FUTURE ROLES FOR COMMUNICATORS IN DIGITAL MEDIA-ARENAS: BOXTURNERS AND GLOBAL DIPLOMATS

AUTHORS: VILMA LUOMA-AHO, JYVÄSKYLÄ UNIVERSITY; MARK BADHAM, LEEDS BECKETT UNIVERSITY

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Digitalization is affecting not only the corporate communication function within organizations, but also giving rise to numerous new and unpredictable digitally-influenced societal issues. The more these changes occur, the greater the responsibility of communicators to monitor and manage these effects. To make sense of these effects, this article introduces the novel Digital Media-Arena (DMA) Framework (Badham et al., 2022, 2024) which outlines 14 digital spaces where organizations, stakeholders, and publics communicate today. The article then examines new emerging roles for corporate communications in the digital realm.

THE DIGITAL ECHOVERSE

Digital technology and AI are disrupting corporate communications' ability to manage communication with stakeholders. The environment in which organizations operate today has been called the echoverse, where "a diverse network of human and nonhuman actors – consumers, brands, AI agents, and more – continuously interact, influence, and reshape messages across digital platforms" and "messages circulate and echo, being amplified, modified, or dampened by ongoing interactions" (Bowers et al., 2024, p. 1). In this digital echoverse, communication is omnidirectional, send-er-receiver roles are blurred, organizational messages continuously evolve, and the meanings are co-created among stakeholders. Corporate communicators are faced with much more diverse and uncontrolled communication pathways where creation and dissemination of organizational messages is increasingly done by stakeholders.

In this digital echoverse, communication is omnidirectional and the meanings are co-created among stakeholders.

Digital corporate communication is understood as the strategic management of an organization's communications with its stakeholders and wider society, through the use of digital technologies and infrastructures (Luoma-aho &

Badham, 2023). Digital corporate communication is a vital function that nurtures an organization's intangible assets, such as reputation, legitimacy, and stakeholder trust. In the following, the new Digital Media-Arena (DMA) Framework is introduced to help communicators navigate this digital echoverse. DMAs left unattended and roles not adopted may lead to reputation and legitimacy challenges as stakeholders, competitors, and even hostile actors utilize the DMAs for their own purposes.

THE DIGITAL MEDIA-ARENAS

The digital realm of diverse media platforms has not only activated new stakeholders, but also diminished organizations' ability to shape communication related to and affecting them. Communication professionals have long relied on the PESO (paid, earned, shared, and owned media) model for media content planning, but in the dynamic echoverse this model is becoming outdated. The DMA Framework offers a contemporary planning grid for communication professionals attempting to address the challenge of how to interact with a diverse range of actors. Some of these actors master the use of digital communication tools (including AI and memes) to actively damage corporate reputations.

The value of DMA lies in mapping out the digital realm to assist communication professionals in strategic decision making on which arenas to communicate. Each DMA determines how much control organizations can have over their message and therefore how much influence they have over the way their messages are interpreted by stakeholders and members of the public. Each DMA also shows which actors can be expected to engage in support of or opposition to the organization and its messages.

The DMA Framework maps out a nuanced set of 14 established and emerging communication spaces that exist in the digital environment. Dynamic and at times overlapping, DMAs run along the spectrum

›   between strong and weak control of corporate messages (horizontal axis)
›   and between strong and weak control of the arena/platform (vertical axis).

The term "media" is complemented with the concept of interactive "arenas" or forums where anybody (stakeholders and members of the general public) can gather to discuss and debate matters that often relate to organizations and brands.

As seen in the figure below, a typical digital arena is characterized by an online discussion about an issue – sometimes linked to a # (e.g., #whomademyclothes) – which often points to organizations or brands deemed responsible for creating or solving that issue. These digital arenas are more suited to omnidirectional user-generated communication of messages than organization-generated messages. Some scholars refer to these digital spaces as issue arenas or even crisis arenas (Badham et al., 2022), where the free flow of opinions about brands collectively contributes to the inflation or deflation of corporate reputations.

Digital Media-Arenas (DMAs)

DMAs are positioned within two axes: (1) level of control over the corporate message and (2) level of control over the arena/platform.
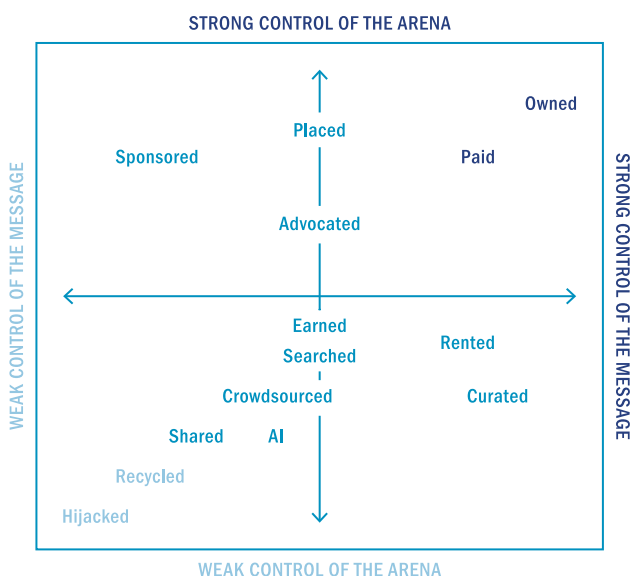
Source: Mark Badham and Vilma Luoma-aho

DMAs with stronger message control

›   The two essential DMAs that enable fairly strong control over the design, production, and dissemination timing of an organizational message are **Owned** (e.g., organizational website, apps, and blogs) and **Paid** (advertising purchased in some medium).

DMAs offering moderate message control

Most DMAs fall under the area of moderate message control:

> **Placed** DMA refers to digital communication spaces in which organizations disseminate messages by subtly positioning their product or brand into content created by others, such as product placement in movies, games, or events.

> **Sponsored** DMA refers to communication spaces in which organizations subtly disseminate their messages to wider public by providing funding or other resource support for an individual, group, or charity.

> **Advocated** DMA refers to communication spaces in which stakeholders in a close relationship with the organization (e.g., employees and long-term clients) and with some level of intimate knowledge (e.g., about internal processes, strategies, and product blueprints), willingly and without coercion publicly endorse the organization. These mostly take the form of advocacy for the organization, but advocacy against the organization also is possible, such as corporate whistleblowers leaking information to the public about corporate wrongdoing.

> We list **Earned** DMA (i.e., news content, journalists' articles following editorial guidelines) in this category because although organizations can make use of these communication spaces to attract editorial publicity through media relations activities, corporate communication practitioners have a moderate degree of control over organizational messages in Earned DMA depending on factors such as level of media relations skill, the corporation's crisis history, and relations with journalists, producers, editors, or hosts.

> **Rented** DMA refers to communication spaces involving some contractual collaboration with social media celebrities or influencers in which they communicate an organizational message to their own audiences.

> **Searched** DMA refers to communication spaces in which members of the public conduct online searches for information related to brands. A corporation has a moderate level of control over its messages discovered through this process, such as through search engine optimization (SEO) tactics.

> **Curated** DMA are communication pathways in which

information-intermediary analysts, consultants or businesses – such as Edelman (e.g., Edelman Trust Barometer), Gartner (business insights and trends), and Nielsen (media industry ratings and analysis) – select, edit, and publish content about corporations from a wide range of sources for the purpose of supplying a curated and thus reinterpreted form of content. There is some control over the message, as some companies pay to participate, such as by signing up to the Best Place to Work competition.

> **Artificial Intelligence (AI)** DMA refers to communication spaces in which anyone can harvest information, create, or manipulate organizational messages via AI services and algorithms – typically through artificially constructed text, images, and videos (e.g., deepfakes and bots) in social media, news media, and other digital media. Using AI to generate their own messages enables corporations a moderate level of control over their messages here. Some forms of AI offer more control than others. For example, in-house bots answering employee questions provide more organizational control over content than public generative AI software (e.g., ChatGPT) harvesting content across the entire internet.

> **Crowdsourced** DMA refers to communication spaces in which members of the public contribute and edit content about an organization (e.g., testimonials, reviews) on publicly available crowdsourced sites. Typical examples include wikis (e.g., Wikipedia), product and service rating sites, and review sites (e.g., Trustpilot, Amazon and Glassdoor). To some extent, organizations can influence the content in these sites, but organizational control is very limited.

> While **Shared** DMA demonstrates the axiom 'power to the people', organizations have been able to exercise some degree of control over their messages delivered to fans via social media.

DMAs characterized by weak message control

> **Hijacked** DMA refers to communication spaces in which predator stakeholders hijack a brand's carefully crafted message and turn it into a reputation-damaging message.

Typically, they co-opt a brand or campaign hashtag and twist the intended message into an oppositional message. For example, the hashtag #DoctorsSpeakUp, created by physicians to promote vaccines on Twitter in early 2020, was successfully hijacked by anti-vaccine advocates.

> **Recycled** DMA refers to communication spaces in which members of the public appropriate organizational messages to distort their original meaning or context, mostly through use of humor and entertainment. Typical examples include memes and parodies created and shared in social media, TV shows, and blogs.

FIVE FUTURE CORPORATE COMMUNICATION ROLES

Digital technology is not just disrupting the ability of corporate communications to engage with stakeholders across traditional and newly-emerging media-arenas, it's also re-shaping corporate communication roles in organizations and society. The second figure illustrates these new roles and shows which DMAs are most needed within each role.

1 Community builder

Belonging to a community remains a very central human need. It's not just NGOs and community associations that build communities, organizations also can foster community within and among their stakeholders – typically through a CSR and community relations function. Online brand communities focused on problem-solving a local issue or gaining product-related insights can be a natural starting point for organizations wanting to contribute to community building. But opportunities also exist for organizations to get involved in communities not centered around a brand. As an example, corporations can enable community through sustainability-related neighborhood groups figuring out how to best utilize local food waste.

But be forewarned: The idea that organizations can maintain control of these communities is dated. Today, organizations should adopt a stakeholder-centric approach in which the most valuable contributions come from members of the community while corporations remain simply as enablers of interaction and exchange (Luoma-aho & Vos, 2010).

Community-building functions include sustainability and diversity programs of organizations. They improve quality of life around the organization and its neighborhoods (e.g., environment, health, jobs), but they also benefit corporations. For example, community-building efforts can nurture employee branding, resulting in people choosing to work for an organization they see contributing to the best of society. Within these communities, learning to support stakeholders and customers without pushing an organizational agenda on them remains a challenge, but those corporations overcoming this will curate future faith-holders who can help the organization in challenging times, such as during online firestorms that happen sooner or later in the digital realm.

DMAs that most help build such communities are Sponsored, Advocated, Shared and Placed. The strongest influence on organizational culture comes from within the organization – from its employees and leadership, which points to the importance of employee advocacy (Advocated DMA). Employees could be further empowered to act as the organization's advocates for community-building initiatives and groups, representing issues or communities in need on behalf of the organization. When not able to contribute directly themselves, organizations can partner with other organizations more suited to achieve an improved sense of community, often around topics related to their mission. This partnering can consist of sponsoring young people's sports, environmental groups, and local community initiatives (via Sponsored DMA). Because people – particularly millennials – tend to approve of corporations that support causes and issues, corporate communication practitioners could inspire social media users to join the corporation in further building these communities (via Shared DMA) and signal their support for certain communities (e.g., those linked to environmental awareness or LGBTQ+ initiatives) by placing the corporate logo or a product within a TV show or online game (Placed DMA).

Questions to consider

Corporate communication practitioners aiming to become community builders should consider two key questions:

> Who in need in society can we best help in our area of business?

> What can we facilitate to improve their community?

2 Organizational conscience

As AI and machine learning take on greater roles in organizations, the more important ethics guiding these technologies become (Buhmann & Fieseler, 2023). There are several new technologies that require more thoughtful consideration of their potential negative consequences on organizations and society, especially over the long term. The increased use of AI-assisted communication can lead to severe consequences for organizations:

> Organizations need to verify the authenticity of messages apparently sent by the organization in the digital realm.

> While AI helps interpret and predict stakeholder behavior patterns, the big challenges remain the values on which the algorithms are built. Understanding and listening to emerging stakeholder needs and expectations may prove to be one of the most valuable skills of future communication practitioners, yet the limits of what kind of listening is acceptable require constant negotiation. AI is also increasingly used to scam organizations' managers and leaders into leaking organizational information or even mistakenly transferring organizational assets. Corporate communication professionals can work with IT departments to prevent these scams.

> Another central challenge is the ethical collection and use of data by organizations. At best, behavioral insights drawn from data analytics help communicators tailor content to meet stakeholder needs and preferences. At worst, such insights contribute to an "iron cage of surveillance" where performance is ranked and monitored for efficiency (Faraj et al., 2018).

Acting as the organizational conscience means ensuring organizations meet stakeholder expectations, especially regarding corporate responsibility. Matching organizational messages with organizational behavior in the digital realm is increasingly important as stakeholders are quick to call out various forms of corporate "washing" – ranging from vague sustainability signaling (greenwashing) to carewashing such as pretending to care about the war in Ukraine (warwashing), or signaling the organizations' value of equal treatment and rights of certain groups (rainbow washing).

Corporate communicators are highly attuned to emerging crises and risks that may affect the corporation, but AI also broadens the impact of crises to stakeholders and society. For this reason, corporate communication professionals need to act as the organization's conscience by working together with HR and legal units to curb the potential harms and biases of AI on organizations, stakeholders and society.

DMAs that are most in need of the organizational conscience role include AI, Curated, Rented, and Recycled DMA. Corporate communicators can help organizations become more ethical and transparent with their data collection and management practices (via AI DMA). For influencer collaborations where organizations borrow the attention of influencers' publics, a new form of organizational conscience is needed to understand how collaborations impact influencers and their public (Rented DMA). With rising accusations of corporate greenwashing and failing to live up to their promises, stakeholders have a fruitful new arena to mock inauthentic organizational messages through humor and memes (Recycled DMA). Organizational conscience is needed to portray an honest and transparent view of organizational reality so as not to attract criticism from industry analysts (Curated DMA). Communicators as organizational conscience can help predict where such clashes are likely to occur, and help mold corporate messages more in line with stakeholder expectations.

Questions to consider

Corporate communication practitioners setting out to adopt an organizational conscience role should consider two key questions:
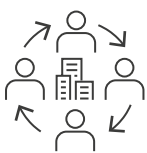
> What are the social costs of AI efficiency?

> What happens when an algorithm developed to serve an organization starts to serve itself or gets hijacked and used for harmful purposes?

Digital Media-Arenas most needed with corporate communication roles
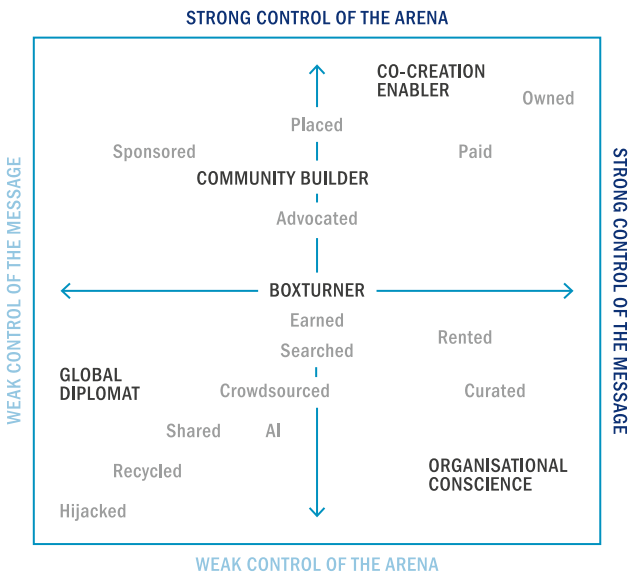
Source: Mark Badham and Vilma Luoma-aho

3 Co-creation enabler

Corporations and their brands are increasingly "owned" by stakeholders with the communicative and collective power to force change. Accordingly, corporate communicators need to embrace a more stakeholder-centric approach and welcome stakeholders into the organizational orbit. A key way to achieve this is through co-creation initiatives – ensuring stakeholders are given opportunities to contribute to the life of organizations. The digital environment enables a whole new level of co-creation with stakeholders, from co-creating products through 3D printing to recreation and innovation of existing and past products and services. As corporate faith-holders (fans and supporters) immerse their daily lives within brand-related virtual environments, corporations should provide them with co-creation opportunities to further strengthen corporate-stakeholder relations.

For example, give them product blueprints that enable them to repair and reproduce products. Digital customer experiences can also be co-created in the metaverse where customers can virtually try products (e.g., try on clothes or place digital furniture in their homes) and subsequently offer suggestions to improve them, as well as develop and code their own collectibles and games (Rahman et al., 2025).

Communication professionals can play a central role in defining rich personalized stakeholder experiences by becoming involved in these co-creation initiatives.

DMAs most suited to this co-creation enabler role include Owned DMA. For example, corporations can design digital spaces enabling stakeholder co-creation of products, services and experiences. Paid DMA are vital to attracting targeted stakeholders' and publics' attention towards these co-creation opportunities in Owned DMA. Employees are encouraged to participate alongside stakeholders in the co-creation initiatives (Advocated DMA), providing them with guidance and guardrails.

Questions to consider

Corporate communication practitioners aiming to become co-creation enablers should consider two key questions:

› Where do we draw the line between stakeholders' co-creation of corporate products and the corporation's legal concerns (e.g., copyright)?
› How can we best balance fans' co-creational aspirations with the potential limitations of corporate goals and resources?

4 Boxturner

The digital realm is often a reality check for organizations because anyone anywhere can find, declare, and share information about a corporation and its products and services. Not only does the internet leave behind an interlinked and lasting digital trail of past publicity of organizational indiscretions and wrongdoing, it also offers a wide-open terrain of communication spaces for consumers to say what they like (within online moderation boundaries) about their experiences with products and services. This criticism often metastasizes into a corporate crisis, beginning in one arena and then crossing over into other arenas like fall-

ing dominoes (Badham et al., 2022). Increasing numbers of stakeholders and publics (including news media) are checking and fact-checking what corporations say and measuring that across what they do. Conscious consumerism is giving rise to new expectations over what corporations can make, sell, and say. Boxturning (Luoma-aho et al., 2023) finds inconsistences in reporting and actions, for better or worse.

BOXTURNING

Boxturning refers to an emerging phenomenon in which stakeholders invested in brands are "turning the box over" to look for the details, the fine print, the less visible information that might reveal potential harm or deceit or conflict with expectations (Luoma-aho et al., 2023). Examples include harmful product ingredients, greenwashing, questionable investments, and toxic organizational practices. Boxturning can lead to public criticism in the form of boycotts and canceling brands and their leaders, but internal boxturning can help communication professionals produce engaging digital content for stakeholders on topics previously not discussed publicly.

Communication professionals should adopt a boxturner role to make sure everything the corporation says and does is consistent, honest, and transparent across all DMAs. Boxturning attracts increased attention to message consistency across platforms and channels and understanding the fine print implied. Communication professionals will need to focus more on the framing of their messages and on transparency of organizational processes. As negative messages remain more credible than positive in online environments, and negative messages spread faster than positive messages, this boxturning role requires speed in responding to an emerging crisis online. Boxturning is often a question of stakeholder resonance: organizational messages that do not resonate with stakeholder perceptions will lead to boxturning.

The most obvious DMA pertaining to this boxturner role is Earned DMA, as journalists traditionally have viewed their role in society as a watchdog holding corporations and governments accountable for their actions and statements. Of course, stakeholders and the public turn to Searched DMA to seek organizational information and to Shared DMA

to spread their findings. They also co-create organizational information on Crowdsourced DMA to make their findings more visible and legitimate. Influencers and celebrities are often quick to jump onboard boxturning endeavors if they match their areas of interest (Rented DMA).

Questions to consider

Corporate communication practitioners aiming to become boxturners should consider two key questions:
> Where do we receive the most complaints about our products or services?
> How can we make sure everything our organization (or client) says and does is consistent, honest, and transparent?

5 Global diplomat

The more global organizations become, the more complex their communication becomes as they seek to navigate differences in attitudes and behaviors across cultures and countries. Global tensions and cultural divides continue to polarize opinions and isolate individuals inside their own like-minded thought bubbles and echo chambers. Digital technologies and social media platforms have contributed to the increased polarization of individuals in society, and organizations are often pulled into such divisions. As a result, members of the public have quite contrasting and diverse expectations of institutions and organizations, more easily leading to expressions of outrage against them. This outrage extends to brands birthed in countries (i.e., their country of origin) that have been stigmatized (e.g., Russia).

Even inside organizations, polar opposites of social and political ideologies collide when organizations are asked to take a stand on global issues. Being aware and considerate of all parties and cultures remains challenging, yet organizations find themselves picking sides when it comes to cross-national crises such as military wars, trade wars, and pandemics. Remaining neutral is a challenge as employees demand that their employers identify with what is important to them. Balancing international tensions is a difficult task, and when done wrong can create a firestorm of criticism

from within organizations as well as from external sources.

Large multinational corporations are considered a resource for uniting previously diverse populations and ideologies (Edelman, 2024), and brands are taking on roles of global diplomacy. For communicators, the global diplomat role requires an understanding of the underlying pressures and organizational behaviors that can trigger division. This understanding can best emerge through heavy reliance on listening to public concerns and monitoring public opinion. Communicators' relationship-building and listening skills remain critical in this role.

Hijacked DMA becomes a central space where "hate-holders" of a global corporation (stakeholders opposed to the corporation) attack it using defamatory hashtags to harness public criticism, like a dragnet trawling through online social networks. Likewise, when corporations get drawn into global sociopolitical controversies, memes and parodies abound online (Recycled DMA) and an epidemic of criticism spreads like wildfire through online social networks (Shared DMA). Earned DMA often become involved because news media outlets gravitate to these public tensions and cross-national conflicts.

Questions to consider

Corporate communication practitioners aiming to become global diplomats should consider two key questions:
›   How can organizational choices help diminish geopolitical divisions?
›   How do we make sure these choices adopt a long-term view so that shifts in political views and public opinion don't come back to bite us?

IMPLICATIONS FOR CORPORATE COMMUNICATION

The value of the DMA Framework is that it shows 14 separate communication spaces (DMAs) where digital communication from or about organisations takes place between organizations and stakeholders, and also among stakeholders themselves. This array of DMAs reveals to corporate communicators:
›   Where communication can and can't be controlled; and
›   Where communication should prioritize "speaking" versus "listening".

After all, digital corporate communication should be both a listening and speaking profession (Macnamara, 2023). Reflecting on the five corporate communication roles, the DMA Framework suggests four complementary actions for communicators that can be positioned across four quadrants.
›   **Innovate** (through the co-creation enabler role): Communication professionals should take advantage of the most controlled DMAs to encourage co-creation and innovation with the corporation.
›   **Empower** (through the community builder role): In community-building DMAs, empowerment of communities and stakeholders should be the central aim, even when control of the organizational message is weak.
›   **Reflect** (through the organisational conscience role and boxturner roles): Thinking deeply about what organisations are promising stakeholders and ensuring best use of AI to protect stakeholders is crucial in DMAs with weak arena control.
›   **Monitor** (through the global diplomat role): Where there is little control over the organizational message and the arena/platform, communication professionals require a helicopter view of stakeholder and public communication taking place in the digital echoverse, and here organizational listening should be prioritized over organizational speaking.

Four emerging digital corporate communication actions
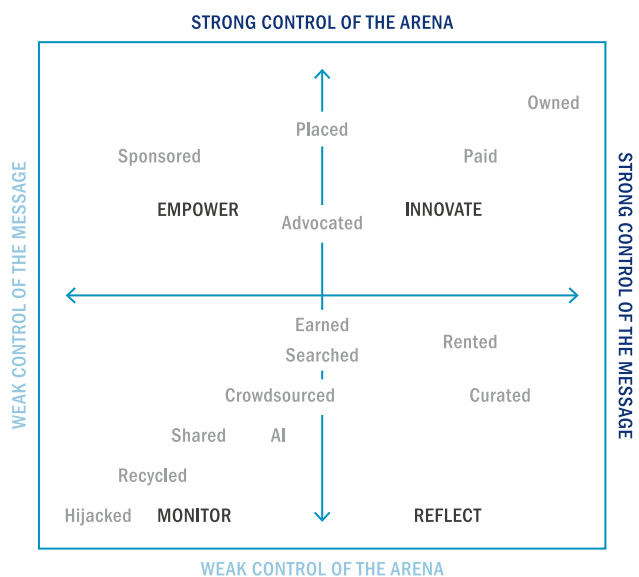
Source: Mark Badham and Vilma Luoma-aho

CONCLUSION

The explosion of digitally mediated forms of communication is changing the game for all communicators. Communication power has shifted drastically from organizations and institutions to the public and different stakeholders. Organizations are no longer in charge of their brand and messages, and reputations are increasingly at the mercy of our stakeholders formed on the different Digital Media-Arenas. How well the organization acknowledges these DMAs and both the positive and negative interaction taking place there is now a vital question.

The new emerging roles bring about some new tasks such as the boxturning of internal issues, or the organizational conscience, but many of the required roles are actually something communicators have already learned to do in their boundary spanning and community building functions. Global diplomats have previously been diplomats of the organizational culture on a smaller scale inside their organizations. Corporate communicators utilizing technology have an increased responsibility not just to organizations, but also to stakeholders and to society at large – to listen and to respect their voices as they attempt to both collaborate, co-create, and occasionally also recycle or hijack the organizational messages in DMAs. Understanding these different DMAs is the starting point of all digital development.

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MORE INFORMATION

Further details on the Digital Media-Arena Framework can be found in Badham et al., 2022, 2024, and in the forthcoming (2025) Routledge textbook Digital Communication Management: Theories and Practices for a Global and Volatile World.