International Association of Business Communicators

The Future of Communications: 6 Trends to Watch in 2021 and Beyond

By the IABC Trends Watch Task Force

Introduction

By Joanne Henry, IABC Trends Watch Task Force Chair

The IABC Trends Watch Task Force is pleased to share six key trends we see shaping communicators in 2021 and over the next few years. Some are a continuation or an evolution of cultural trends already in place, and others are brand new, such as the radical changes in the work place due to COVID-19. Our eight task force and two staff members come from London, Calgary, Jamaica, Dallas, Los Angeles, Minneapolis, Reykjavík, the greater Boston area and Chicago. We do our best to watch what is happening in Southeast Asia, Africa, Australia and New Zealand, and will do our best to keep the global lens as wide as possible through this task force.

We stand on the (virtual) shoulders of last year's Trends Watch Task Force and our goal is to dive deeper this year into how these trends are impacting and will impact communicators and their organizations. Even more, what can or should we be doing now that we know more about what is coming at us?

Dive into full the report below, along with their sources, for more reading and information.

Trend No. 1: In the Wake of COVID-19, the Workplace Is Emerging as the Differentiator for Employees

By Mike Klein

Definition of the Trend and Its Context

The relocation of central and office staff in organizations around the world over the course of 2020 has set up the emergence of a broader trend for 2021 and beyond — the extent to which organizations' decisions about how to organize and situate themselves will have far broader repercussions.

Potential Impact and Scope (Based on Scenarios)

It is critical to note that the repercussions are unlikely to be the same from one case to another, even if each organization makes the same decision: to return to the office, stay remote, go hybrid, or see the change of workplace issue as a rationale for exporting positions through

outsourcing or offshoring. These decisions do not seem to be driven by sector: Google and Twitter will have their employees work remotely, while Netflix is speaking of the earliest feasible return to the office.

More importantly, at a macro level this replaces the dominance of the approach where employees were largely office-based with four competitive approaches: office-based, hybrid, remote and offshored/outsourced.

Who Will Be Most Directly Impacted?

We expect this trend, as it emerges, to have three key impacted constituencies, and additional practical ramifications. Specifically:

- Each company's employees will be highly affected regardless of which model is chosen.
- Employees looking to move between companies will look closely at which approach their target companies are embracing before deciding whether to pursue new positions with them. This will be particularly true of prospective employees who may have relocated to new locations in the wake of the pandemic.
- Organizations choosing any of these models are likely to face more pressure from other stakeholders on environmental and total cost grounds.
    - A company with an office-based approach may find itself challenged for its contribution to traffic and its environmental impact (commutes per day, petrol consumption).
    - A hybrid company may incur the highest total cost, as they will need to retain considerable real estate and facilities when they host a fraction of their normal employees on any given day. Employees, in turn, may question the need and value in staying in an expensive metropolitan location in order to be within commuting distance for that weekly office visit, while, perhaps, claiming home office-related expenses back from their employers.
    - A company that embraces outsourcing may surface anger or sabotage from departing home-country employees, and may create an additional challenge around whether to adopt an office-based or remote approach in the new location.

Why Is This Trend Relevant to IABC Members?

This trend presents potentially significant challenges for IABC and its chapter model. The chapter model is based on having a critical mass of members physically situated in proximity to a concentration of other IABC members. The chapter model is under stress already, but the decision of IABC member employers to opt for a remote approach or full outsourcing will likely cause its members to disperse to cheaper and/or more pleasant locations, many of which will lack viable IABC chapters.

International Association of Business Communicators

What Do IABC Members Need To Know and Do by Audience?

Employees

Employees will be impacted in any number of ways, depending on the approach chosen by their enterprises. Some companies that have offered remote working have linked it to recalibration of salaries. Some companies offering hybrid work environments are insisting their employees remain in their current metro locations. Employees in remote situations will need onboarding programs that are far more thorough and connective than the much-more-analog in-person programs delivered by human resources.

More importantly, workplace approach has the potential to be one of the most pivotal drivers of job selection decisions, along with job content and salary. It has the potential to become a "Great Differentiator" not only because of the convenience and compatibility of the job location itself, but because each approach will deliver markedly different cultures.

Customers

While companies will likely construct their interfaces in a way that makes their activities less than "location-obvious," it will be harder to hide any turmoil or bad feeling if the change between approaches is not managed well and proactively.

Community Stakeholders/Partners

Each workplace model chosen will have community implications — increases or decreases in traffic, loss of positions forcing communally active people to move elsewhere, reduced critical mass for volunteer organizations and institutions, or returns to pre-COVID commute traffic congestion.

Government/Regulators

The state of the workplace has implications for the state of the post-COVID recovery. Outsourcing/offshoring will place huge burdens on the government to help those displaced from their positions, at a time when their coffers will be depleted from COVID relief activities. Environmental regulators (and sustainability monitors) may well start calculating work commutes into the overall sustainability measurement for companies and individuals. Deductibility and assignment of home office expenses could also present tangible issues.

Investors

Each approach has a different cost-base implication, many of which will not be known at the outset.

International Association of Business Communicators

Trend No. 2: Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) Policies Evolve — Have We? Communicators Can Take the Next Step to Propel the Profession Forward

By Shaniek Parks

Definition of the Trend and Its Context

The conversation on equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) is essential in a world where diversity defines us. Several studies have highlighted the benefits of EDI for productivity, creativity and innovation:

- "Infographic: Diversity + Inclusion = Better Decision Making At Work," Cloverpop
- "The Diversity and Inclusion Revolution: 8 Powerful Truths," Deloitte Insights
- "How Diversity Makes Us Smarter," Scientific American

Communications professionals are uniquely placed to champion EDI policies and showcase its values in their daily work. As a global organization, we must accept that EDI looks different in each country and region. Issues of representation, unconscious bias and positive discrimination are not always easy to recognize or “fix” because communicators may not be present to them.

Potential Impact and Scope (Based on Scenarios)

The recent Black Lives Matter protests have resulted in a resurgence of EDI conversations. Communicators have supported their organizations to host EDI talks internally, make statements on the Black Lives Matter protests and enter the fray of public debate. While the renewed focus is useful, there is concern about the longevity of these policies beyond internal discussions and media statements.

Three things are to be considered:

1. Less newsworthy EDI policies still need to be discussed, such as representation for people living with disabilities, generational representation in the workplace, language and communication barriers, and the accommodation of beliefs — faith or otherwise.

2. The Black Lives Matter protests have sparked conversations in many parts of the world, but the move to develop new policies in response is limited to North America and Europe. In other parts of the world, the global policies of multinational companies have served as an impetus for change, but this has not always caught on in local markets.

3. Communicators are critical to cementing existing EDI policies in company culture by showcasing the value of an inclusive work environment for innovation, staff engagement

and improved reputation — a role that has become more challenging as employees work remotely. Further, this function has caused many communicators to question their own biases and the representation in their own departments, as they must lead by example.

Who Will Be Most Directly Impacted?

The trend will impact the following group/segments:

- **Senior leadership teams:** It is critical for leadership teams to incorporate EDI policies into the organizational strategy and ensure continuity. This will ensure wins among employees and bolster CSR activities.

- **Employees:** An inclusive workplace enables employees to feel valued and engaged. However, if EDI announcements and policies are not cemented into company culture distrust may bloom among employees.

- **Communication professionals:** Often the mouthpiece for EDI policies, communication teams will be under scrutiny to ensure that they adhere to the values that they promote within the organization.

Why Is the Trend Relevant to IABC Members?

IABC has a responsibility to update communication professionals on conversations and trends impacting the industry. Considering the role of communicators in reputation management and internal communications, it is critical for them to be aware of the existing conversations on EDI and its impact on their role and their stakeholders.

The Trends Watch Task Force intends to conduct further, in-depth analysis on this topic. Stay tuned for future reports.

Trend No. 3: Ethics, Privacy and the Creep Factor: the Risk vs Rewards of the Internet of Behaviors

By Katie Macaulay and Nick Vivion

Definition of the Trend and Its Context

Lines have blurred between physical and digital. The Internet of Things (IoT) — the vast array of physical objects connected to the internet — is now extending to human behavior and physiology with the Internet of Behaviors (IoB) — the online monitoring, tracking and analysis of our everyday actions and biology.

The IoB includes data not just from your online behaviors, such as your social media activity, but activity across your devices, including:

- Laptops
- Smartphones
- Connected home devices (Ring/Nest cameras, smart locks, etc.)
- Wearables (Apple Watch, etc.)
- Smart vehicles
- Voice assistants

By connecting behavioral science with the "digital dust" of our lives, organizations can strategically target their marketing and communications efforts to better understand, predict and ultimately *influence* our behavior. This has immense commercial, political and societal implications — both good and bad. Communicators must balance the risks and the rewards, ensuring that the creep factor and cybersecurity concerns do not outweigh the commercial benefits of IoB applications.

Potential Impact and Scope (Based on Scenarios)

The IoB is the Holy Grail of personalized one-to-one marketing. It combines online and offline data with behavioral science, using detailed data profiling to influence behavior. For instance, a coffee chain might use facial recognition software tied to its security cameras to track a customer across locations, match faces to transactions and use behavioral data to geo-fence relevant marketing offers.

Companies might track employee compliance with standards, such as wearing a mask, by using facial recognition to identify non-compliance. Governments could use this data to track citizens and monitor IoB data for signs of undesirable behavior, such as terrorism or organizing political protests.

> "The IoT itself isn't inherently problematic; a lot of people like having their devices synced and get benefits and convenience from this setup. Instead, the concern is how we gather, navigate and use the data, particularly at scale. And we're starting to understand this problem." —Chrissy Kidd, technology researcher and author

The IoB raises questions of data ownership, personal privacy and data security. These datasets can be combined across intermediaries, with third parties buying and selling aggregated data to give companies ever-more granular insights about individual consumers. There are also ethical concerns related to the tracking of individuals and then aggregating this data into an actionable format to influence behavior.

- **Scenario One: Violation of privacy laws**

  - Your organization has been using IoB data in ways that violate local privacy laws.
  - It is subject to fines and penalties, as well as the labor cost and reputational damage resulting from these violations.
- **Scenario Two: Hackers breach your firewall and steal user or customer profiles that aggregate IoB data**
  - Detailed personal information is now in the public domain.
  - Your organization is at risk of being sued by individuals, as well as facing government fines.
- **Scenario Three: Compliance with user opt-out requests**
  - Your organization must comply with local privacy regulations, which may vary widely across regions. It must conduct rigorous data mapping to assess what data it stores about what clients, customers or users, and it must comply with laws concerning where and how this data is stored.
  - Only then can it be certain it is deleting data as requested by users and avoid fines for non-compliance.
- **Scenario Four: Your organization faces a backlash for its monitoring of employee behavior**
  - Your organization may be complying with the law but still behaving unethically in the eyes of its stakeholders, both internal and external. In 2020, Barclays Bank faced repercussions when it attempted to introduce a system that tracked the time employees spent at their desks and sent warnings to those spending too long on breaks.
  - Your organization's use of data is legal but destroys trust and threatens to damage vital stakeholder relationships.
- **Scenario Five: The personalization of your products or services goes too far and is seen as creepy and intrusive**
  - Personalization makes products and services more attractive, deepening our loyalty and allegiance. But personalization can go too far. The U.S. retailer Target discovered this when it identified 25 products that, when bought in combination, culminated in a "pregnancy prediction" score. Customers rightly complained when they realized Target knew about their pregnancies before they did.
  - Your organization needs to consider the limits of personalization. You must not only comply with the law, but also ensure your collation and use of data is seen as ethical and moral in the eyes of your customers and the public.

Who Will Be Most Directly Impacted?

Networked devices now outnumber people, says McKinsey. From smartphones to smart speakers, voice assistants and security cameras, that adds up to over 30 billion connected devices worldwide.

These devices, equipped with sensors and automatic-activation functions, are set to pervade all areas of our lives — constantly transferring huge volumes of personal data to organizations for real-time analysis.

These devices are reaching into every aspect of our lives. By 2023, Gartner predicts individual activities of 40% of the global population — three billion people — will be tracked digitally in order to influence human behavior. It is becoming impossible to escape the ever-present eye of these connecting devices that can record our every action.

With all of these devices tracking us, and artificial intelligence making data analysis faster and more precise, the IoB has significant implications for business and society more generally, which are philosophical and ethical, as well as legislative. As Chief of Research and Gartner Fellow Daryl Plummer observes, the existence of these devices — and how their data exhaust is being used by governments and corporations requires rethinking our existing frameworks:

> "With IoB, value judgments are applied to behavioral events to create a desired state of behavior. Over the long term, it is likely that almost everyone living in a modern society will be exposed to some form of IoB that melds with cultural and legal norms of our existing pre-digital societies."

Why Is the Trend Relevant to IABC Members?

The IoB has significant implications for communicators. First, the upside: Marketers have long known the personalization of products and services drives customer acquisition and retention. The IoB allows us to personalize in more profound and fundamental ways.

However, falling foul of regulators or misjudging public opinion could result in significant financial penalties and, even more damaging, a loss of trust and mass rejection from consumers who feel their privacy has been violated.

Few companies are asking themselves whether they are handling personal data in a moral and ethical manner. It is time they did. Share prices, earnings — the very survival of organizations — will rest on how they choose to collect, handle and use the "digital dust" of our lives.

Organizations that use connected devices and data are especially at risk, as these devices are uniquely vulnerable to attack. Often, IoT devices have limited security protections, use easy-to-guess factory passwords and are infrequently updated.

And it is not just access to the devices themselves that poses a problem; it is what hackers can do with the information once they have it. Hackers can use these personalized data points to develop sophisticated phishing attacks where they impersonate colleagues, friends and other

known associates. The IoB is the tip of the spear, helping hackers phish more frequently and effectively.

There is also growing concern surrounding privacy and security. This is reflected in increased legislation, such as the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) in Europe, Lei Geral de Proteção de Dados (LGPD) in Brazil (their answer to GDPR) and, more recently in the U.S., the Internet of Things Cybersecurity Improvement Act of 2020. The intense scrutiny around privacy will only grow in the coming years.

Communication professionals must understand the risks and rewards of holistic tracking technologies, both to minimize exposure to bad publicity and maximize the positive impact on business objectives. We must prepare for a range of scenarios and assess how exposed our clients are, or our organization is, to potential pitfalls of the IoB.

What Do IABC Members Need to Know and Do by Audience?

Connected devices offer more and more digital “breadcrumbs” from our customers and users' lives to collate and analyze. As a result, communication teams must have a clear risk management strategy and playbook defining the role, responsibilities and response of key players in different scenarios (see above).

In the event of a data breach that exposes IoB data, communicators need a crisis communications game plan. Since this data is often more personal in nature, breaches have greater reputational risks that could lead to long-term brand damage.

The IoB raises a number of significant issues and actions for all our audiences:

Employees

Employees are your front line. These are the people who make the most impactful decisions about how technology is used, which security practices are followed and the overall culture that amplifies the rewards of IoB while minimizing its risks. The right culture is your best defense.

- Internal communications professionals need to ask themselves: “What is our current strategy concerning the monitoring and surveillance of employees and how is the organization planning to screen employees in the future?” For example, most office workers know, on some level, their work emails and messages are not private. But they may not realize the extent to which their communications are being analyzed for signs of happiness and satisfaction.
    - Identify what your workforce considers to be an acceptable level of data collection and surveillance.

    - Consider how transparent your organization should be around the collection, storage and use of this data.
- As brand ambassadors, your employees will have views on how your organization uses its customer data. Consider your messaging to employees on your organization's guiding principles surrounding data collection and usage.
- Training may be required to ensure internal comms teams understand the risks:
    - Training is especially important for those communicators who are designated subject matter experts.
    - You may need to create an incentivized environment for calling attention to potential security issues before they escalate.
    - You will need to work alongside external comms colleagues to create an agreed crisis communications playbook.
    - Fire drills may be needed to train communicators on what needs to happen in the event of an issue.

Customers and Clients

As we have seen with the SolarWinds cybersecurity breach, it is critical to understand the risk profile not just of your own organization but those of your customers and clients. In an interconnected system such as ours, each node takes on the risk profiles of the nodes in its network. The weakest link is your greatest risk.

- External comms teams need to be aware of how their organization currently gathers and monitors information about customers, clients or users. They need to understand what customers believe is a fair exchange for their personal data.
- They need to proactively plan for a possible data breach:
    - Prepare relevant messaging in advance so it is approved and ready to be published quickly in the event of an issue.
    - Stay ahead of the conversation by developing security and data privacy threads in your communications strategy across content, PR and social media.
    - Provide customer service training as appropriate to build trust and develop stronger collaborative relationships with customers.
- Drive awareness around the priorities of your customers so you ensure complete alignment between your internal organization and customer expectations.
    - This includes understanding expectations for cybersecurity best practices and how customer data will be collected, stored and used (both internally and among affiliated third parties).

Executive Communications

Communicators who advise leadership teams need to equip executives to deal proactively with IoB issues both legal or ethical. This includes:

- Detailed training on how to message company's security practices
- Thorough understanding of relevant local laws and regulations
- Thought leadership that puts the company ahead of the privacy conversation
- “Buck Stops Here” ownership of data collection, storage and management practices

General Public

The walls of all organizations are now highly permeable. What happens internally can all too easily become public knowledge. Transparency is key. (See trend No. 6, “Could Radical Transparency Be the Solution to an Eroding Trust in Authority?” later in this report for more.)

It is advisable to stay ahead, or at least abreast of public opinion, and assume data policies and usage can and will be shared beyond the walls of your organization. Develop your communications strategy with an eye on what matters most to your target constituents.

Media and Opinion Influencers

Media strategies need to consider both the risk and reward of personal data collection and usage.

Risks need to be considered when media teams are crisis and incident planning — what is their response in the event of a data breach or data mismanagement? Equally, the upside needs to be considered — can favorable media coverage be gained by demonstrating a particularly ethical approach to the management of personal data?

Government and Regulators

Even with the latest flurry of data protection laws in Europe and the U.S., regulation is likely to struggle to keep pace with the IoB. This will likely result in an explosion of personal data and countless, creative ways of using this data for commercial gain.

Communicators and business leaders would be wise to understand the letter and the spirit of the law, and where possible form alliances with governing bodies to better understand and help shape data regulation over the long term.

Trend No. 4: Communicators as the Ultimate Integrators of the Human Experience

By Donna Itzoe

Definition of the Trend and Its Context

The focus on the human experience is not new. The trend of creating silos among internal and external communications, marketing and customer experience is fading, and the lines have started to blur. Organizations are organically, and sometimes purposefully, integrating the spectrum of customer, employee and user experience into the *Integrated Human Experience*.

For the individual, the human experience is the aggregate of a person's mental, cultural, emotional, spiritual and physical experiences. For an organization, success lies in understanding how the aggregate of those experiences becomes an asset within the workplace and a way to understand external audiences. By understanding that communication is the underlying force in building and connecting these experiences, communicators assume the role of ultimate integrator for human experience within the workplace, as well as within the consumer space.

Potential Impact and Scope (Based on Scenarios)

From recruiting to sales pitches, to building work environments with more human interactions, the topic of human experience is prevalent. It is a concept that is familiar to many of us who have been working in this realm, regardless of where it may have fallen in an organization or what it was called. Where the ownership for the human experience resides is clear: within the communications function.

Human experience is best demonstrated via the process of communication: sender, message, channel, receiver. Thus, the communicator fills the role of building, bolstering and integrating the human experience in any organization. By virtue of what we are charged with doing, we assess and act quickly. We also develop the appropriate messages to connect with the individual receivers of messages.

In Deloitte's research, the company talks about designing marketing around the human experience instead of focusing solely on brand loyalty. A key takeaway from this research:

> "In this frenetic, impersonal digital age, we believe that people want to be treated like individual humans and less as a part of a homogenous customer experience. Organizations that go beyond delivering on customer experience to elevating the human experience will be better positioned to create more meaningful connections, foster loyalty and ultimately drive growth. When we focus on the human experience, we go beyond just showing up. We build relationships that matter. We seize attention, build love, inspire dreams, create connections, respect and recognize individuals, and build confidence."

Deloitte also developed the Human Experience (HX) Quotient, a formula that demonstrates how an organization can define human experience to align the values of its customers, employees and partners.

International Association of Business Communicators

2020: A Prime Case Study for Communicator as Human Experience Integrator

The human experience often reveals itself in online conversations, and the need for human connection and interaction was preeminent during 2020. We might argue that at no other time has the collection of human experiences been at center stage than during the pandemic when people were told to quarantine or isolate.

Whether to share pain, grief, stories or artistic endeavors, connectivity was arguably what people craved most. The year also proved a need for authenticity and accuracy. Amid the chaos of online confusion about the pandemic and U.S.-based elections, organizations looked to communicators to provide information online. Internal communicators and public relations professionals emerged as the appropriate owners of the single source of information for their respective organizations' employees, clients and partners.

We can and should continue to lead as the single source of information for our organizations. During crises or in any given situation, easy access to validated information is critical. After a year of letting down their paywalls to provide pandemic-related news, newsrooms are considering the efficacy of their paywalls, a potential tradeoff to engage with the people they did not know they could reach. A 2021 Newman Lab prediction says newsroom leaders "got closer to their communities during the pandemic and the 2020 election, and they're reluctant to wall themselves off once again." We believe that this trend is the result of communicating directly with a broader, previously untapped audience, one that would not have engaged had the paywalls existed.

During the pandemic lockdown, the intersection of most human experiences became almost entirely digital, with social media as a primary communication and connectivity tool. That provided some unintentional risks for people. During this era of "cancel culture," employees regularly balance participating in free speech with aligning to their employer's values. (See trend no. 5 for more on cancel culture and disinformation.) Countless examples exist of employees being let go after posting extreme or insensitive statements online, particularly related to the race movement and the U.S. election. PR and internal communications professionals were often left to clear up these external and internal situations.

There is certainly a positive side to digital connections within organizations, particularly as organizations saw the cost savings of allowing remote working conditions. Interestingly, some organizations worried for years that if they allowed office and support teams to work remotely, would productivity levels would plunder and give way to personal distractions?

With many offices shuttered during 2020, the result showed that people in offices were able to communicate and be productive remotely. In 2019, 87% of US employees averaged 8.5 hours per workday (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics). The Wall Street Journal reported on two surveys,

one citing that a sample group of 2,025 full-time employees worked an extra 26 extra hours each month, and another citing that daily work hours increased from 8-15% in a sample of 3.4 million workers.

True, interruptions exist in home offices and even encroach during web-based meetings, such as children or pets making unannounced, charming interruptions during meetings. These interruptions contributed to another amazing result of people working from home during the pandemic: online meetings emboldened the human experience of the office worker.

People learned a great deal about their colleagues and clients by seeing them in their home environments, versus the artificiality of work environments. They have also been able to connect on a human level; the walls came down and new avenues of connecting and communicating emerged by using the digital communication channel.

In her series "The Lost Year," *Vox* writer Emily VanDerWeff interviewed a fitness studio owner who hosted web-based workouts as a way of not only earning during the pandemic when fitness studios were shut down, but also connecting with her clients — and even building a new client base. VanDerWeff thought the interview would take on another "Zoom fatigue" theme. Instead, she references the unusual intimacy of Zoom in the headline. Melanie, the instructor, said that she was able to create a one-on-one connection, or experience, with each person. "This whole experience has brought home the idea of making sure that the weave of your social fabric is together, by any means necessary," VanDerWeff says. This certainly tracks with the experiences of many colleagues and customers during the pandemic.

The pandemic also increased the number and intensity of online exchanges during this time. In his article about social impact theory, Ronn Torossian covers "how important the influencer is to the target audience, immediacy is in terms of proximity in time between the two, and numbers stand for the number of the influencers themselves." In this case, the influencer is the human and how his or her experience affects interests, as well as personal content shared.

If Torossian's theory holds, then the human — and therefore the human experience — has potentially incredible influence and power on marketing campaigns. He does caution we need to be flexible in our campaigns because user-generated content (such as testimonials and reviews) is the most influential. Nothing new there, as we all know that people trust other buyers' reviews. However, through marketing and communication campaigns, we not only *allow* user content, but we should *encourage* it to get the direct impact of peer trust. In Edelman's 2020 Trust Barometer, the agency found company experts, academic experts and peers as the most credible source of information. Furthermore, people in our organizations can be some of our best communicators if we equip them.

Who Will Be Most Directly Impacted?

The individual employee and the employee as consumer are the primary focus of this trend. To understand this, we have to understand that there is a person behind every decision. Much too often, when we use the term business to business (B2B), we treat it as if a business comprises a single individual decision-maker. There is a human behind the decision-making, albeit perhaps a different human at each decision-making level. Thus, the messages we share must resonate and tap into the human experiences of the decision-maker.

Communicators understand how to reach people through storytelling, data, facts and even images; we know how to explain something so the audience receives the message. In order to be successful in marketing, we should look at the role of the message, plus audience, plus channel – and thus the communication. Communication professionals know that the same message or channel will not work for every audience, thus the need for well-designed communication strategies with tactics, channels and messages with fully defined audience analyses.

Why Is the Trend Relevant to IABC Members?

The single factor that complicates this trend is what makes the communications professional the best individual in an organization to lead the integration of human experiences: the *individuality* of the human experience.

There is no need to create silos of functions overseeing the variations of human experiences. Communicators already understand them and we evaluate and analyze these experiences to develop fully integrated communication strategies and messages. As communications professionals, we weave multiple points into singular messages. The communicator adeptly plays the role of integrator. Here is why:

- **Communicators build and own the channels that allow the need for connection to not only survive, but thrive within the organization and within the brand.** We are integral to explaining, sharing and bridging workplace culture. That includes the physical and mental culture. Organizations traditionally have asked employees to leave their personal experiences at the door. This has created a huge gap of experiences we could tap into to understand our myriad audiences. In short, we had the data under our virtual roofs the whole time. Communicators naturally tap into the human experience through our ability to assess quickly and respond with an understanding of those experiences.

- **With this understanding, we actively seek brand advocates and equip them with toolkits, training and guardrails.** Our organizations' employees are already online, and they connect and represent our organizations and our brands. We want them to be authentic as they speak on behalf of the brand. Communicators can provide the monitoring, guardrails and guidelines for employees who want to make these connections.

- **The communicator is the key person during any organization's crises.** Because of our need to understand any new situation or crisis and quickly develop communication strategies and messages, we are uniquely qualified to understand how to reach audiences through authentic, transparent messages, using the best available channel. We can cull out something that is not authentic and we are uniquely able to play the role of editor and critic, even of our own messages. On any given day, the crisis changes, yet the role of the communicator remains the same: share the messages that move audiences back to center.

- **Further, although the lines within communication disciplines are blurring, the communication function should exist outside of all other functions to maintain credibility and authenticity within and outside our organization.** We already organically assume the role of integrator within our organizations. We know the messages and the ways they are best delivered and received. That is the primary benefit of having the communicator in its own internal vertical comprising internal communications, external communications, media, PR and marketing. These communication functions and experts are the integration point for all messaging for sales, operations, human relations, talent acquisition, customer relations and digital media. We also bridge human experiences with those of others, thus creating the integration among people as well as functions.

What Do IABC Members Need to Know and Do by Audience?

Employees

Help your organization's employee base understand your message, equip them with the tools, talking points and allow them to use their positive organizational experiences to share with new audiences; this may allow you to reach new external audiences.

Customers

Given the variety of human experiences, combine multiple sets of talking points into single messages.

Community Stakeholders/Partners

Work with this group to build the messages that work for you and appeal to them.

Influencers/Media

Encourage organizational leaders to ensure the key message for the audience is the one they want to reach. Use multiple approaches versus a singular approach to ensure the message matches the audience.

Government/Regulators

Shine a light on the authenticity of the human experience within your organization by allowing your employees to be your best brand ambassadors. This is not a situation where we can check a box and move on. Instead, it requires constant nurturing.

Investors
This group wants to know that there is longevity and potential. They are humans with their own experiences, and we need to appeal to them as individuals with their own experiences.

Trend No. 5: Disinformation and Deepfakes Fuel Growing Mistrust

By Joanne Henry

The growing mistrust in agreed-upon facts and a global decline in trust of all forms of media accelerated in 2020. In the most recent Edelman Trust Barometer of 33,000 participants worldwide, the threat and negative result of disinformation campaigns was a key takeaway. (For additional analysis and talking points, see the Catalyst article from Mike Klein, IABC task force member, "Talking about Trust: IABC Insights From the Edelman Trust Barometer.")

Heightened polarization in many regions of the world and the rise of tribalism contribute to a narrowcasting of news that reaches only those who already share a point of view. On social media forums in particular, there appears to be both a free-for-all in terms of sources purporting to be experts, combined with a censorship of content and sources inconsistently applied by standards that seem to shift in response to crowd thinking.

The declining credibility of the media is tied to polarized viewpoints (i.e. "my station is the only one that does not spread lies") but that does not explain everything that makes us skeptical about content on all media formats, including social media. The trends to understand that may well be deepening polarization is the rapidly increasing technical capabilities for news and information manipulation, along with the continued power, growth and consolidation of giant news platforms. This includes cable, network and publishing conglomerates, and platforms like Google, Facebook, Snapchat and others.

Potential Impact and Scope

Since 2017 when initial fake videos came to the internet as pornography, huge leaps in sophistication of technology and video production have made the capability attractive to good actors and bad actors alike. The now accessible (inexpensive) technology makes it incredibly

easy to manipulate content and facts for entertainment, marketing and information, as well as sinister purposes.

Deepfakes are among the communication tools that pose a significant risk to trust in communications. The convergence of artificial intelligence (AI) “deep meaning” and “fakes,” or deepfakes, use facial recognition and audio technology to produce AI-synthetic media. According to Sentinel, a global organization founded by ex-NATO cybersecurity experts to detect them primarily for government clients, the number of deepfakes online has grown 900% in the last year, amassing close to 6 billion views.

The impact of deepfakes on credibility cannot be understated in a world where a false image can be shared millions of times in a few seconds. Videos of politicians and business leaders appearing to say words they never used have hit country leaders like Speaker of the United States House of Representatives Nancy Pelosi, the president of Gabon, a UK major financial institution, Jeff Bezos and Tesla’s Elon Musk.

In the country of Gabon, a suspected deepfake video of the country’s president (who had been in ill health) sparked an unsuccessful coup. In the United States, a deepfake video of Pelosi added stuttering that made her appear drunk. It was widely circulated by her opposition.

Disinformation and the Conditions That Enable It

In the U.S., in January 2021, Edelman published its latest survey, which was completed by 33,000 people in 28 countries, indicates a growing "epidemic of misinformation," according to Edelman CEO Richard Edelman, as reported in a CBS News commentary.

"We have an infodemic, and in short, we don't trust the sources of information, meaning we don't trust the media, it's seen as politicized, biased, and we don't trust the people who are speaking," Edelman said to CBSN.

Advances in AI also allow “black box” algorithms to automate the control of precise distribution by media publishers and online platforms. Use of these algorithms can control what news, which version, frequency, and where and how content is displayed. For marketers, micro-personalization of content is a dream come true. For media companies, and those who rely on the media as a viable third-party source of accurate information, it is both boon and threat. For the public and for governments, the jury is still out.

While AI image/text monitoring allows platforms to remove violent images or incitement to violence (think Christchurch massacre images pulled country by country on Facebook), it also enables content suppression, a “cancel culture.” Growing populist fury at real or imagined suppression of information fuels mistrust and potentially makes it almost impossible for organizations to get out facts for unpopular positions.

In late 2020, Twitter, Facebook and YouTube joined in a fight to remove conspiracy theories and any disinformation about new COVID-19 vaccines. The problem is that while many still get through by eliminating code words, other organizations trying to reach their employers and community members have experienced their channels temporarily blocked without warning. Other business and financial damage examples are included in an excellent report by Alex Moltzau in Medium, published in January 2020.

Who Is Most Directly Impacted by This Trend?

Communicators for governments and government agencies already face critical challenges related to disinformation and the impact of mistrust in leaders and in institutions. This threat could easily migrate to business leaders; wherever they may stand on political issues, they are an “authority” institution that, by its leaders’ actions or inaction, could be a target.

Organizations that are now in the public eye, or may be in the future, and those who need to reach constituents through the media will be most impacted by these issues. External communications and public affairs will be increasingly challenged, as traditional approaches will be inadequate if they don’t address new and constantly changing technology and political realities.

Corporate and investor relations professions for publicly traded companies rely on timely, accurate third-party information about their stocks and the company, including media reports. If even an unchecked rumor can send a stock plunging or skyrocketing, calculated disinformation using deepfake technology could be too difficult to detect until much damage had been accomplished.

Public affairs and communications professionals who operate in a climate of division on public/private issues will be affected, as opposition have new tools that are not as easy to monitor, and require fast responses.

What Do IABC Members Need to Know and Do by Audience?

Employees

Businesses and business communicators have a huge opportunity according to the information from the Edelman survey. Business leaders have been tracking higher in trust by employees than their governments, but this year, that gap was at a record level. Sixty-one percent of respondents said they trusted business leaders versus a 53% trust of government (the survey covered 28 countries).

Other research shows that employees increasingly want their companies to take a stand on social issues. Often, that stand involves communicating through key influencers, such as respected media. With declining trust and narrow-cast channels, companies need to be able to demonstrate they are taking a public stand while giving great attention to *where* and how this message is delivered, as many media channels now carry their own bias baggage, real or perceived.

The 2019 Edelman Trust Survey showed that while trust in many institutions and the media had declined, employees were much more likely to trust managers in their own organizations. While we do not know if this will be true in 2021 and beyond, we do see some corporate leaders embracing an antidote to declining trust. That antidote, for some, is radical transparency. See more on the use of radical transparency in trend No. 6 below.

Customers

In a world of deepfakes and misinformation, branding takes on a new imperative. Owning, protecting and consistently using your brand over trusted channels will be essential to maintain customer trust. Some notable marketing campaigns and commercials have used AI technology recently to produce ads where celebrities or sports personalities appear to be together, or in a location created beyond them. Disclosure on these techniques is vital to maintaining trust, even for the most entertaining content.

The use of manipulated images of people — to protect identities — or purely for promotional reasons (a happy gallery of Zoom call participants on a screen shot) should also be disclosed. The law may not be there yet; be ahead of the regulations.

Influencers/Media

Communicators should work with media channels to understand their own capabilities to identify and eliminate the threats of disinformation and deepfakes. When corporate leadership is being interviewed, it is even more critical to work to identify who else is providing information and to have the knowledge and resources to assess their credibility and veracity.

Investors

Understanding the potential and monitoring for deepfakes and other disinformation that can impact a stock will be a critical skill. Investor relations and corporate communication professionals may need to find immediate and alternate channels to correct information when a media report is false. This will require working with attorneys and following stock trading laws and regulations that are unique to each country and market exchange.

International Association of Business Communicators

Trend No. 6: Could Radical Transparency Be the Solution to an Eroding Trust in Authority?

By Brigitte Fontaine

Definition of the Trend and Its Context

Radical transparency, or the art of creating an open culture where all opinions are welcome and all decisions are open to debate, may be seen as the cornerstone of building trust in institutions of all sorts, including corporations, nonprofits and governments. It is a powerful counterbalance to deep skepticism, an inevitable consequence of fake news and conspiracy theories floating around on the internet. If left unchecked however, radical transparency can inflict much damage, in particular in the workplace.

Potential Impact and Scope (Based on Scenarios)

The impact of radical transparency is both positive and negative. Done right, it has the potential to grow businesses, increase trust in public servants or financial institutions and boost employee morale. At its worst, it will encroach on people's right to privacy and erode employees' self-confidence.

In a TED Talk speech, Ray Dalio, founder of one of the world's biggest hedge fund firms, Bridgewater Associates, recalls the biggest mistake of his career and how it led to his change of leadership style. He transformed his firm from an autocracy, with him being the sole decision maker, to a transparent meritocracy, where associates would have access to all available information and be able to freely give their opinions. In his world, this means that a newly hired employee, fresh out of college, can potentially rate him, the CEO, very poorly on his performance at a company meeting, without fear of retaliation. The feedback, weighted against everybody else's, helps the CEO to improve, adapt and, in the case of Bridgewater, win big.

Radical transparency, however, requires leaders to show a great deal of humility and vulnerability, traits that have not been the norm until now. In a scientific paper titled, "The Neuroscience of High-Trust Organizations," researcher Paul J. Zak correlates vulnerability with the levels of oxytocin in our bodies. In other terms, leaders who care for their employees and genuinely look for their input in decision-making provoke a release of oxytocin in their entourage, making them more willing to cooperate, and thereby setting the foundation for a trust-oriented organization — the key factor being an authentic willingness on the part of the leaders to be "natural" and empathetic.

Critics of radical transparency, however, have equated it to brutal honesty, claiming that it could be perceived as harsh criticism and undermine one's self-confidence or sense of belonging. Netflix, for example, has often been criticized for fostering an environment that is "ruthless, demoralizing and transparent to the point of dysfunctional." Prominently displayed on Netflix's

website are their maxims, showing how the company's full embrace of radical transparency (maxims 1-3) could potentially lead to a culture of doubt and unhealthy competition (maxim 4-5):

1. Encourage independent decision-making by employees.
2. Share information openly, broadly, and deliberately.
3. Are extraordinarily candid with each other.
4. Keep only our highly effective people.
5. Avoid rules.

Who Will Be Most Directly Impacted?

This is why boundaries should be drawn around radical transparency. Most importantly, privacy should not be sacrificed at the altar of transparency. According to Ethan Bernstein of the Harvard Business Review, too much transparency could "distort behavior instead of improving it." If people feel observed in their every move, they may start to go to great lengths to hide their ideas or process improvements, potentially at the detriment of their colleagues and the organization at large, only to bring them up at a crucial moment in the quest for self-promotion. This would create a highly political and unhealthy environment where every person's move is watched and possibly used for the benefit of self or others. Bernstein proposes the following boundaries to create a transparent framework that will encourage innovation and productivity:

1. **Allowing privacy within team boundaries:** By keeping radical transparency within teams, members are more likely to open up and share their ideas in an authentic way.
2. **Keeping feedback and evaluation separate:** By making a clear distinction between data used to improve processes, products or people's skills, and information used to evaluate employee performance, less time is spent on pretending, and fear of retaliation may be curbed.
3. **Decision-making versus improvement rights:** While decision-making is the privilege of a few, improvements rights should be awarded to a broader part of the organization, regardless of roles.
4. **Experimenting for a predetermined amount of time:** Giving employees total freedom to explore, experiment and think during a set amount of time allows them to make the most out of their window of privacy for the benefit of the organization.

Why Is the Trend Relevant to IABC Members?

As we have seen, transparency must be authentic and multi-directional, and set within clearly defined boundaries to allow for individual privacy. What does it mean for communicators?

As communication professionals, we are expected to both facilitate the communication links between all parties and promote the company's products and services (in the case of external communicators) or mission and values (for internal communicators), and they may be contradictory. Our role then is to reconcile both and create a narrative that aligns an

organization's product or mission with the authenticity sought after by its various audiences — and essentially become a trust agent. (See trend No. 4 regarding communicators as the ultimate integrator of the human experience.)

The 2018 study by The Brand & Reputation Collective explores the impact on communicators of socio-economic uncertainty: "In order to build trust and support with stakeholders and consumers, [communicators] are or plan to be listening more, ensuring their words and deeds are consistent, and speaking in a more human way." This, however, may prove challenging if the leaders are not on board.

What Do IABC Members Need To Know and Do by Audience?

It is then incumbent on us as communicators to coach the leaders and managers of the organization or institution we advise, and request they live up to the authenticity value not only with their words, but with deeds and appropriate distribution of resources. More specifically:

Employees

Internal communicators must help management define what radical transparency means for the company, and set the parameters for the boundaries. Being transparent with employees means informing them of everything happening in the company as soon as they happen, and answer their questions candidly, even if we (or the leadership) do not have the answers. It does not mean that all data should be shared with employees. It is our duty to partner with the leadership and other departments to draw a clear line between transparency and privacy.

The other key factor in building transparency is listening. Knowing what matters to our employees will guide our communications and steer management in the right direction.

Customers

Being transparent with our customers is a trust-building exercise. It allows us to cement our relationships, increase customer loyalty and potentially bring in more customers. For example, if a support center has been overloaded to the point of not being able to answer customer calls, the right thing to do is to send them a letter acknowledging the issue and spelling out the steps that we are taking to remedy it. Customers will be thankful that we took the time to apologize and they will be more likely to forgive our organization's mistake, as long as we keep our word.

Community Stakeholders/Partners

For the communities we do business in or with, nothing will speak louder than deeds. It is not enough to assert that we are taking steps to reduce our environmental footprint, for example; we must show them. It then becomes the community relations communicator's role to provide the details of the steps our organization is taking toward the environment or other issues dear to our communities, and to be proactive in showing our progress at regular intervals.

Influencers/Media

As an influencer, transparency is personal. There are so many well documented cases of personalities losing their clout, even their job, because of trying to bury or cover up personal matters. Because the lines between our persona as a personality and our real self may be blurry to the point of total loss of privacy, we should assess the legal, social and economic implication each time we go public with our personal lives.

Government/Regulators

Arguably, honesty and transparency have not been the forte of politicians who are generally too focused on getting reelected. In recent years however, more and more are starting to understand that being transparent may be the key to winning the trust of their constituents and their elections. In Taiwan, for example, the digital minister has set the standards for political accountability by using radical transparency as a tool to force the discussion in favor of public interest instead of private interest. Using Taiwan as a model, communicators in the public space have a critical role to play in our democracies to refocus public debate and regulations on the people they serve.

Investors

As investor relations professionals, we have a tough job ahead of us when it comes to convincing our leaders to be fully transparent. Without divulging financial information that may lead to insider trading or change the trend of a particular stock, we may have much to gain by ways of transparency. As controversial as Elon Musk may be, his approach to the announcement of Tesla's quarterly results could be emulated for the sake of transparency and honesty. On the other hand, his regular tweets about the car maker's stock value could rightfully be perceived as suspicious, to say the least. Today, we have an opportunity to bring more honesty and transparency in the financial world by purposefully driving change through a messaging strategy that ties results to our organization's role in its community and society at large.