# Editorial: Virtual communication, organisational reputation and (mis)trust

Much has been said about virtual communication, particularly since the COVID-19 pandemic when the world faced lockdowns and turned towards virtual communication using technology to work and stay in touch. In the *Corporate Communications: An International Journal* (*CCIJ*), we had a special issue this year on digital transformation with papers showing the effects of lockdown and remote work on employee satisfaction, interpersonal communication and the world of work generally (Ravina-Ripoll *et al.*, 2023). In previous issues, we also tackled the issue of interpersonal communication and social listening (Topić, 2023b) as well as listening in the context of listening to the public and their concerns (Topić, 2023c). These issues argued that we need to listen to one another to communicate effectively and build relationships as well as that digital transformation needs to be run by humans, for the humans and it needs a heart (Topić, 2023a). Issue 28.4 particularly focused on the notion of interpersonal communication and social listening arguing that interpersonal communication is a distinctive form of human communication involving elements such as relationship management, which can be done both online and face-to-face (DeVito, 2022). The literature already warns us about issues with remote working, the absence of informal conversations and increased stress due to isolation (Fay and Kline, 2012; Viererbl *et al.*, 2022; Tripathi *et al.*, 2023). However, social listening in the digital context can benefit organisations as we have argued in issue 28.4 of the *CCIJ*; it is possible to listen externally to consumers and clients, as well as for clients and consumers to listen to one another with both groups being able to listen internally (Stewart and Arnold, 2018). In the increasingly digital world, we still need to retain human contact and listen to one another, both in personal contact and online.

However, one issue that is hotly debated, albeit not always in the *CCIJ*, is the issue of trust, which becomes particularly relevant with the rise of virtual communication where everyone can share any information, at any time. Truth and post-truth became much-debated topics because claims have been made that we live in a post-truth society (Malcolm, 2021) and in a society where virtual communication can influence people's careers and livelihoods because many organisations are willing to dismiss people who communicate something on social media that goes against organisational values. This also leads to the issue of a lack of trust in institutions and also in communication processes. Post-truth generally refers to following emotions and prejudice rather than evidence and reason (ibid), and this has particularly proliferated during the COVID-19 pandemic. In this issue, we thus focus on various forms of virtual communication including social media communication with a particular emphasis on the COVID-19 pandemic, organisational reputation and trust, three issues which are relevant on their own but are also intertwined particularly since the recent pandemic.

COVID-19 happened suddenly in December 2019 and quickly spread across the world, with January 2020 bringing a health emergency declaration by the World Health Organization (WHO). During the pandemic, the use of the Internet and social media became a platform for socialising, education and fun and also for information gathering (Kutscher, 2022). The latter then led to the declaration of an infodemic, which the WHO warned about due to digital space becoming overwhelmed with fake information resulting in confusion as well as resistance towards the pandemic measures, risky behaviour, decreased trust in public and health authorities, etc. (Romer and Hall Jamieson, 2021; Luo *et al.*, 2021; Parmet and Paul, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic thus opened an issue of post-truth culture

more than ever due to the undermining of modernist ideas of the production of knowledge and science as the basis of progress with progress resting on scientific knowledge whilst, at the same time, the rise of populism and authoritarianism led to undermining of democratic values (Delanty, 2021; Malcolm, 2021).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, different countries experienced different levels of contagion and death numbers and implemented different communication strategies. In this issue, Angeles Moreno, Cristina Fuentes Lara, Ralph Tench and Stefania Romenti write about how information channels and sources influenced the public's evaluation of the government response strategies on COVID-19 in Spain, Italy and the UK. During the pandemic, an elevated media consumption of diverse media occurred during lockdowns, particularly in Spain and Italy with television and online newspapers being the most used channels in all countries closely followed by social media networks, showing the remained importance of the mainstream media in information dissemination and also the rising influence of social media in information gathering. However, the fact the public had access to the diversity of communication channels did not stop criticism of the national government, with the UK government taking the greatest hit with distrust and criticism of the British public in comparison to the other two countries which is likely due to minimal UK's government intervention in early stages of the pandemic, whereas Italy was the first country to institute lockdowns in Europe. However, an interesting finding emerged in the sense that the public who consume more mainstream media such as television and newspapers also show more trust in the government than consumers who consume a combination of newspapers and social media content, thus showing that mistrust likely emerges from excessive social media news consumption. This opens a question on the impact of digital communication where the proliferation of fake news has caused a lack of trust in national governments. This is well documented in research studies showing the decreased trust during the pandemic accompanied by the rise of conspiracy theories (Topić *et al.*, 2022; Malcolm, 2021). Moreover, Moreno *et al.*' paper shows the relevance of the mainstream media and the dire need for their protection from self-proclaimed media publications that often provide poorly sourced content or have an agenda that results in the proliferation of fake news. Whilst media have been known to form public opinion and influence outcomes as well as influence the public agenda since the pioneering studies into agenda-setting theory in the US (McCombs, 2014), they have not always done this without bias and an influence from their owners for example (Topić, 2021), but at the same time, mainstream media, with all of their shortcomings, do follow some rules of sourcing stories and adhering to professional standards of reporting the news, which then also does not undermine the role of the national government, as this study has shown. In other words, social media communication and the proliferation of information that literally anyone can create indeed contribute to democratic processes and everyone having a voice, thus combatting elitism, but in some cases, it can also undermine democratic processes and reduce trust in institutions.

The pandemic did not just open the doors to the decrease in trust and issues in communicating effectively by health and government bodies. It also opened a question on how organisations are generally supposed to communicate in such times when there is a health emergency. In this issue, Steven Brewer and Rebecca Imes write about pandemic messaging on LinkedIn in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic exploring how the world's largest businesses (business-to-business, B2B) communicated about the novel virus in 2019 using the LinkedIn social media network. Using Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), the authors argued that businesses experiencing a crisis use "apologia" to defend themselves in a context when the crisis is self-inflicted, and the organisation is to be blamed. However, in the context of the crisis brought onto the world, studies have shown that many corporations used communication elements such as "prevention, reminding, ingratiation, victimage and updates" or emphasising "trust, safety and cordiality". In their study, the authors discovered that messaging about COVID-19 increased in March 2020, spiked sharply in April (about one-quarter of the total messaging) and then declined again to approximately

5% of total messaging during the summer and autumn months, which is surprising given how much messaging was available on Facebook from the hotel industry where the percentage of messaging was 20% ratio of all pandemic-related messaging (Kwok *et al.*, 2022). The authors debate whether the organisations concluded that COVID-19 was a threat to business demands and personal health but not a reputational risk and thus decreased communication, showing that organisations see communication mainly linked to reputation management rather than engaging with their public of their own will.

However, issues with trust and organisational communication and its appropriateness are not generally the only concern with social media and virtual communication. There is also an issue with organisational reputation management and employee privacy issues. In this issue, Caleb T. Carr and Rebecca A. Hayes write about the effects of social media disclaimers on perceptions of employees and their organisations from tweets and retweets looking specifically at the perceptions of the public against employees and their organisations following a (re)tweet as well as the additional potential ameliorating effect of a disclaimer distancing the organisation from the individual employee's social media presence. They refer to well-known cases of employees being fired after tweeting or re-tweeting something that goes against organisational values and thus employees increasingly put disclaimer statements on their profiles stating views are their own, disassociating organisations from employee posts since 85% of employers would dismiss employees for personal social media posts that present a potential for the reputation damage (Global Newswire, 2023). Authors correctly argue that in online communication, it is very difficult to follow the social cues of communicators and thus it comes as no surprise that employers are concerned with their employees' social media communication since these posts affect the reputation of the organisation (Lee and Kim, 2021; Cooren, 2020). In addition to that, the authors argue that "the presence of a disclaimer did not mitigate the attributional effect of [re]tweets. Positive and negative perceptions of the individual poster and the poster's organization were stable, regardless of whether a disclaimer was included in the poster's profile. A broad and generalized statement in a user's profile does not meaningfully offset the user's active decision to (re)broadcast content, which is incorporated as a cue to the user's person and to the user's organization, impacting reputational assessments of the organization". Therefore, authors suggest that "organizations and managers may be better served by encouraging or requiring employees to simply omit disclosing their organizational affiliations in their profiles, lest any wayward or ill-taken tweets reflect poorly on the organization". Therefore, social media communication can damage organisations' reputations and can also affect employee privacy and working rights where employees need to be careful what they communicate even on their private channels due to organisational association.

In addition to these papers, two papers in the issue tackle virtual organisational communication and its impact on communication outcomes, which is also linked to reputation. Jillian Williamson Yarbrough and Leslie Ramos Salazar write about virtual onboarding and socialisation respective of employee discussions and experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. The authors argue that employers struggled to implement virtual onboarding during the pandemic, which with some employees created a challenging experience of communication deficiencies of the remote experience. Onboarding employees to a new role is an important aspect of every organisation because this is when employees learn the organisational vision, mission and values. Studies have shown that effectively onboarding employees supports employee retention, satisfaction and wellbeing (Bhakta and Medina, 2021; Meyer and Bartels, 2017; Caldwell and Peters, 2018). Using online comments from a publicly available, United States website, Blind (Teamblind.com), the authors analysed discussions of various employees on their virtual onboarding experiences, both posting and answering questions. The results showed that new hires wanted more basic details about their upcoming virtual onboarding experience, such as when the training will start, how they receive their work

equipment and how they will be compensated. In addition to that, some new employees reported negative experiences such as labelling the process as terrible posting comments such as "no one ready to help", "half the team don't even reply", "It's painful", "Its miserable", "The authorization process is very painful" and "It's been really challenging onboarding remotely". Veronika Koller and Xiaoxi Wu write about analysts' identity negotiations and politeness behaviour in earning calls of US firms with extreme earnings changes to establish socially desirable identities in the Q&A of publicly accessible earnings calls. Findings show that analysts negotiate different identities according to specific social contexts where they promote their identities as competent professionals when they face problematic performance by asking questions in a confrontational manner with few politeness strategies and dependants of the firm by asking questions in a more polite manner when firms experience satisfactory performance. With this, analysts also aim to present a socially desirable face in Q&A to influence managers' and investors' perceptions. Earning calls are hosted at the end of each quarter by firms, right after the release of quarterly financial results, and the audience includes financial analysts, investors, journalists and other stakeholders, with the primary goal of these calls being for managers to communicate company performance and future outlook to investors and analysts, thus making this form of communication highly sensitive and relevant for the business future. These two articles show the importance of virtual communication and the power of appropriate communication, thus opening the notion of interpersonal skills in virtual communication and how these skills influence communication outcomes. The issue of virtual socialisation and inducting new employees is indeed linked to organisational reputation as the analysis of the website with employee feedback has shown where employees have taken online to comment on poor onboarding experiences. As the second paper points out, politeness in virtual communication can also influence communication outcomes for organisations, bringing back the argument from issue 28.44 of the *CCIJ* about the importance of interpersonal communication and skills, which are also linked to the organisational reputation. In other words, negative onboarding experiences and communicating about these online increases mistrust in the organisation and affects the reputation. Equally, inappropriate communication can influence organisational outcomes when talking to investors and other organisational stakeholders, thus again potentially influencing organisational reputation.

Finally, virtual communication does not just bring bad news and negative consequences. This form of communication can positively impact organisations such as new businesses where social media communication can help them grow. In this issue, Dominyka Venciute, Vilte Auruskeviciene and James Reardon write about the impact of social media marketing on new venture performance looking particularly into the impact of social media marketing on the marketing performance of new ventures through a mediating effect of social media marketing performance. The authors argue that social media marketing capabilities positively impact the marketing performance of new ventures through a mediating effect of social media marketing performance. This is a relevant issue because new ventures are vital for economic growth and are often seen as primary drivers of modern economic development and innovations, but they often face resource and capability restrictions, which affect their strategies regarding the competition (Chen *et al.*, 2017; Tushman and Anderson, 1986; Aspelund *et al.*, 2005), and the findings of this study show the vitality of social media in lives of new firms and how important social media are for marketing activities. Therefore, whilst social media can negatively impact organisations, particularly large ones with many employees who have social media accounts and communicate online, it also positively impacts generating new business and business growth. The issue remains on how to separate social media from organisational reputation damage that adversely affects organisational reputation as well as employees and their privacy rights.

In summary of this issue, communication is linked to reputation, and this influences how and what organisations communicate. However, virtual communication also impacts employee privacy rights and freedom of speech since employees can find themselves dismissed if they

communicate on social media something perceived as against organisational values and/or reputational risk. We know that even not mentioning the organisation on the social media profile and/or having a disclaimer can still get employees dismissed if they communicate something an organisation does not agree with, which again brings back the issue that digital communication must work for humans. What is more, some papers in the issue open a question of how should organisations communicate and about what, only on issues that are potentially improving and maintaining reputation or communicating with their public because it is worth doing? Communicating for the sake of promotion and reputation of management leads to mistrust, and with public opinion already showing anti-business orientation and attitudes [1], accompanied by the rise of populist factions who try to exploit people's emotions, this means we need virtual communication led by humans that also works for humans, and thus, organisations should communicate with their public sincerely and consistently. Ultimately, COVID-19 may have not been a reputational risk for organisations as they did not cause the pandemic, but it impacted the lives of the public in more ways imaginable; thus, organisations should pay attention to what matters to the public and communicate regardless of whether there is a reputation increase from the communication happening or not. In other words, organisations should communicate consistently, genuinely and sincerely if they want to (re)gain the trust of their public.

**Martina Topic**

## Note

1. For example, a survey in 2017, in the UK, showed decreased trust in businesses among members of the British public (Grierson, 2017), which in 2021, resulted in the UK Government's white paper on restoring trust in audit and corporate governance (UK Government, 2021), which can lead to further regulation, thus potentially burdening organisations with further regulation and paperwork, which can be avoided with better communication and building trust.

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