

Reimagining Strategic Communication in the Age of Artificial Intelligence

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ABSTRACT

Artificial Intelligence (AI) has become a pivotal force reshaping the practice and theory of strategic communication. Organizations increasingly rely on Natural Language Processing (NLP) and its applications—such as sentiment analysis and automated content generation—to manage stakeholder relationships, monitor public discourse, and optimize communication strategies. Drawing upon insights from the presentation *Reimagining Strategic Communication in the Age of AI*, this article critically examines the opportunities and challenges posed by AI integration in strategic communication. Through a qualitative conceptual analysis supported by contemporary scholarly literature, this study argues that while AI enhances efficiency, scalability, and data-driven decision-making, it simultaneously introduces ethical risks related to authenticity, creativity, trust, and accountability. The discussion highlights the paradox of AI mediated communication, where technological sophistication may undermine relational and symbolic dimensions central to strategic communication. This article proposes a human-centered hybrid framework that positions AI as an assistive intelligence rather than an autonomous communicator. The findings contribute to ongoing debates in strategic communication scholarship by emphasizing the need for ethical governance, contextual sensitivity, and the preservation of human agency in AI-driven communication environments.

Keywords: *strategic communication; artificial intelligence; sentiment analysis; communication ethics; human-centered AI.*

INTRODUCTION

Strategic communication has traditionally been understood as the purposeful, research-based use of communication by organizations to achieve long-term objectives and maintain mutually beneficial relationships with stakeholders (Hallahan et al., 2007). In contemporary digital environments, this function is increasingly mediated by technological infrastructures that shape how messages are produced, distributed, and interpreted. Among

these technologies, Artificial Intelligence (AI) represents one of the most transformative developments, fundamentally altering both the operational and conceptual dimensions of strategic communication (Osei-Mensah et. al., 2023).

AI technologies are no longer experimental add-ons but have become integral to strategic communication ecosystems. AI driven sentiment analysis enables organizations to monitor public opinion in real time, while machine learning algorithms assist in predicting audience behavior and optimizing message delivery. Automated content generation tools further expand communicative capacity by producing texts, visuals, and audiovisual materials at scale. These developments promise unprecedented efficiency and analytical depth.

However, the growing reliance on AI also raises critical questions regarding authenticity, ethical responsibility, and the role of human agency in communication processes. Public reactions to AI-generated campaigns, such as the Coca-Cola AI advertisement discussed in the presentation, demonstrate that audiences are not passive recipients of technological innovation (Nott, 2023). Instead, they actively evaluate the symbolic, emotional, and moral dimensions of AI mediated communication. Negative sentiment expressed toward AI generated creative content suggests a tension between technological efficiency and audience expectations of human creativity and authenticity.

This article addresses the persistent tension between technological innovation and communicative ethics by critically examining how artificial intelligence (AI) is reshaping strategic communication practices and stakeholder relationships. Rather than adopting a techno-optimistic or techno-deterministic orientation, the study positions AI as a socio-technical phenomenon, situated within broader theoretical discourses on strategic communication, trust, and ethical accountability. By foregrounding these interconnections, the research seeks to advance a nuanced understanding of how AI mediates both the processes and principles of organizational communication. The central argument advanced here is that AI should be conceptualized as an assistive strategic resource rather than an autonomous communicative actor. Without human-centered governance, AI driven communication risks undermining the relational foundations upon which strategic communication depends.

Accordingly, this article is guided by three research questions:

- (1) How does AI transform strategic communication practices at the organizational level?
- (2) What ethical and relational challenges emerge from AI-mediated communication?
- (3) How can organizations design strategic communication frameworks that integrate AI while preserving human agency and trust?

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Strategic Communication as a Relational Practice

Strategic communication scholarship emphasizes that communication is not merely instrumental but fundamentally relational. Strategic communication scholarship emphasizes

that communication is not merely instrumental—a means to achieve organizational goals—but fundamentally relational, shaping and sustaining the connections between organizations and their publics. Scholars such as Hallahan, Zerfass, and Verčič have argued that strategic communication should be understood as a dynamic process embedded within relationships and social contexts. This perspective aligns closely with dialogic and relational theories of public relations, which conceptualize communication as an ongoing process of meaning negotiation and mutual understanding rather than a one-way transmission of messages (Kent & Taylor, 2002).

In digital contexts, strategic communication increasingly operates within algorithmically mediated environments. Nothhaft et. al. (2018) argue that strategic communication must be understood as a reflective practice shaped by technological infrastructures, organizational culture, and societal expectations. AI, therefore, does not merely enhance communication efficiency but reconfigures the very conditions under which strategic communication occurs.

Artificial Intelligence in Communication Contexts

Artificial intelligence refers to computational systems capable of performing tasks that traditionally require human intelligence, including learning, pattern recognition, and decision-making (Russell & Norvig, 2021). Within communication studies, AI has been increasingly applied through tools such as chatbots, sentiment analysis, recommendation systems, and automated content production, reshaping how organizations engage with publics and manage information flows. Sentiment analysis, highlighted in the presentation, exemplifies AI's growing influence on strategic communication by enabling organizations to quantify public attitudes expressed in large-scale textual data through natural language processing techniques. However, scholars caution against equating computational sentiment scores with nuanced human interpretation, noting persistent limitations related to context, ambiguity, and cultural meaning-making (Ahmed et al., 2020).

Ethics, Authenticity, and Trust in AI-Mediated Communication

Ethical concerns surrounding AI have become central to interdisciplinary debates. Floridi et al. (2018) emphasize that ethical AI must be designed to promote human well being, accountability, and transparency. In strategic communication, these concerns intersect with issues of trust and authenticity. Trust is not solely a function of informational accuracy but is embedded in relational expectations and moral judgments (Kent & Taylor, 2002).

The audience backlash observed in AI-generated advertising campaigns reflects what can be described as an authenticity deficit. When communication artifacts appear detached from human creativity and labor, audiences may perceive them as manipulative, impersonal, or cost driven. This perception poses significant reputational risks, particularly for brands that rely on emotional resonance and symbolic capital.

Artificial Intelligence, Creativity, and Strategic Meaning-Making

One of the most contested dimensions of AI integration in strategic communication concerns creativity and meaning making. Traditionally, creativity has been regarded as a

uniquely human capability, closely tied to emotion, cultural sensitivity, and symbolic interpretation. Strategic communication relies heavily on these elements to construct narratives that resonate with stakeholders and reinforce organizational identity.

Recent developments in generative AI challenge this assumption by demonstrating the ability of machines to produce texts, images, and audiovisual content that mimic human creativity. However, as argued by Manovich (2019), algorithmic creativity is fundamentally derivative, relying on pattern recognition and recombination rather than lived experience or moral judgment. This distinction becomes critical in strategic communication contexts where meaning is negotiated socially rather than generated mechanically.

The audience response to Coca-Cola's "Holidays Are Coming (AI-Generated)" campaign, launched in the United States in November 2024, underscores the inherent limitations of algorithmic creativity. Although generative AI technologies can emulate human-like aesthetics and narrative structures, they continue to lack authentic emotional resonance and contextual sensitivity. While the campaign exhibited notable technical sophistication, sentiment analysis of public discourse revealed predominantly negative evaluations, characterized by perceptions of dehumanization, erosion of artistic labor, and corporate detachment. These reactions indicate that stakeholders assess not only the communicative outcomes of AI-mediated campaigns but also the intentionality and ethicality underlying their creation and deployment.

From a strategic communication perspective, this phenomenon underscores the centrality of symbolic authenticity in maintaining stakeholder trust. Communicative artifacts—such as advertisements and brand narratives—operate not merely as informational messages but as symbolic representations of organizational identity, values, and priorities. When AI-generated content is perceived to supplant human creativity for reasons of efficiency or cost optimization, it risks conveying value misalignment, thereby generating reputational vulnerability. Consequently, authenticity emerges not as a stylistic attribute but as a relational construct through which audiences interpret organizational integrity and intent.

AI, Strategic Organizational Listening, and Sentiment Analysis

Strategic organizational listening has been identified as a foundational dimension of effective communication management (Macnamara, 2016). AI-driven sentiment analysis technologies have significantly expanded organizations' capacity for listening by enabling the real-time processing of vast volumes of user-generated content across digital platforms. The application of sentiment analysis in evaluating public responses to AI-generated communication exemplifies this analytical affordance. By categorizing audience reactions into positive, negative, and neutral sentiment clusters, organizations can discern patterns of approval, resistance, or ambivalence, thereby informing adaptive communication strategies.

However, the strategic value of such analytics depends on interpretive competence—that is, the ability to situate computational outputs within broader cultural, historical, and relational contexts. For instance, during the JAKIM halal certification controversy in Malaysia (Shadiqe, 2024), where viral reports claimed that several popular

restaurant chains were not halal-certified, sentiment analysis of social media discourse revealed an initial surge of negative affect driven by religious concern and distrust, followed by more balanced sentiment after official clarification. This dynamic mapping of public emotion illustrates how AI-enabled sentiment analysis can support crisis communication, offering early detection of reputational risks and insight into shifting stakeholder attitudes.

Nevertheless, scholars caution that sentiment analysis may oversimplify complex emotional expressions and neglect power asymmetries and cultural nuances embedded in digital discourse (Gillespie, 2014). Within strategic communication practice, overreliance on quantitative sentiment metrics risks privileging surface-level approval over substantive relationship building. Hence, AI-enabled listening should function as a complement—rather than a substitute—for qualitative, interpretive engagement, ensuring that technological efficiency aligns with relational and ethical dimensions of organizational communication.

DISCUSSION

The Strategic Promise of AI Integration

AI offers undeniable strategic advantages for organizational communication. Automation reduces operational burdens, predictive analytics enhance decision making, and data and algorithmic driven insights improve message targeting. From a managerial perspective, AI enables communication departments to operate more efficiently and responsively in dynamic media environments.

The presentation highlights how AI-powered tools facilitate rapid assessment of public opinion, allowing organizations to adjust strategies in near real time. In crisis prone environments, such capabilities can be invaluable. AI thus functions as a strategic amplifier, extending human capacity to monitor, analyze, and respond.

The Authenticity and Trust Dilemma

Despite these advantages, AI integration introduces a fundamental dilemma for strategic communication: the tension between efficiency and authenticity. Trust, as emphasized in relational communication theory, is built through perceived sincerity, transparency, and ethical consistency (Kent & Taylor, 2002). AI-mediated communication that appears automated, impersonal, or deceptive may undermine these foundations.

The negative sentiment documented in the Coca-Cola case demonstrates how stakeholders may resist AI driven communication when it conflicts with expectations of human creativity and emotional engagement. This resistance is not a rejection of technology per se, but a critique of how technology is positioned within organizational values.

Toward a Human-Centered Hybrid Model

In response to these challenges, this article advocates for a human-centered hybrid model of strategic communication. In this model, AI serves as an assistive intelligence that

supports human decision-making rather than replacing it. Human communicators retain responsibility for ethical judgment, narrative coherence, and relational sensitivity.

Such a model aligns with emerging frameworks of responsible AI governance, which emphasize transparency, accountability, and human oversight (Floridi et al., 2018). For strategic communication practitioners, this means integrating AI tools within reflective practices that prioritize stakeholder relationships and long-term reputational capital.

Governance, Ethics, and Strategic Accountability in AI-Mediated Communication

As artificial intelligence becomes increasingly embedded within strategic communication practices, questions of governance, ethics, and accountability emerge as central to organizational legitimacy. AI systems do not operate autonomously; they are designed, trained, and implemented within institutional structures that embody specific values, priorities, and power relations. From a strategic communication perspective, governance extends beyond regulatory compliance to encompass the internal decision-making frameworks that determine how AI tools are deployed, monitored, and evaluated. In the absence of clear governance mechanisms, organizations risk delegating communicative agency to systems that lack moral reasoning, contextual awareness, and relational accountability.

Germinder and Capizzo's (2025) study advances a framework for the ethical use of generative artificial intelligence (GAI) by integrating principles of ethical advocacy and deontological responsibility within the broader construct of Responsible Artificial Intelligence (RAI). Drawing on 21 in-depth interviews with strategic communication professionals, the research identifies both opportunities and ethical vulnerabilities associated with AI integration in public relations practice. It proposes minimum ethical standards—anchored in revised definitions of access, process, truth, and disclosure—to guide practitioners in safeguarding communicative integrity. By aligning ethical reasoning with market-place theory and strategic accountability, the framework positions public relations and communication professionals as key actors in promoting organizational adherence to RAI principles, ensuring transparency, fairness, and trust in AI-mediated communication environments.

Empirical evidence from recent industry cases further underscores these ethical imperatives, particularly through examples of audience backlash toward AI-generated campaigns perceived as opaque or inauthentic. Such reactions reveal a critical insight: stakeholders increasingly expect organizations not only to communicate effectively but also to communicate ethically about the communicative process itself—that is, to disclose how content is created, by whom, and through what technological means. This emerging expectation reframes AI governance as not merely a technical or procedural concern, but as a strategic and relational responsibility central to maintaining organizational credibility and public trust.

Power, Labor, and the Political Economy of AI Communication

Beyond ethics, AI adoption in strategic communication raises critical questions about power and labor. Automation reshapes professional roles, redistributes creative authority, and redefines expertise. While AI tools promise efficiency, they also risk marginalizing human communicators, particularly creative professionals whose labor is rendered invisible or undervalued.

From a critical political economy perspective, AI functions as both a technological and ideological instrument. As Mosco (2009) argues, digital technologies often obscure labor relations by framing automation as inevitable progress. In strategic communication, this framing may legitimize cost-cutting measures that undermine creative autonomy and professional judgment.

The negative sentiment observed in public reactions to AI generated branding campaigns reflects broader societal anxieties about technological displacement. Strategic communication practitioners must therefore recognize that AI adoption is not a neutral operational decision, but a communicative act that signals organizational priorities and ethical stance.

A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR HUMAN-AI HYBRID STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION

Based on the synthesis of literature and empirical insights derived from the conference presentation, this article proposes a Human–AI Hybrid Strategic Communication Framework.



This framework is grounded in five interrelated principles that collectively articulate a human centered approach to AI augmented strategic communication. Rather than treating

artificial intelligence as an autonomous communicative agent, the framework situates AI within a socio technical ecology governed by human judgment, ethical responsibility, and contextual interpretation. The principles are analytically distinct yet conceptually interdependent, forming an integrated logic that guides both the strategic deployment and ethical governance of AI in communication practice.

Human primacy constitutes the normative foundation of the framework. Strategic communication is inherently purposive and value-laden; it involves not only the dissemination of messages but also the construction of meaning, the negotiation of trust, and the assumption of moral accountability. While AI systems may assist in generating content or optimizing message delivery, they lack moral agency and cannot be held accountable for communicative consequences. For this reason, strategic intent, ethical judgment, and narrative authority remain irreducibly human responsibilities. These principal resists techno deterministic narratives that conflate computational capability with strategic intelligence and instead reassert human agency as the ultimate source of communicative legitimacy.

Closely related is the principle of AI as augmentation rather than substitution. The framework recognizes the instrumental value of AI in supporting analytical tasks such as data processing, trend detection, audience segmentation, and content variation. These functions can substantially enhance efficiency and responsiveness, particularly in complex and data-intensive environments. However, augmentation is explicitly distinguished from replacement. Relational dimensions of communication such as empathy, dialogue, moral persuasion, and trust-building depend on social presence and ethical intentionality that cannot be automated. By positioning AI as a supportive infrastructure rather than a surrogate communicator, the framework safeguards the relational core of strategic communication while still accommodating technological innovation.

The principle of transparency of AI use addresses the ethical implications of increasingly opaque AI-mediated communication. As algorithmic systems shape content generation, personalization, and dissemination, stakeholders may be unaware of the extent to which communication outputs are machine influenced. Such opacity risks undermining trust and exacerbating power asymmetries between organizations and publics. The framework therefore emphasizes the ethical obligation to inform stakeholders when AI significantly shapes communication processes or outcomes. Transparency is conceptualized not as a technical disclosure alone, but as a communicative practice that supports credibility, accountability, and informed interpretation. Importantly, the framework adopts a proportional view of transparency, recognizing that disclosure should correspond to the degree of AI involvement and its potential impact on stakeholder understanding.

Contextual intelligence further underscores the irreplaceable interpretive role of human communicators. AI systems operate primarily through statistical abstraction and pattern recognition, producing outputs that are decontextualized by design. Human communicators, by contrast, interpret meaning through culturally, historically, and situationally situated lenses. Within the framework, AI generated insights are treated as

inputs rather than authoritative conclusions. Human actors are responsible for evaluating whether algorithmic outputs align with local norms, historical sensitivities, and the specific dynamics of a given communicative situation. This interpretive mediation is particularly critical in cross cultural, crisis, and public interest contexts, where misalignment between data-driven recommendations and lived realities may produce ethical or reputational harm.

Finally, the framework incorporates reflexive governance as a dynamic mechanism for sustaining ethical oversight over time. AI integration is not conceived as a one-time technological adoption, but as an ongoing organizational transformation with evolving social implications. Reflexive governance entails continuous evaluation of how AI mediated communication affects power relations, inclusion, bias, and accountability. It encourages organizations to engage in iterative learning, policy revision, and stakeholder dialogue as AI capabilities and societal expectations evolve. By embedding reflexivity into governance structures, the framework positions ethical responsibility as an integral component of strategic communication rather than an external compliance function.

Taken together, these five principles articulate a coherent model of human-centered AI-augmented strategic communication. Human primacy establishes normative authority; augmentation defines functional boundaries; transparency sustains trust; contextual intelligence ensures interpretive alignment; and reflexive governance enables long-term accountability. The framework thus advances a balanced approach that neither rejects AI nor uncritically embraces automation but instead situates technological capability within enduring communicative values and human responsibility.

This hybrid approach enables organizations to harness AI's analytical power while preserving the relational and symbolic dimensions essential to strategic communication. Rather than positioning AI as an autonomous communicator, the framework conceptualizes AI as an infrastructural layer that enhances, but does not define, communicative meaning.

CONCLUSION

This article has critically examined the transformation of strategic communication in the age of artificial intelligence (AI) through an interdisciplinary and reflexive lens. Drawing on contemporary scholarship and insights from *Reimagining Strategic Communication in the Age of AI*, it demonstrates that AI constitutes both a strategic opportunity and a normative challenge for organizations.

While AI augments efficiency, scalability, and data-driven listening, it simultaneously unsettles foundational tenets of communication such as creativity, authenticity, and trust. Audience responses to AI-generated campaigns further reveal that stakeholders remain deeply invested in human agency, emotional resonance, and moral accountability within communicative interactions.

The central argument advanced here is that the future of strategic communication does not reside in full automation, but in the ethical hybridization of human and machine

intelligence. Strategic communicators must therefore act as ethical stewards and interpretive mediators, integrating AI thoughtfully, transparently, and contextually to preserve the integrity of communicative relationships.

Ultimately, strategic communication in the AI era is not merely about technological adaptation, but about reaffirming the humanistic values that endow communication with its strategic, ethical, and societal significance.

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