels were significantly reduced and new structures and processes have been implemented in order to increase communication effectiveness and efficiency. Stephanie Bauer, online and social media manager, was appointed Head of Newsroom. Now, the newsroom is the single point of contact for relevant stories.

Purpose and vision of the newsroom

The main purpose of the newsroom is to reduce double work and to improve the quality of communications. This is achieved by inspiring active employee participation and properly channeling current knowledge and topic expertise into a special unit. Every year, three focus topics are chosen in line with the corporate and communication strategy. The newsroom serves the purpose of long-term, topic-based communication planning. Importantly, it does not compete with the daily work of the press office, but rather plays a complementary role. In the long term, this positions the organization clearly and distinctly towards its external and internal target groups.

Newsroom structures and organization

Currently, 11 of the 18 communications employees work intermittently in the newsroom in addition to their core work in external, internal, or brand communications. The newsroom engenders flexibility and job diversity: not only do employees have the opportunity to assume editorial responsibility, but they sometimes need to perform more than one function in the newsroom. In general, four main newsroom roles can be identified:

▶ *Media managers:* These are channel experts who are responsible for content delivery and channel development.

▶ *Content managers:* These are topic experts who collect and process information as well as define target audiences and core messages.

▶ One *production coordinator*, who is responsible for producing all kinds of visual material and video.

▶ One *editor-in-chief*, who is also the head of newsroom.

In this system, Stephanie Bauer has complete overview and is in charge of strategic decisions. She explains: *"With our newsroom structure, we break down existing hierarchies, because people from different teams and organizational levels have to work together, and team leaders, for instance, simply become content managers. These kinds of occupational role changes require an open mindset but also clear rules."*

In the communications department of voestalpine, each team has its own open-plan office, but no physical space is specially equipped as a newsroom. Instead, one of the meeting rooms serves as a newsroom where all involved employees come together on a regular basis. Thus, implementing successful topic management is not always a matter of cutting-edge technology; it relies heavily on the particular communicative objectives and needs. Stephanie Bauer explains: *"Of course we have screens, and we can start the news ticker at any time. But this is not of primary importance for everybody. Our colleagues from internal communications, for example, have other content that they regularly monitor."*

Working procedures and coordination processes

Employees from different teams, along with external partners, need to work in close coordination and cooperation with each other. To facilitate this, a series of meeting formats has been established. These help partners keep each other updated, exchange relevant information in a timely manner, and plan future activities:

▶ *Pit stops:* Brief meetings that take place two or three times per week, when necessary and for no more than 20 minutes. The newsroom team reviews daily news and issues that may require faster action.

▶ *Editorial meeting:* This larger biweekly gathering occurs with the marketing communication managers from the group's companies, who participate via WebEx. This is the time to discuss and plan major topics.

▶ *Short meetings or telephone conferences with external service providers:* Some communication activities have been outsourced in order to best use the existing resources and offer higher quality. For example, an online agency has been hired to maintain the Facebook and Instagram corporate channels. In addition, voestalpine cooperates with certain journalists with relevant topic expertise.

▶ *Ad hoc meetings, calls, and emails:* These are used for project-team work and detailed planning.

▶ *Strategy meetings:* These occur twice per year with all team leaders, content managers, and the communications executives of the divisions. Normally, the topic selection and prioritization processes happen one year in advance, and the more detailed preparation begins three months before the start of the communication period. Although the strategic topics remain mostly unchanged, some small modifications are sometimes necessary but should always be joint decisions.

Due to the high number of involved parties, the coordination process is intensive and can be very challenging. Therefore, **transparency and knowledge management** play a key role. Fact sheets for each strategic topic are updated annually, along with a company-wide platform for images and videos. voestalpine has also developed an editorial plan on SharePoint, where all relevant information about a specific topic or project can be found. This includes a calendar with events, project descriptions and tasks, necessary content elements, and names of the employees in charge. Although only the newsroom team can make changes to the editorial plan, everybody in the company can see it. This helps increase the priority given to topic management and the communications efforts of the newsroom as a whole.

Newsroom Organization Voestalpine

Communication strategy & Focus topics

Content Manager
- Focus topic 1
- Focus topic 2
- Topic1
- Topic 2
- Specific topic 1

Editor in Chief

Media Manager
- Online / Social Media
- Media Relations
- Corporate TV
- mm / Intranet
- Events / Fairs
- Brand / Ads
- Sponsoring

50 media & channels

Production coordinator
- Digital experts
- Animations
- Videos
- Photos
- Graphics / Layout

Deutsche Telekom is one of the world's leading integrated telecommunications companies, with some 178 million mobile customers and more than 216,000 employees in more than 50 countries. In 2016, the communications department in the company's headquarters in Bonn, Germany, was turned upside down after systematic change. What first started as an efficiency program in 2014 led to as a modern workplace, but as a clear manifestation of agility, integration, and digital transformation. This is what makes Telekom's Content Factory more than just a regular newsroom.

Developing the Content Factory was not an end in itself but rather a major change process with the aim of becoming quicker, more flexible, and more impactful. Björn Muscheid, who is now responsible for planning and coordinating the editorial work, explains the background: *"What we experience now cannot be compared with the communication reality of ten years ago. Today's environment is extremely dynamic and highly fragmented – it is mainly driven by social media. And we needed to transform the way we think and act in order to succeed in the battle for attention, reputation, and trust."* The project was marked by three main milestones: structural reorganization, stronger topic-orientation, and a totally new office situation – all accompanied by an ongoing cultural change.

Diving into the pool: The new structure

In the past, Telekom's communications department was very traditionally structured: divided into internal and external communications, characterized by rigid hierarchies, inflexible resource allocation, and almost no project work. Today, none of that remains. Over the course of the change, the department evolved from a traditional silo organization into what is called a pool organization. Of the approximately 130 employees working in corporate communications today, only 30 are members of permanent teams, which are responsible for communications strategy, pool management, digital transformation, and event management. The other 100 employees are members of the pool. Just like in a real newsroom, they can be assigned to different projects depending on their availability, interests, and skills. The pool consists of four thematic clusters: Corporate, HR, Products & Services, and IT.
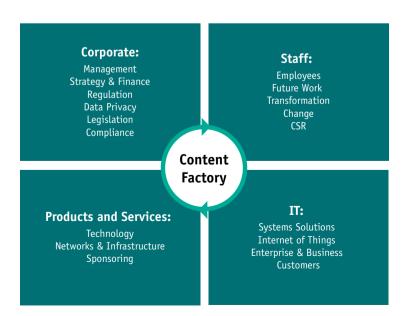
The pool has only two hierarchical levels:

1 The **management level** with the head of corporate communications and a leadership team of seven people. Of these seven, four are the key account managers of the pool's thematic clusters and have specific topic expertise. The team also includes the head of pool management and the senior managers in charge of the communications strategy and digital transformation.

The new steering logic for corporate communications at Deutsche Telekom

Communication services
Pool management

Communication strategy

Digital Transformation & Development

Corporate:
Management
Strategy & Finance
Regulation
Data Privacy
Legislation
Compliance

Staff:
Employees
Future Work
Transformation
Change
CSR

Content Factory

Products and Services:
Technology
Networks & Infrastructure
Sponsoring

IT:
Systems Solutions
Internet of Things
Enterprise & Business
Customers

② The **operational level:** it consists of the project members, the six editors-in-chief, and the project managers, who do not have official disciplinary functions, although they still play a leading role in daily business. Every week, one of the editors-in-chief takes over the newsroom and is responsible for quality management. This means he or she must keep an eye on the editorial plan, coordinate the working process, check contents, and give approvals if necessary. The editors-in-chief are also supported by two social media managers – known as "social media sidekicks" – who monitor the online channels.

Planning the newsroom activities

Björn Muscheid`s task is to plan the newsroom activities from a bird's eye perspective. This begins with the annual planning, which is possible because the main strategic topics, or the "block-busters", are clearly defined according to the corporate and communications strategy; these form the core of the thematic clusters. The semi-annual planning is more detailed and is carried out in close cooperation with the other communication-related disciplines in the company, including marketing, HR, investor relations, and political communication. For this purpose, a special meeting format called "Campus" was established in which all relevant topics, projects, and upcoming major events can be discussed. Furthermore, once a month, the planning team sits together with the key account managers and parts of the project staff to plan the next weeks.

The same type of meeting happens on a weekly basis to set the specific agenda for the following days. But still, the daily morning and afternoon stand-up meetings constitute the centerpiece of the planning process. These meetings take place at the news desk in front of three big screens that track Telekom`s communication activities and are the key to efficient integration. Björn Muscheid describes it metaphorically: *"This is our daily campfire, where we can talk openly to each other, ask questions, and bring in new ideas. Since we created the Content Factory, our planning and decision-making processes have become much more transparent, and the positive outputs are already visible."*

Blockbusters, channels, and projects

The 'blockbusters' are the central topics in Telekom's Content Factory that provide the framework for the topic-based project work. There are also channel-based projects, which are called permanent tasks. These channel management tasks include the maintenance of the intranet and the corporate website. Also, there is a project team responsible exclusively for social media. Topic-based projects, on the other hand, are usually defined for a certain period of time. But of course, there are several exceptions to this rule: financial communication, for instance, is considered a long-term project due to its importance throughout the whole year.

Generally, there are topic experts and channel experts. In practice, both types of projects depend heavily on each other. Employees working mainly in topic-based projects also need to acquire channel expertise, so that a whole team can perform adequately. In contrast, channel managers are expected to understand topic-related communications priorities.

Agile project work practices

As soon as a new project is created, a project team is formed. The task-employee assignment is usually made by the pool management team, together with the key account managers. They oversee the workload along with the required know-how and availability of the staff. Once a year in their appraisal interviews, employees have the opportunity to share their individual preferences and desired trainings in order to diversify their own project portfolios.

The project team has to fully engage with the topic, developing a storyline and deciding where and how to position it. Here, it is crucial to focus on the topic first and only then think about the channels. In the first step, the team prepares a master document with the core messages and wordings that, in the second step, are adapted to the specific target groups and the channels. The news desk plays a key role, because it is where the project team can present its concept, take advice from channel experts and further colleagues, and get the green light for implementation.

SIEMENS

As one of the world's largest producers of energy-efficient, resource-saving technologies in the areas of electrification, automation, and digitalization, Siemens has always been in the limelight of public attention. Knowing the importance of change and ongoing improvement, the company is also regarded as a newsroom pioneer. In fact, today's newsroom has little to do with the original concept from 2012 and is currently undergoing another transformation. Despite that, or exactly because of it, the newsroom has emerged as a key pillar of the new corporate spirit, promoting ideas like innovation, internalization, ambition, and leadership.

The newsroom at Siemens headquarters in Munich has already undergone multiple iterations. This is an ongoing process of evolution that can be seen as a kind of seismograph for new trends and changing business needs. Michaela Förster, who was head of newsroom and planning at the time of the interview in September 2018 and is now a global communications manager, provided a glance behind the scenes of this development.

▶ **New office:** In view of ongoing digitalization, it became clear that the traditional division between internal and external communication, with teams sitting in separate offices, was no longer an advantage. It was becoming increasingly necessary to bring communication employees with different functions closer together and to combine forces for better outputs. Hence, the major change in the initial phase in 2012 was a new open-space office, which helped to reduce parallel processes and make them faster and more flexible.

▶ **Increased speed:** While the first newsroom concept was very much focused on classical media relations and respective topics, it soon became evident that professional social media work in terms of speed and high-quality content is a must. So, the second iteration aimed mainly to expand skills and competencies in this field and coincided with the move to the new headquarters building in 2016.

▶ **News desk:** The next step was to merge all corporate channels at the news desk. The news desk comprised functions including global communications, social media, press relations, and the corporate website as well as the role of an editor-in-chief. But still, it was mainly about better organizing the channels with a special focus on employees working in the company's headquarters.

▶ **Global newsroom:** The most fundamental change happened with the last transition in 2017. This marked the introduction of a new logic where an even higher priority was placed on topics as well as virtual communication. This meant that the newsroom was not seen as a physical space any longer but as a topic-based planning and collaboration platform including all communication employees of Siemens worldwide.

Decentralized network structure

Throughout this process of evolution, the structure and roles in the corporate newsroom changed substantially. In the past, the newsroom was a place where representatives of the different communication departments met and synchronized their daily work. Altogether, there were four topic teams aligned with the four strategic business fields of Siemens. A media team managed the internal and external channels, as well as the team responsible for financial communication. The editors-in-chief and, later, the so-called governance team were responsible for the planning, management, and coordination of both topics and teamwork.

Today, the newsroom follows a strongly decentralized approach based on the principles of self-organization, trust, and co-creation. The functions of editors-in-chief and the governance team have been discontinued. Teams now extend beyond the company's headquarters and have gained increasing independence regarding decision-making in daily business. Michaela Förster describes the change: "One Voice evolved into One Spirit. We moved away from controlling and unifying and now focus on mutual commitment and trust, instead. If there is trust and the appropriate conditions for exchange and cooperation, there is also greater transparency."

» The newsroom totally reflects our corporate mindset. We think globally, act independently, and cooperate internationally. «

Michaela Förster

Process orientation

Self-organization is not to be confused with lack of organization. In fact, the newsroom has a process-oriented structure with three subteams:

▶ **The newsroom and planning team** is responsible for the short- and long-term communication planning along Siemens' core strategic topics. It also manages the topic architecture and serves as an interface between the various players involved, organizes meetings, maintains tools, and collects and processes relevant information.

▶ **The production team** is in charge of the contents, based on the work of the planning team. Here, there are staff with topic expertise as well as employees with the know-how needed to develop content according to the specifics of the different media. For example, Siemens has not only experts for social and external and internal media but also in-house video producers.

▶ **The distribution team** comprises the former channel managers. They support their colleagues to communicate the produced content adequately and have an important consulting function in regard to analytics, channel improvement, and knowledge sharing.

The newsroom team closely collaborates with other communication teams and departments in the company. These include Digital Communications (mainly responsible for the digital infrastructure), Marketing Communications, Insights & Analytics, and Operational Excellence as well as the stakeholder experts for Media Relations, Thought Leadership, and Employee Engagement. Together with these teams as well as the company's sites and business units abroad, the newsroom pursues the objective of communicating more closely with customers, personalizing content, and reducing outsourcing. Regarding communications, Michaela Förster states: *"We communicate only on topics with high business value and want to encourage discussion about topics relevant for the future. Instead of focusing on the current state, we prefer to talk about visions, opportunities, new business potentials and groundbreaking technologies."*

Project squads

Like every corporate newsroom, the Siemens newsroom has a specific meeting culture. Interestingly, the number of meetings at fixed times has been reduced considerably in past years, leaving only the daily editorial meeting, held as a video conference and accessible by all communication employees – more than 1,000 worldwide. Normally, 70 to 120 employees participate. Here, they can get the latest updates,

The ongoing development of the Siemens newsroom

This case study represents the state of the Siemens newsroom at the time of the interview in September 2018 and is based on statements by Michaela Förster in her function as head of newsroom (ad interim), now global communications manager. Since the beginning of 2019, the newsroom is managed by Patrick Naumann and is continuously developing to meet the challenges of digitalization, new technology and business responsibility. The structures, processes and core topics have been recently revised, resulting in another major iteration of the newsroom. Up to the print of this issue of Communication Insights no further details have been made public.

enter into dialogue with colleagues, make proposals, and ask for support. The focus, however, increasingly lies on flexible collaboration and informal exchange, which can be achieved mainly via digital platforms, given the fact that the project teams are usually an international mix. In this regard, Slack and Trello are the key tools at Siemens. Trello is used for editorial planning, and everyone who has a new idea for a topic, campaign, or other communication activity can post it on the Trello board, discuss it with the newsroom team, and invite qualified colleagues to collaborate on the project.

In the Siemens newsroom, there are no longer predefined topic managers and teams. Instead, project work is implemented in agile squads formed only for the time of the project, and these are not set in stone. Squad members come and go, depending on the specific project needs. There is a squad leader, who is also the project owner and has the freedom to choose his or her own team. While squad leaders are responsible for coordinating teamwork, organizing jours fixes and controlling the budget, decision-making is a joint task of all squad members. With only a few exceptions in case of sensitive topics of global relevance, no additional approvals are necessary, and there are no channel owners who eventually accept or reject contents. Quite the contrary, almost all employees can now access each of the corporate channels worldwide and actively use them. In the end, it is all about trust and communication expertise.

ⓘ AT A GLANCE

- In Topic-based Strategic Communication (TSC), there is no "one size fits all" solution. Companies need to find their own individual way when deciding on new structures and processes, while remaining goal-oriented and complying with the corporate strategy.

- Setting up a corporate newsroom or implementing agile processes for topic management enables corporations to become faster, more efficient, and effective.

- OSRAM is an example of a company that uses strategically relevant topics to achieve stronger communication integration and centralization. The topic wheel plays a key role as a central means for steering and coordination.

- voestalpine demonstrates well that introducing full-fledged TSC structures is not always reasonable. The implemented newsroom model is not a less advanced model but rather a deliberate decision, and it follows traditional editorial principles and functions.

- The communications department of Deutsche Telekom replaced its hierarchical structures with a pool organization with only two levels of hierarchy. The pool consists of four thematic clusters and numerous project groups focusing on topics and channel tasks. The news desk constitutes the core of the Content Factory, where cooperation takes place at full pace.

- Siemens is one of the pioneers in terms of TSC and corporate newsrooms, and it has undergone a series of iterative changes. The newsroom in its present form goes far beyond the physical newsroom at the Munich headquarters and is a key driving force for Siemens's digital transformation in the communications field. It acts as an innovation incubator and facilitates mutual learning processes. As for the content, Siemens is now increasingly focusing on topics that are both socially and corporately relevant.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR MANAGING TOPICS IN AGILE ORGANIZATIONS

Introducing new structures and processes is never easy; problems and conflicts arise where deep-rooted behaviors are challenged. Change does not happen overnight, nor is it a forgone conclusion. Successfully introducing a new approach requires leadership, listening, dialogue, and understanding as indispensable components. In particular, **breaking up silos** is key. Rigid hierarchical structures have no future in a corporate newsroom.

Employees need to be brought along, because they will ultimately decide whether the change is achieved. One Head of Communication sees participation, and beyond that ownership, as critical: *"There is this old saying, 'turn the affected people into involved people.' I think this does not go far enough. It is not only about participation, but also about ownership of processes. Otherwise, this does not work on the long run, because acceptance is not sufficient."* This means that an organization that wants to embrace Topic-based Strategic Communication (TSC) in a corporate newsroom has to hand over at least partial ownership to its employees. Only if they experience being owners will they give what it takes to make the corporate newsroom a success.

Other lessons learned include not underestimating the **time factor.** Changes are usually slow and incremental, happening within an evolutionary process. Consequently, implementing new approaches needs to be carefully thought through and prepared.

The future course of topic management

It is difficult to make predictions about future developments, and experts are wary of doing so. However, they agree in several areas about the future of TSC:

1. **Storytelling is key:** Many believe that the importance of storytelling will continue to increase, especially in the form of data-driven storytelling. One senior manager predicts: *"I believe that we will tell totally new stories. We can become more data driven. We are trying to identify data sources in the company that we can use; there is definitely something to it!"*

2. **Internal becomes external:** Many agree that internal boundaries will continue to be dismantled, taking on (for example) the distinction between internal and external communications. The guess is that *"the groups that are existing in our company right now are going to dissolve. Possibly, topic management will pick up steam, and those groupings will disappear."*

3. **Marketing and corporate communications merge:** Topic-based Strategic Communication will affect the much-debated relationship between marketing and corporate communications, where one expert identifies a clear trend: *"Marketing is assimilating itself a bit into corporate communications, and then they call it content marketing. In essence, it is not different from what we are doing. But at the end of the day, marketing cannot do it the same way we do."* This will entail more integration, which does not necessarily imply integrated communications as a concept but does include approaches like 'one message, many voices'.

4. **Ongoing digitalization:** It seems safe to predict that digitalization has not yet reached its pinnacle. Thus, it is safe to assume that more intense usage of digital tools, more data analysis, and more visual communication will influence TSC.

5 **Data-based evaluation:** Data analysis in particular proves to be an important challenge in the near future of TSC. Many companies, if not all, actively evaluate their communications performance and have formulated key performance indicators, with a strong focus on social media parameters such as engagement, reach, conversion, followers, and so on. Additionally, traditional evaluation methods are applied, including media resonance analysis, organizational listening, sentiment analysis, and structured stakeholder feedback (focus group interviews or surveys).

Discussing the trend of the ever-increasing role of storytelling, one Head of Communication acknowledges that *"we do not use evaluation enough. We get a lot of data, but we do not use it for strategic planning. That is where we try to improve."* As methods of evaluation and listening become more sophisticated, this trend will be further reinforced.

6 **Outside-in perspective:** Companies actively engage in changing their communications perspective; they look to shift from inside-out approaches to outside-in approaches. Companies will always emphasize what they perceive to be important, but the internal perspective needs to be more strongly aligned with the views of stakeholders, or otherwise corporate communications runs the risk of telling stories that nobody listens to.

7 **Others:** Other challenges were mentioned that include (among others) cumbersome processes, more meetings as a result of flattened hierarchies, greater need for professionalization, and unclear responsibilities.

Reward or regret: Are newsrooms worth the effort?

Even though the advantages of agile TSC in corporate newsrooms are apparent, one should not forget that the process is not perfect. **Flat hierarchies** mean increased coordination efforts that digital tools are supposed to provide. However, the complexity of corporate newsrooms makes off-the-shelf solutions unsuitable. Instead, resources have to be put into developing and maintaining tailor-made solutions.

Companies ask much from their **employees** in the new world of corporate newsrooms. This requires not only constant training and coaching, but above all a new leadership style and organizational culture that rest on trust. Collaboration and cooperation can only thrive in an environment of understanding and listening. While companies have already taken great efforts to listen to their stakeholders in order to identify the stories worth telling, it is even more important to first listen to its employees and understand their needs and worries.

It goes without saying that there is no perfect recipe for successful topic management. The 14 organizations that we analyzed differed widely in terms of business sector, customer orientation, products, public relevance, size, tradition, structure, and so on. No one organization was like the other; however, the move towards a newsroom philosophy is clearly trending in all of them. No company can withstand the tides of digitalization, the real-time communication on a global scale, or the empowerment of stakeholder groups. With growing public relevance and exposure, the need for newsroom structures increases. While smaller companies do not necessarily need full-fledged newsrooms, no global player can afford to be caught off-guard when new topics arise in the digital arena of the public sphere. Even more importantly, companies must not only react, they must be part of the conversations and share their views by means of corporate agenda setting.

Traditional structures of corporate communications are no longer suitable to 21st-century communications. To some degree, all companies that are exposed to competition need to increase their level of agility to be able to keep up. The silo will probably never go fully extinct, and not all companies need to engage in public conversations. However, if one company does not talk to stakeholders, another will in its place. Newsroom-like structures enable companies to be part of the conversation without being the last participant to arrive to the talk.

All the experts we talked to – chief communications officers, senior managers, and communication managers – welcomed the development towards more agile structures. Not all of them will embrace a fully-agile corporate newsroom, though some have. However, all have realized that the communications challenges of tomorrow cannot be met with yesterday's tools. More transparency, increased efficiency, strengthened collaboration, elevated stakeholder engagement, and more effective communications are the most visible benefits of these change processes.

Still, experts are also clearly aware that the challenges must not be underestimated. The requirements for communicators are unprecedented; a fair workload distribution is difficult; effective knowledge management systems are hard to establish; and excellent communications leadership is hard to achieve – to name only a few obstacles. However, the biggest challenge is perhaps not transforming communications departments or adopting newsroom structures. Sooner or later, all employees will become communicators in a storytelling organization. Then, the question will not be how agile the communications structures are, but how much the organization itself has become a newsroom, and how it can be managed.

FURTHER READINGS

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ACADEMIC SOCIETY FOR MANAGEMENT & COMMUNICATION

The Academic Society for Management & Communication is a joint initiative of leading companies and universities. Through collaborative research and knowledge sharing, it aims to actively shape the future of corporate communications. The initiative was founded in 2010, and today it is supported by five universities and more than 40 corporate partners.

The Academic Society initiates practical, future-oriented research projects. They are multidisciplinary in nature and are designed as comprehensive studies that support the ongoing professionalization of corporate communications.

The Academic Society is part of the Günter Thiele Foundation for Communication & Management, a non-profit entity governed by state law that is dedicated to advancing science and knowledge transfer in the field of communications.

Value Creating Communication

In 2015, the Academic Society launched the world's most comprehensive research program in strategic corporate communications: Value Creating Communication. Researchers from universities in Leipzig, Muenster, Vienna, Berlin, and Duisburg-Essen collaborate with academics from all over the world and with corporate communications executives from leading companies. Together, they research the key challenges facing communications management today, such as digitalization and big data, value creation, and how to cope with agility.

So far, Value Creating Communication has researched four topics:

Module I: How will corporate communications change due to new social conditions and megatrends — above all, digitalization and big data? (2015–2017, University of Muenster)

▶ Communication Insights, Issue 2: Wohin geht die Reise? (German)

▶ Communication Insights, Issue 4: Startklar für Big Data (German)

Module II: How do corporate communications create value for an organization? How are communications and business strategy aligned? What contributions can communications make to the overall business success? (2015–2017, Leipzig University)

▶ Communication Insights, Issue 1: Was bringt das alles? (German)

▶ Communication Insights, Issue 3: How to play the game

Module III: How will agility transform corporate communications? How will collaboration with internal and external partners change? What can agile content management look like? (2017–2019, Universities of Leipzig, Münster, Vienna)

▶ Communication Insights, Issue 5: Fast and flexible

▶ Communication Insights, Issue 6: It's all about content

Module IV: What influence do bots have on the social media communications of organizations? How can corporate communications apply bots for more effective communications? (2018–2020, University of Duisburg-Essen)

From digitalization to value creation, from big data to agility: Our previous issues of Communication Insights

Research project: Corporate Communications in Agile Organizations

Communications leaders are currently faced with the challenge of mastering the needs of agile organizations in volatile environments. Scientific research in this field is scarce. This research program closes the gap by investigating how corporate communications should align its own structures, processes, people management, and collaboration with internal and external partners.

Given the complexity of the topic, the program is divided into three subprojects, focusing on different aspects:

1 **Implications of agility for managing the communications department:** How can agile structures and processes, people and cultures, and tools and technologies be implemented, and how can other units and overall goals in agile organizations be supported? (Leipzig University: Prof. Dr. Ansgar Zerfass, Dr. Lisa Dühring)

2 **Implications of agility for the relationship with external consultancies and service providers:** How will collaboration change in agile settings, and how can consultancies support the transformation process? (University of Münster: Prof. Dr. Ulrike Röttger, Dr. Christian Wiencierz)

3 **Implications of agility on topic management:** How are topics strategically managed in agile organizations? How essential is a newsroom? (University of Vienna: Prof. Dr. Sabine Einwiller, Dr. Jens Seiffert-Brockmann)

The Universities of Leipzig, Münster, and Vienna closely collaborate in order to gain first-hand insight and to shed light on agility in corporate communications from different angles. They are supported by renowned communications leaders from global corporations across all industries.
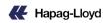
Research Partners