

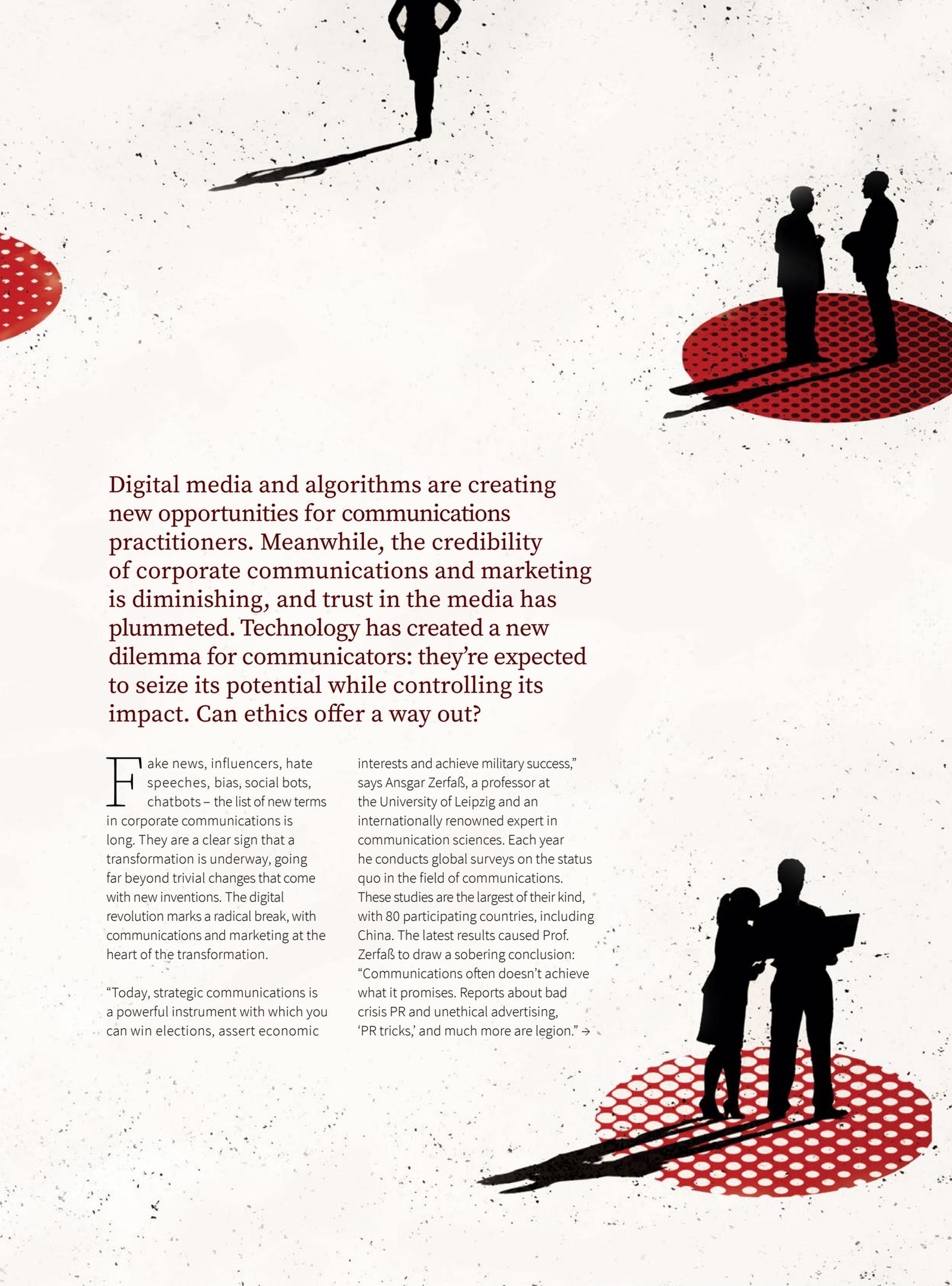
COVER STORY More than a Market



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CAN ETHICS HELP RECLAIM PUBLIC TRUST?



The background of the page features a white surface with a pattern of small black dots. Three red circular areas with white polka dots are scattered across the page. On each of these circles, there are black silhouettes of people. At the top center, a single person stands with hands on hips. To the right, two people are in conversation. At the bottom right, a man and a woman are looking at a laptop together. Long shadows are cast from each silhouette towards the bottom left.

Digital media and algorithms are creating new opportunities for communications practitioners. Meanwhile, the credibility of corporate communications and marketing is diminishing, and trust in the media has plummeted. Technology has created a new dilemma for communicators: they're expected to seize its potential while controlling its impact. Can ethics offer a way out?

Fake news, influencers, hate speeches, bias, social bots, chatbots – the list of new terms in corporate communications is long. They are a clear sign that a transformation is underway, going far beyond trivial changes that come with new inventions. The digital revolution marks a radical break, with communications and marketing at the heart of the transformation.

“Today, strategic communications is a powerful instrument with which you can win elections, assert economic

interests and achieve military success,” says Ansgar Zerfaß, a professor at the University of Leipzig and an internationally renowned expert in communication sciences. Each year he conducts global surveys on the status quo in the field of communications. These studies are the largest of their kind, with 80 participating countries, including China. The latest results caused Prof. Zerfaß to draw a sobering conclusion: “Communications often doesn’t achieve what it promises. Reports about bad crisis PR and unethical advertising, ‘PR tricks,’ and much more are legion.” →





Various surveys from the last few years have shown that the public's trust in corporate communications and the media has taken a nosedive. In Germany, according to the survey "Trust in Communicators" by EPREKA, only 1 in every 12 citizens trusts the messages of professional communicators. Responsible for this decay are scandals involving information strategies that aim to hide more than they reveal, such as the diesel and racism scandal in the automobile industry. The low level of participation in societal debates has



also been criticized: people do not see companies taking a stand or being truly dedicated to important issues. According to Edelman's "Trust Barometer," during the pandemic – at least in 2020 – institutions and companies have gained credibility; however, the media continues to score poorly. Many blame the media for ideological and one-sided reporting instead of delivering impartial information and a diverse offering of information.

The credibility of marketing and communications is closely correlated to the behavior of companies, their owners and top managers. A company that acts neither sustainably nor decently and humanely cannot build up any other image. Therefore, ethical communications is closely related to "corporate social responsibility" and to a commitment in the corporate culture to treat its surroundings like "more than a market." Many companies acknowledge the need for sustainable behavior, and they want to be part of the solution, not the problem. But 'greenwashing' is not the answer – in the internet age, with millions of users having eyes, ears and a voice, companies' attempt at greenwashing is quickly exposed. Sustainability is a long journey, and it encompasses a change in both mindset and supply chains.

Can Old Codes Answer New Ethical Questions?

Have communicators themselves understood the signs of the times? According to the "European Communication Monitor" survey from 2020, two out of three communicators in Europe faced one or more ethical challenges in their daily work during the last 12 months. For communicators who work at agencies, this is the case for every second person. The survey lists the problem areas: social bots; personalized data made possible by big data analysis; paying influencers for positive reporting; sponsored (but not recognizable as such) social media posts on news websites; and encouraging employees to use their private accounts to spread posts.

Of course, there are codes of ethics for journalists that define the rules of behavior for such situations.

But communicators appear to lack knowledge or awareness of them, or the codes are not fully compatible with the digital age. According to another finding from the same survey, only 16% of communication managers in Germany have participated in ethics training, and only half knew about these codes. An initiative started in Tübingen called "Responsible Communication" calls for an up-to-date discussion of these issues in the industry. Starting summer 2021, the initiative will offer a broad range of training at the World Ethos Institute, focusing on ethical topics for professional corporate communications.

It's All About Trust

What does ethical behavior mean? Without diving into philosophy, it's worth recalling that ethics is an ancient discipline. Aristotle's *Rhetoric* laid the foundations for ethical communications behavior, based on three principles: Ethos stands for a person's credibility, Pathos for the ability to touch an audience emotionally and – most important – Logos, the arguments and evidence that prove what has been said. First the facts, then the morality – this principle is still valid today if you want to communicate convincingly. When the world is in crisis or undergoes major changes, ethics experiences a boom and everyone returns to the basics.

That was the case during the financial crisis, and it's true for the climate crisis and the current pandemic. A view to the future makes clear that this shift will further accelerate: the number of refugees is increasing, artificial intelligence will render many jobs redundant, climate change, self-driving cars, and perhaps Chinese will become the most widely spoken language in the near future. Who can

provide orientation? Many studies show that institutions, companies and the media play a crucial role in ensuring social cohesion. But to achieve that, they need to be trusted by the public more than ever before. As Robert Bosch once said: "I would rather lose money than trust."

Ethical Guidelines For Communicators

Professional communicators play an important role in building trust. At the same time, marketing and communications are one of the main fields of application for artificial intelligence, and professionals in the field are highly affected by the changes. The challenges they face are plentiful:

- Individualized content will enable marketing and advertising to address target groups in a more customized way to reflect their specific life circumstances. The US presidential election was a disconcerting example of this strategy.

- Algorithms are producing content. So-called robo-journalism has been used for routine press releases for some time now. Xinhua was the first to use a robot to also read the news.

- In the future, AI will also be able to communicate intelligently and with emotions. GPT-3, currently the most ambitious project of this sort, already writes poems and articles.

- Easily programmable social bots can communicate independently, influence discussions through hate speeches and fake news, and generate trolls.

Digitalization and automation will be associated with efficiency gains in marketing communications (marcom), as is already the case in factory environments. The analysis of the results and the impact enables a new quality of evaluation. Language assistants, text generators, and tools for supporting creative work will certainly help marcom teams manage the rising demands due to a higher number of channels and campaigns. →



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Experts agree that transparency, fairness, and individual privacy protection are the topics that communicators must guarantee to master the ethical grey zones. Here are ten propositions on how the moral compass should look like to navigate today's VUCA world:

1

Anyone who wants to communicate well needs knowledge of ethics.

What does ethical communication mean? How do new developments affect the communications task? Not everyone needs to be an AI expert, but they should be aware of algorithms' potential and how they are being applied.

2

Companies need to be serious in their efforts to behave sustainably and ethically.

Quick announcements and empty promises lead to PR crises. Marketing Communications will become easier if the corporate culture is clearly defined and verifiably lived out in daily practice.

3

Press spokespeople belong in the C-suite.

Marketing Communications needs to be incorporated into the leadership team and consulted for decisions that can impact the company's image.

4

Transparency is a must.

Companies don't need to publish everything, but when they do, it must be candid and transparent. Where does the data come from? Where does original content end and paid articles begin?

5

Corporate identity also has a digital component.

Communications and design are important pillars that reveal how a company sees itself. What purpose do digital systems, automated processes, and the use of data serve? How should campaigns be rolled out so

that a company's identity is visible everywhere? In the digital space, a specific image of the company is created, and marcom needs to reflect that in the company's identity.

6

Stories must be backed up with facts and examples.

Even if virtual worlds can seem enticingly imaginative, the stories that are told should include verified information. Earning recognition is more important than getting attention.

7

Engage with the public.

The more uncertain the state of information becomes, the greater the need for dialogue and discourse. Having a dialogue with the public is not free of risk. Professional communicators know the groups they need to converse with and how to ensure a respectful discussion.

8

Quality is king.

Readers react better to media outlets that invest in quality journalism. Even if the flow of content requires speed, pictures and texts transport messages, create impact and conjure up emotions. Messages must be carefully monitored for fairness, discrimination and manipulation based on experience.

9

Consult with the experts.

The corporate environment is complex, and communicators can't know everything. That's why depending on the knowledge of specialized departments is crucial to crafting the right message. Furthermore, subject-matter experts are often active on social media and establish contacts independently with editors and multipliers. Communicators should support these 'natural' influencers and actively involve them, using their communications know-how.

10

Algorithms against fake and hate news.

AI is what you make of it. Algorithms can be used to create fake news and to detect disinformation. Communicators must know the potential of algorithms and utilize it in order to work efficiently and responsibly.

The transformations currently afoot in technology, tasks, and trends demand a lot from communications teams and agencies. At the same time, companies are reducing their budgets for professional communications and saving on resources. The result? Justified complaints from the remaining teams about stress and mental overload.

Responsible communication is multifaceted. This summer, business publishing house Springer plans to publish a handbook titled *Responsible Communication*. The eponymous initiative from Tübingen and its experts for sustainability, crisis communications, marketing, design, and content describes the current challenges with a learning program. One chapter is devoted to an ethical framework for intercultural communication, with China as one example.

Communicators face various dilemmas. Only by thinking things through together and reflecting together can we unravel these dilemmas — and perhaps even solve them. ■

Heidrun Haug is the founder and managing director of the communications agency Storymaker GmbH and Storymaker (China) Ltd. Haug, a trained journalist, has launched the initiative 'Responsible Communication' in collaboration with the World Ethos Institute at the University of Tübingen. The agency operates the cyber podcast on AI and ethical communications. The agency has been active in China through an office in Shanghai since 2007.