

Inversion of logic in measurement: communication directors measure only what is necessary and not all communicative actions

Inversão da lógica na mensuração: diretores de comunicação medem o necessário e não todas as ações comunicativas

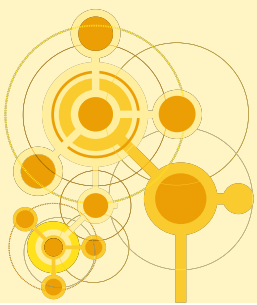
Inversión de la lógica en la medición: directores de comunicación miden solo lo necesario y no todas las acciones comunicativas

Interviewee
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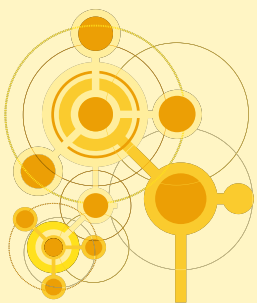
ORGANICOM – *After so many years of discussions and proposals, are we now able to measure the impact of the communication activities carried out by organizations?*

ANSGAR ZERFASS – We have talked for a long time about measuring effects of organizational communication in different channels. Of course, this is relevant, especially when considering social media. Social media communication generates data that can be analyzed quite automatically. This results in a large amount of available data, which changes the profession. For many decades, only the impact on traditional media was measured, which was mostly commissioned from clipping and media analysis agencies; today we have more data available internally. However, this also implies new challenges. These data are seldom analyzed or interpreted on a daily basis. While on the one hand, a large amount of data can be used by channel managers today, on the other hand, these are often lost opportunities.

ORGANICOM – *However, data on the use of communication channels are only at the level of outputs and not indirect outcomes and outflows, if we consider the measurement model of the Deutsche Public Relations Gesellschaft (DPRG).*

ANSGAR ZERFASS – Yes, this is true. A fully developed communication management system seeks to define objectives and then plans activities and concrete key performance indicators (KPIs), which allows to track the ongoing performance of organizational communication. Here we have a greater challenge because, besides analyzing media and content-generated data, we may need, for example, to measure the quality of relationships with certain stakeholders. Or even simpler, to measure whether we can build relationships with a given audience.

This is a classic objective of public relations or *public affairs, i.e., communicating with stakeholders in the political sphere*. In this case, it is not about numbers, but about whether we have managed to create a relevant relationship. Of course, we can measure how many contacts we had with a politician, but that does not indicate quality. This means: it is not so much the challenge of how to measure, but of establishing a way to measure relevant dimensions of the communication process and that this data can be included in a management system that guides future activities. We have seen in recent years the implementation, for example, of a model we proposed – the Communication Value Circle – in large companies in Germany, or the Strategic House that is used, for example, by KLM (airline of the Netherlands) for managing reputation. In these cases, there is a clear definition of objectives, translated into key performance indicators (KPIs).



ORGANICOM – *Exactly. And then there is the question of differentiating between indirect outcomes and outflows. Therefore, the heart of the matter is: can we create a system that continuously manages to integrate this measurement in holistic and declined way?*

ANSGAR ZERFASS – The direct process, that is, how a certain channel was used and how certain content was produced and viewed, can be measured, as mentioned before. We can even measure better and better. However, the focus of the debate has changed recently and there is now less interest in those aspects. When we look at organizational communication from the perspective of a Chief Communication Officer (CCO), we see more and more other needs. This was not present in the past, but it is starting to be more and more relevant: a conceptual view that links all communication objectives to the key objectives any organization (profit, non-profit, governmental, etc.) has to fulfill: enabling operations, building intangibles, ensuring flexibility, and adjusting strategy.

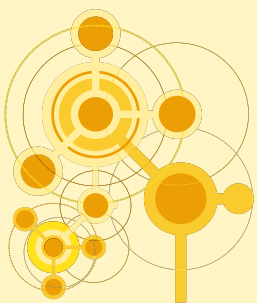
In fact, from a leadership perspective, there is just a need to measure those overarching impacts and to define how they can be achieved. And here, quite often not the effects of specific communication activities are of interest, but the results of multiple interactions, such as reputation, networking, or thought leadership in a given domain. We are not talking about measuring concrete outcomes of a communication action, but rather about the result of a set of actions that are managed separately. For example, thought leadership is an objective that can be measured by calculating the share of voice of an organization on social media or the number of speeches delivered by an CEO at the five most relevant industry events in a year. Communication leaders might only be interested in data linked to those key processes and not in other data like the share of voice in the print media compared to the competition. Of course, communication practitioners in charge of media relations will still need those data to evaluate and optimize their daily work. But a CCO will only need to know about the share of voice in the two significant dimensions mentioned before.

This is interesting, because communication practitioners were concerned with obtaining more and more operational data for a long time. But now, even though we have more data, it becomes obvious that not everything is relevant for strategic management. A few years ago, the CCOs had no numbers, now they just want a few, even though there are so many. Of course, there are huge activities going on, events and other ongoing communications, but at the strategic management level, a lot of data become irrelevant and are just left to the operational level. This logic presents something new. Before, we were looking for a general, integrated model of measurement data that would encompass everything. What remains, however, is the task to define a specific model which outlines the strategic objectives for communication for a given organization and thus defines what needs to be measured to gain impact.

ORGANICOM – *As a scholar, what is your reaction to this change in professional practice?*

ANSGAR ZERFASS – I became more sceptical about overly complex models for professional practice. I always aimed at deriving communicative actions at all levels in the frameworks which we developed. However, I believe that it is the strategic orientation that should be the focus of the managing organizational communication and, consequently, of measuring it. This is at the core of our research activities right now. The rest can be left aside. There are professionals with so much experience in operational management that know how to deal with operational data. Therefore, although from the point of view of science many approaches to track operational communication are the result of logical and meaningful argumentation, in their transfer to practice, adaptations are necessary. Why should practitioners collect and analyze data that they do not need?

ORGANICOM – *That is, can models be discarded for implementation? Are there levels that disappear? For example, is it still necessary to measure indirect outcomes?*



ANSGAR ZERFASS – No, established measurement models with many levels are not obsolete. But the logic changes. Typical models like the DPRG or AMEC frameworks always start with communication activities and show how those may impact media, stakeholders, and in the end organizational goals. But strategic management of communication starts on the other end, that is, with the strategic objectives. This is because practice has changed. Before organizations relied mainly on the work of the press officers and event specialists, for example. Today we have so many channels and tools that gathering data along so many different channels, which must then be analyzed, reduced, and interpreted, makes the work Herculean. So, considering that the result is always influenced by multiple communication actions, effectively you are right: focusing on outflows is much more important than indirect outcomes or similar effects. That is, if we consider reputation as an objective, we may define that relationships with certain stakeholders are crucial, and then it is only necessary to measure those aspects.

The issue of resource management and limited resources puts a brake and forces you to be more judicious in measurement. This also means that it is sometimes useful to make decisions based on estimations guided by the professional experience of practitioners instead of perfect data – if the overall conceptual model guiding communication management is appropriate for the specific organization.

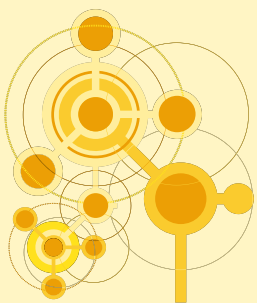
ORGANICOM – *In an analogy with a restaurant, we could say that it does not matter what goes on with the shopping or in the kitchen, the dish has to serve the strategic objectives.*

ANSGAR ZERFASS – Exactly. Once again, I reinforce that the scientific logic of the models has not changed and that, on the other hand, providers of communication services like media monitoring companies are sticking to the traditional logic tracking communication processes from input to output and outflows. This might result in spectacular data leaks and dashboards, but this does seldom add value to communication leaders. As measurement companies sell data in many specific areas, some companies might end up with 20 area-specific reputation scores, plus a media reputation study, plus a journalist survey. What can they do with all this? It is better to focus on a limited number of measures and data, for example, a reputation score adapted to the specific context and needs and with a survey of the most relevant stakeholder groups for strategic guidance.

ORGANICOM – *Do you foresee anything new in communication measurement in the near future?*

ANSGAR ZERFASS – A new challenge is the centralization of content production and the creation of newsrooms in organizations. This includes coordination activities to combine the efforts and processes of many practitioners across various channels and stakeholder interactions. This also means that communication leaders will have more data on internal workflows in their departments. Some of them are related to productivity, such as the production time of different professionals for a news story. Then usage data can be added. This means that content produced by communication practitioners can be adjusted to increase its consumption and thus better meet what the audience expects and needs. This is already applied by mass media and journalists, and it will change the way communicators work in the near future. A clear advantage of this system is knowing which communication activities were most successful, who was in charge, and how long it took different practitioners to produce or manage such activities. This creates transparency, which is always a two-edged sword. A lot of issues around data protection and privacy need to be clarified. But it is quite clear that less and less communicators will work in silos in the future – their work will be tracked and optimized, just as it is the case for production workers and sales experts.

ORGANICOM – *The last topic I would like to address in this interview is the fact that in Germany the DPRG (Deutsche Public Relations Gesellschaft – German Public Relations Association) framework was developed and there is also the AMEC (Association for Measurement and Evaluation of Communication) model. However, when we look at the results of empirical studies in the Ibero-Latin American space, even organizations based in European or American countries have not yet established strategic*



communication objectives or implemented systems to monitor value creation through communication. Is it possible to manage communication professionally without strategic communication objectives?

ANSGAR ZERFASS – We have seen a lack of objective-driven communication for 50 years. It is still possible to work this way. However, the communication leaders with whom I have contact, specifically in the German-speaking countries (Austria, Germany, and Switzerland), are less and less at this stage and much progress has been made in the last years. For example, CCOs who compete for the annual *Integrated Communication Award* by the most important German business publisher F.A.Z. (Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung) do no longer report on successful campaigns, but about restructuring communication departments and their strategic frameworks for managing communication with a few KPIs as discussed above. For example, companies like Henkel, Bayer, and Siemens Healthineers are quite good in this respect. What I see is that it is now a standard to have defined communication objectives and measurement approaches linked to organizational goals, instead of generic measurement models.

ORGANICOM – *But that is in Germany or the United States...*

ANSGAR ZERFASS – Yes. This way of managing and measuring communication is still new. We need five to 10 years for them to spread globally. However, we can say that in the ideal world of communication management, we have both the level of the strategic objectives of communication and the level of managing specific or channels or stakeholder interactions. If only the latter exists, we can measure the reach, that is, the outputs, but anything beyond that is meaningless. We know that although the overall strategic objectives are more important, some practitioners are only in charge of the operational level and, in that case, can only implement measurement and evaluation at this level. But they should be aware that they cannot go beyond that and that they are not able to reach strategic level KPIs.

Thinking about national and regional communication activities within global organizations, it does not make sense for each unit to measure communication in specific ways. On the contrary, it should be done with the same method for the whole world, for the most relevant markets, for example. Because, if different countries measure it differently, results cannot be compared and communicators within an organization cannot learn from their peers in other regions. Of course, regional and national communications directors always think it makes sense. But what is the point of an organization investing resources in a study that only lets it know how it stands in the context that it was studied. Of course, if we talk about independent units and management, this may already make sense. On the other hand, when many stakeholders are involved and the same business models applied, then consistent KPIs and measurement approaches are necessary. These considerations are made from a practical perspective. From an academic perspective, all studies are relevant, provided they are grounded and framed.

Note: The interview was conducted in German and later translated and adapted into Portuguese and English by the interviewer, Evandro Oliveira.

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