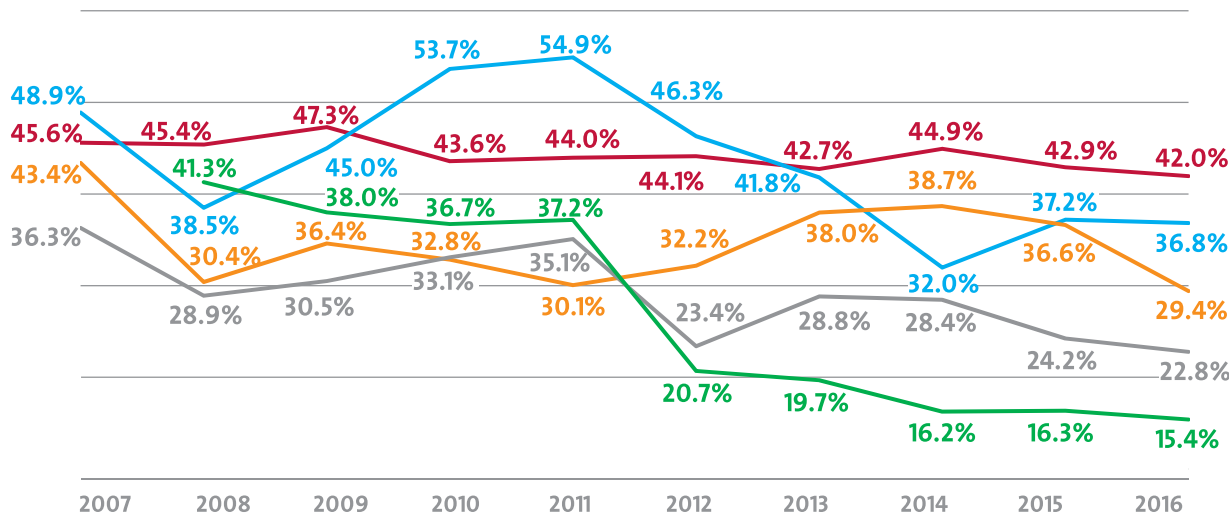


Show me the money

Is communication an increasingly datafied business?
The European Communication Monitor shows how communication
develops from a soft into a hard, data-based profession.

BY DEJAN VERČIČ AND ÁNGELES MORENO



- Linking business strategy and communication
- Coping with the digital evolution and the social web
- Building and maintaining trust
- Dealing with the demand for more transparency and active audiences
- Dealing with sustainable development and social responsibility

Development of strategic issues for communication management in Europe over the last decade (10 years)

This year, the European Communication Monitor (ECM) celebrates its 10th edition and it demonstrates consistency in a long-term trend: linking business and strategy is the most important strategic issue for the profession. While coping with the digital evolution and the social web was the top concern in 2007, it peaked in 2011 and now seems to be under control. Building and maintaining trust, dealing with the demand for more transparency and dealing with sustainable development and social responsibility are all moderately falling on the agenda while financial and general economic crises are also calming down. A return to business as usual means a similar return to: show me the money for communicators.

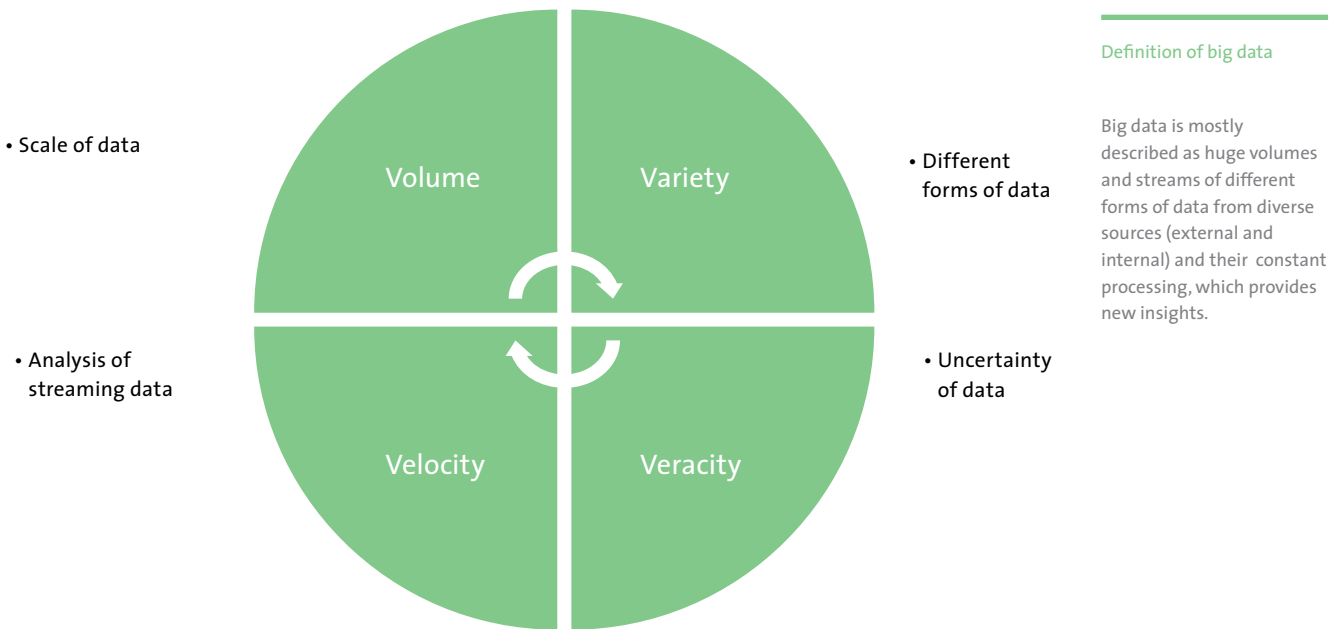
Results consistently show that the challenge of linking communication to corporate or business strategies is the most important issue for the field. This should be the top priority for the further development of corporate communications. This shows that, despite growing influence, the profession is still fighting to get a place at the decision

“Results consistently show that the challenge of linking communication to corporate or business strategies is the most important issue for the field.”

making table where communication is part of the strategic management of the organisation. This also indicates that the communication function has to be able to explain the value of communication in different ways, including by using arguments related to economic success. Nevertheless, in order to explain its value, the function needs a clear commitment to demonstrate and evaluate its contribution to overall organisational goals. Unfortunately, communication functions have failed overtime in demonstrating this value through the inadequate methods of measurement and evaluation. This poor performance has become even more pronounced in the last few years on account of the integration and application of big data for management and in public relations.

Transforming communication from a soft to hard discipline

Since its very beginnings, public relations and strategic communication attracted students and professionals



Definition shown to respondents based on Gandomi & Haider, 2015; Schroeck et al., 2012.

who preferred people to numbers. A frequent response to a question, "Why you decided to study and practice public relations?", was "Because I like people." Individuals who preferred numbers to people studied engineering, mathematics or physics. Things are about to change. With computers, digitalisation, networks and social media, communication repositioned itself into one of the most fundamental social phenomena, and it can be captured in data that take the place once occupied by oil – the centre around which power attracts.

But big data are only just starting to penetrate the consciousness of public relations and strategic communication professionals. While three out of four communication professionals in Europe (72.3 per cent) believe that big data will change their profession, their understanding of big data is limited. Big data stands for volume (scale), variety (different forms), veracity (uncertainty) and velocity (streaming).

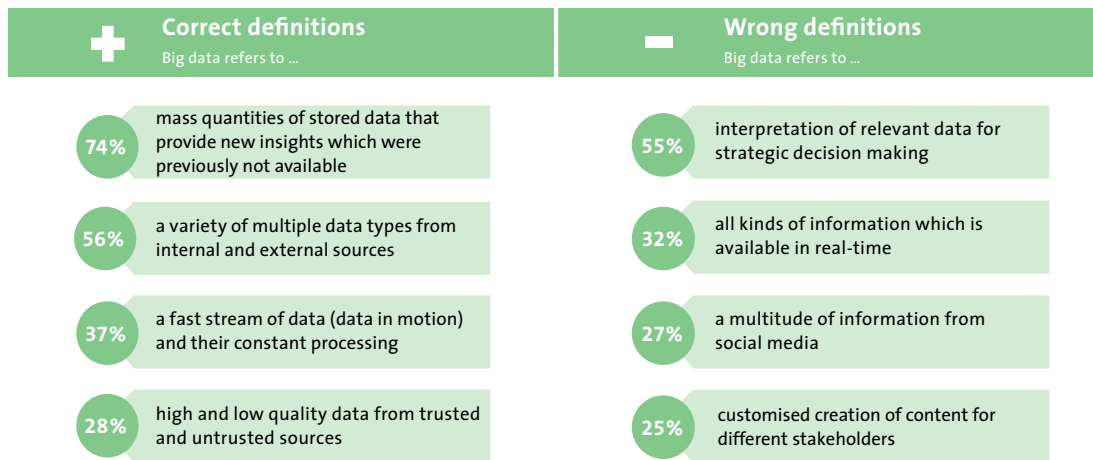
The ECM data and its analysis reveals that only about half of communication professionals in Europe understand big data and can be classified as informed professionals. Table 3 gives

“Only about half of communication professionals in Europe understand big data and can be classified as informed professionals.”

an overview of the right and wrong ideas communication professionals in Europe have about big data.

Recently a new characteristic has been added to describe Big Data: value. This new attribute is the most challenged and challenging definitional component of big data. Big data, in its original form, is often characterised by relatively low value relative to its volume, but analysing large volumes of combined data can obtain a high value. Although big data is often messy and incomplete, the sheer scale of data compensates for this lack of precision. Big data has come to the fore in business because of the necessity to create real-time intelligence and understanding from the high volume of available data that continues to increase every minute.

This acceleration is compounded by the current prolific use of mobile devices all over the world. Value points to the knowledge that is inherent from looking into and understanding the meaning behind the data. Obviously the importance of big data is the value that can be created to improve an organisation's performance. The availability of large volumes of data enables



www.communicationmonitor.eu / Zerfass et al. 2016 / n = 2,710 PR professionals. Q 2: "Big data" is characterised in various ways. Please pick all definitions which you believe are most appropriate. Correct items and definitions represent the key characteristics volume, variety, velocity, veracity based on Chen et al. (2012), Schroeck et al. (2012), and Gandomi & Haider (2015).

How communication professionals define big data

improvements in the decision-making process and can increment the variables that are considered important for making predictions. By using big data, organisations try to improve strategies and tactics which ultimately help in achieving their objectives.

From the few, 20 per cent, of communication departments in Europe that have implemented big data, only about a half of these organisations uses analytics for planning purposes, e.g. to inform future campaigns. Fewer rely on big data for communication measurement or for guiding day-to-day actions, e.g. by automatically generating content for specific publics.

Automated communication

Historically, technological evolution has been about replacing manual (blue collar) labour with machines. Today, information technology is replacing many menial (white collar) operators, from bank clerks to journalists and, as it may happen one day, public relations and strategic communication professionals. The four riders of the media apocalypse (Amazon, Apple,

“Historically, technological evolution has been about replacing manual labour with machines. Today, information technology is replacing many menial operators.”

Facebook and Google) have developed many algorithms for the production and/or suppression of media content. These algorithms are dynamic and able to adapt to various situations with as yet unforeseen consequences for public discourse. Content presented in specific situations on particular devices is not known in advance, but is generated in the course of the interaction. We can foresee largely automated public relations activities affecting even the most delicate parts of public relations, like crisis communication. So, how well are public relations professionals in Europe acquainted with these developments?

As it turns out, not very well. Three out of four respondents (75.0 per cent) agree that communication activities should be adapted to external algorithms of search engines or social media platforms. But only 29.2 per cent state that their communication department or agencies use such approaches. Moreover, only a minority thinks that active applications of algorithms are important, e.g. for automatically adapting content or creating content. Not surprisingly, organisations that have implemented big data analytics to guide day-to-day actions use algorithms of all kind more often than other organisa-

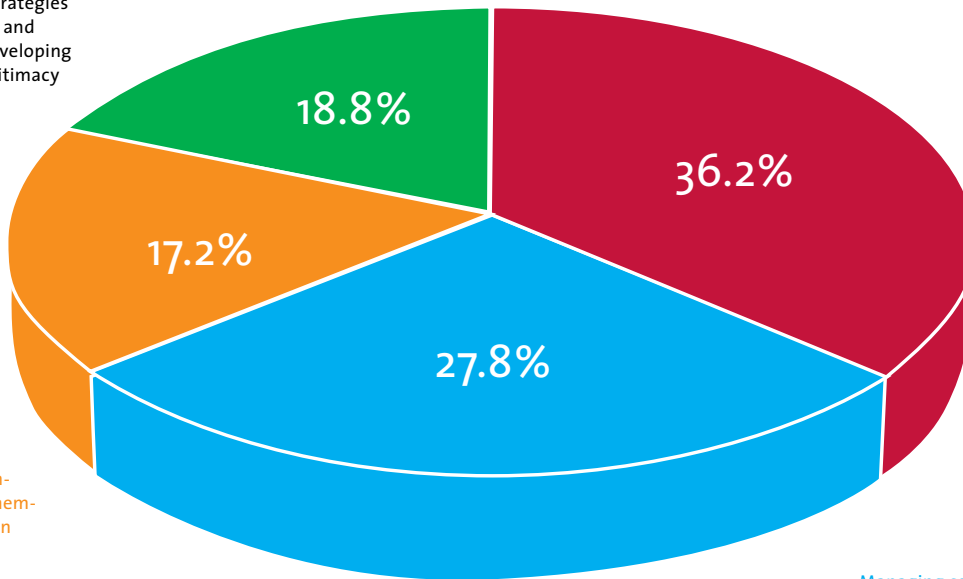
How European communication professionals spend their productive time at work

Aligning communication, the organisation/client and its stakeholders

Studying business and social research reports, identifying organisational goals, monitoring public issues and stakeholder expectations, debating visions and business strategies with top management and other departments, developing scenarios, building legitimacy

Operational communication

Talking to colleagues and journalists, writing press releases and print/online texts, producing communication media, monitoring results of our activities, organising events etc.



Coaching, training, consulting and enabling members of the organisation or clients

On the vision, mission and other communication related issues as well as upgrading their communicative competence, preparing them for communicating with the media, stakeholders etc.

Managing communication activities and co-workers

Planning, organising, leading staff, budgeting, evaluating processes and strategies, justifying communication spending, preparing for crises

www.communicationmonitor.eu / Zerfass et al. 2016 / n = 2,710 PR professionals. Q 7: Please think about how you spend most of your time at work. Please divide your productive time spent at work (values should add up to 100%). In a typical week, I spend the following amount of time with ... Figure displays median for each item; values have been rounded based on mean values.

tions. Both trends – big data and algorithms – are clearly intertwined. Moreover, excellent departments are more engaged in these new challenges of the profession and use big data analytics more intensively.

It seems, however, that the communication profession lacks both analytical skills to make sense of big data and time to derive value from them for useful adaptation to the complexity of public relations tasks. These limitations were confirmed by nearly half the re-

spondents; and this is despite the popularity of search engine optimisation (SEO) and content production aligned to the selection criteria of multipliers.

“Excellent departments are more engaged in these new challenges.”

Communication work: from operations to coaching

Professional communication, public relations and strategic communication, is embracing the total life of organ-

10 YEARS OF THE EUROPEAN COMMUNICATION MONITOR



The European Communication Monitor is the largest longitudinal annual research project in public relations and strategic communication in the world. It started in 2007 and in 2016 it celebrates its first decade. The 2016 European Communication Monitor report is based on results of 2,710 respondents from 43 countries. So far, over 21,000 professionals have been surveyed as part of the European Communication Monitor research. In partnership with the Latin American Communication Monitor and the Asia-Pacific Communication Monitor, over 4,500 professionals participate in each wave in 80 countries around the globe.

The European Communication Monitor is a joint project of the European Public Relations Education and Research Association and the European Association of Communication Directors. The European Communication Monitor is supported by partners PRIME Research International, a global leader in communication research, and Communication Director magazine. The research team is led by Professor Ansgar Zerfass, University of Leipzig. Free reports with full results since 2007 as well as a YouTube highlights video are available at www.communicationmonitor.eu.

isations. We not only use communication to orient in time and space (listening), we use it to influence the world around us (messaging). Not only do we use communication in organisations and societies we live in it, we actually live in communication, we use communication and we are constituted in and through communication: our identities, images and reputations are communicatively constructed. That makes professional communication different to other management functions, like finance or HR. The professional communication function in contemporary organisations exhibits three aspects. It has a performance function when it produces communication activities, like writing a press release, posting on Facebook, or-

“We not only use communication to orient, we use it to influence.”

ganising an event or listening to stakeholders. It has a management function when it strategises, plans and organises such activities into a coherent whole, like brand positioning, campaign planning, and so on.

Professional communication is also a second-order management function which influences the behaviour of top executives and peers and other employees, by confronting them with stakeholder analysis, public opinion, issues and alternative views. Professional communication is also a reflective function, which performs a sensemaking and sense-negotiating role for organisations, helps align organisations to stakeholders, as well as coaching, training and consulting on stakeholder or societal issues. The ECM data reveals that all four roles are present in public relation and commu-

nication management in Europe, with the majority of time (36.2 per cent) still spent on operational communication (talking to colleagues and media representatives, writing texts, organising events, monitoring media). The second largest chunk of time goes to management (planning, organising, leading staff, budgeting and so on).

Aligning communication, the organisation and its stakeholders takes 18.8 per cent of time, and coaching, training, consulting and enabling members of the organisation takes 17.2 per cent. ●



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