

Conference review

REDEFINING STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION AND ITS FUTURE ROLE: THE GLOBAL STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION CONSORTIUM 2024 CONCLAVE – A REVIEW

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INTRODUCTION

The Global Strategic Communication Consortium 2024 Conclave with the main topic “Ethics and Futurism” was held in St. Petersburg, Florida (USA), between March 10th and 13th, 2024. Organized by the University of South Carolina, the conclave brought together more than 30 top-level academics having been invited from all the continents along with high-level professionals to discuss the future directions of strategic communication and possible developments within the discipline.

With the mission to move strategic communication forward by focusing research and collaborations on future challenges, technological innovations, crises, and ethics in the field, the Global Strategic Communication Consortium ambitiously aimed to redefine strategic communication and its ethical framework in the post-truth era, which is immensely important. In the nowadays BANI (brittle, anxious, non-linear, and incomprehensible) world (de Godoy & Ribas Filho, 2021), ethics is taking an even more vital role than it has ever assumed before. In the future, ethics must undoubtedly take the central role in society’s response to geopolitical issues such as conflicts, wars, supply-chain challenges, food shortages, health problems, crises, and rapid technological changes (Li, Deng, Gao, & Chen, 2019;

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Robert Kentish-Barnes, Boyer, Laurent, Azoulay & Reignier, 2020; Frowe, 2022). Such an ethical response is critical to the strategic communication management discipline, even civilization itself, given the fact that, strongly associated with ethics, institutional legitimacy is becoming a topic of growing importance (Lischka, 2019; Lovari & Bowen, 2020). As S. A. Bowen and R. L. Heath (2020) argued, strategic intelligence had to be ethical and based on research, because a mutually beneficial paradigm was simply no longer applicable in such a complex world. With significant ethical concerns about the communications on the governmental, business, and organizational sides, especially contextualized within the framework of the propulsive growth and omnipresent use of artificial intelligence and other advanced technologies, embedding ethics in strategic communication ranging from overall strategies to crisis responses is becoming a crucial element for the future world (Cheng & Jiang, 2021; Dorosh, Astramowicz-Leyk & Turchyn, 2022; Selaković & Ljepava, 2023).

THE FUTURE ROLE OF STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION: KEY CONSIDERATIONS

In the opening keynote, C. Botan (George Mason University) provided insights into the role of strategy in the future, strongly reflecting on the need to redefine the strategy framework in the new contexts and circumstances of the future. B. Berger (University of Alabama) suggested the need for building “practical wisdom” within the strategic communication leaders of the future, only to be followed by S. A. Bowen (the University of South Carolina) and E. Erzikova (Central Michigan University), who offered a new definition of strategic communication in the future context, according to whose research study strategic communication increases organizational effectiveness by enhancing competitive advantage and the normative ethical responsibility, driving values, the vision, the mission, and operations in an identifiable and planned manner. The definition of strategic communication provides a new context different from the previously discussed definition

given by A. Zerfass, D. Verčič, H. Nothhaft and K. P. Werder (2018), which puts strategic communication in the context of organizational success. According to S. A. Bowen and E. Erzikova, strategic communication can be defined differently as an “interdisciplinary management function responsible for communication between organizations and stakeholders, facilitating a social role and duty.”

GLOBAL VALUES OF STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION

In their effort to assess the global values of strategic communication, a group of researchers from the University of Cagliari, namely A. Lovari, M. Porcu, and M. Pitzalis, offered additional insights into the hybridization of strategic communication (Hoffjann, 2021), referring this phenomenon to the public sector. Furthermore, A. Adi (Quadriga University) and T. Stoeckle (Bournemouth University) additionally supported the new definition of strategic communication by emphasizing the need for a new approach in public relations with social values. According to her considerations, determining the role of public relations in addressing complex societal challenges also involves the need to reconsider how social value and the social impact are defined and measured. K. Place (Quinnipiac University) highlighted the importance of ethical listening from the female point of view, identifying the fact that male narratives still influenced perceptions surrounding chief communications officers and how they had to listen. Moreover, Y. Ibuki (Kyoto Sangyo University) suggested that metacognition and organizational learning were the key values behind the success having been made by Japanese public relations generalists.

Y. Zhu (Beijing Normal University) and D. Lan (the Beijing University of Post and Telecommunications) assessed controversies by examining the use of the “like” button as the reactive communication behavior of closed publics within the CAPS problem-solving framework (Kim, Miller & Chon, 2016). C. A. Yue (the

University of Connecticut), L. Lemon (the University of Alabama), and J. Huang (the University of Minnesota) explored new methodological perspectives in the future navigation of strategic communication. According to their research, the methodological focus will expand to the three perspectives – quantitative, qualitative, and computational – with the growing presence of computational methodological approaches. K. Alharbi (Al Imam Mohammad ibn Saud Islamic University) and the researchers from the University of South Carolina, namely S. A. Bowen and C. Piacentine, discussed strategies to mitigate the spread of misinformation during natural disasters in the future, encompassing significant ethical elements within the findings of their study.

FUTURE APPROACHES TO STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION

Artificial intelligence (AI) and its anticipated future role in strategic communication were the pivotal issues discussed at the conclave. M. Selaković (SP Jain School of Global Management) and N. Ljepava (American University in the Emirates) elaborated on the future role of artificial intelligence in the preparation of crisis communication strategies. Despite the anticipated advancements of AI, M. Selaković and N. Ljepava concluded that professionals in the strategic communication domain would remain the decisive factor in selecting the strategies and tactics involved in organizational and institutional crisis communication. In a similar fashion, A. Cheng (North Carolina State University) discussed leveraging AI for crisis communication, simultaneously highlighting its applications, associated challenges, and anticipated future trends, only to ultimately conclude that AI offered an immense potential in crisis communication by providing real-time insights, boosting public engagement, and optimizing emergency response. M.-G. Chon (Auburn University) elaborated on the ethical aspects of the use of AI in strategic communication from the point of view of professional associations' codes of ethics and emphasized the pressing question pertaining to the adequacy of the guidelines available

to public relations practitioners for the responsible use of AI.

In the context of post-pandemic workplaces and workforces, R. Men (the University of Florida) emphasized the profound implications of the changes in the realm of internal communication. In addition to global changes, new generations of the workforce are emerging, bringing novel and different expectations with them. Understanding priorities of generations to come, their expectations, and values may enable organizations to align their internal communication with their employees' expectations. P. M. Buzzanell (the University of South Florida) gave speech on strategic transformative resilience, pointing out the intersection of strategic communication and communicative resilience. In the research study carried out by P. M. Buzzanell together with K. Kee (Texas Tech University) and B. Robertson (the University of South Carolina), a new theoretical framework was offered through the Communication Theory of Resilience (CTR), simultaneously highlighting five key resilience processes. A team of researchers from Texas Tech University, namely M. Hassan, O. Okunloye, and K. Kee, supported by E. Deelman (the University of South California), analyzed strategies for virtual collaboration during the pandemic and identified that all was aimed at leveraging communication in order to keep the workplace virtually coordinated. In addition, A. Adi and T. Stoeckle elaborated on the social impact in the context of the future of public relations and communications as disciplines.

THE CONCLUSIONS AND KEY DIRECTIONS FOR THE FUTURE DEVELOPMENT OF STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION

Based on the discussions made and research presentations given during the Global Strategic Communication Consortium 2024 Conclave, the following points can be highlighted as critically relevant for the future development of strategic communication as a scientific discipline:

1. Both the term “strategy” and the term “strategic communication” will assume new meanings in the future context. Thus, the new definition of strategic communication proposed at the Conclave will be discussed and explicated in S. A. Bowen and E. Erzikova’s Introductory Chapter (still in press), as well as in numerous other Consortium members’ introductory chapters, in the forthcoming book entitled “The Handbook of Innovations in Strategic Communication” (Elgar). At the same time, the new context of strategic communication dictates the need to redefine its global values, for which reason a new definition of strategic communication should incorporate both ethical responsibility and social role facilitation.
2. Future workplaces in the post-pandemic world are bringing new challenges and expectations with them. The strategic communication leaders of the future will need to be capable of overcoming challenges, understand the specifics of the post-truth world, and build practical skills and wisdom. In this context, it is important to focus on nurturing resilience and understanding the need for generations to come to excel in both internal and external strategic communication.
3. New methodologies and new value elements will need to be included in future research in strategic communication. Technological development and change in expectations enable various improvements and changes in the future strategic communication research paradigm.
4. The propulsive growth of artificial intelligence is offering a novel perspective and a myriad of opportunities in strategic communication, especially if used ethically. Thus, practitioners and researchers should be aware of the key principles and aspects of the ethical use of AI in strategic communication. Professional associations should play a vital role in ensuring ethical AI application in the future.

It is important to highlight the presence and contribution of the following strategic communication practitioners, namely M. B. West, S. Smith, and Maj. Gen. M. K. Eder, who had generously supported the

organization of the Global Strategic Communication Consortium 2024 Conclave and offered their insights into future strategic communication roles and issues.

The next Global Strategic Communication Consortium Conclave will be held in Cagliari, Sardinia, Italy, from May 10th to 13th, 2025.

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