

What is meaningful social media communication?

Understanding meaningful content, dialogue and commitment.

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Summary

This (positioning) paper introduces the Circular Meaningful Communication model developed by the professorship Organisations and Social Media (hereafter OSM) and outlines how this model informs the research activities of the professorship. It discusses how content, dialogue, and commitment shape circular meaningful communication online and offline. Organisations and citizens can create and share content online. These ‘creators’ purposely produce and share content such as text, audio, or video via social media platforms to establish or enhance a connection with their stakeholders (e.g., readers of social media posts and comments). Stakeholders in turn, may then respond or react to the content and their creators by engaging in dialogue with the creators and other actors. Stakeholders can evaluate and remix this content and/or share related content with the original creator(s). They are also able to share (critical) remarks about the content offline (e.g., in a conversation) with other actors, who in return might share their thoughts with others. This continuous circular form of communication that develops, may add value for creators, stakeholders, and other actors evenly – it becomes meaningful communication. As such, the combination of public and personal communications can become meaningful on various levels through the productions and exchange of (1) content, (2) dialogue about the shared content, and (3) commitment through emotional involvement amongst stakeholders.

Keywords:

social media, content, dialogue, commitment, meaningful communication, responsible leadership



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Introduction

In the last decade, social media (companies and platforms) have been embraced by organisations and citizens for value creation (Hamilton et al., 2016) as such contributing to social and organisational change. Based on these developments, organisations have had to learn new ways of communicating with their stakeholders through social media and to cope with well-informed and opinionated stakeholders, who are part of a global and cosmopolitan society.

However, the social media landscape has changed from a multi-open platform environment into a more closed habitat 'powered' by a few large Big Tech companies (Dijck et al., 2018). Moreover, according to Owen (2019) today these "platforms are more like shopping malls than town squares — public to an extent, but ultimately managed according to private interests". Based on the critical development around social media organisations and platforms in recent years (e.g., the Facebook-Cambridge Analytica data scandal), organisations are struggling to use social media to create value for their stakeholders in a responsible way or to build trust in an environment that is highly influenced by disinformation and misinformation. Whereas **disinformation** is seen as "... information that is deliberately false or misleading, **misinformation** "...is information whose inaccuracy is unintentional" (Jack, 2017, pp. 2–3). Citizens have started to mistrust social media organisations and platforms (Dijck et al., 2018) because of dis- and misinformation (e.g., fake news). Moreover, the misuse or sell-out of citizens' data (Birch et al., 2021) and the risk of addiction (Bhargava & Velasquez, 2021; Leung & Lee, 2012) have fuelled the idea that social media has become 'unsocial' and 'unsafe' for its users.

On that account, this raises the question of how communication can be meaningful for content creators and their stakeholders alike under the current social media conditions?

Following this thought, content creators as well as stakeholders can be either organisations or citizens. In this positioning paper we, therefore, ask the central question: **What is meaningful social media communication?** We address this question by conceptually exploring how **content, dialogue about content and commitment** based on shared content can develop into **circular meaningful communication**. We introduce a model of **circular meaningful communication** (hereafter **the CMC model**) to provide a foundation for organisations, lecturers, researchers and above all students to understand the underlying mechanisms of computer-mediated communication considering current societal developments. We also discuss how this question and the CMC model inform the research agenda of the professorship OSM.

In essence, the professorship OSM explores computer-mediated communication "...the broad developments, which include communication on the Internet, in social media, human-computer interaction/communication, database search, work interfaces, and so on" (Günther & Domahidi, 2017), and its interplay with off-line communication.

Meaningful communication¹

Most dictionary definitions of communication (see for example Merriam-Webster, Cambridge Dictionary, and Oxford English Dictionary) focus on meanings of sharing, exchanging, and transmitting messages or information by using some type of (media) equipment. These definitions are rooted in early developed linear models of communication, and more specifically

not every model is defined or explained in detail. These models can be further explored through the included sources.

¹ Please note. The following paragraphs mention several communication models. To support the readability of this paper,

in Lasswell's (1948) famous model of communication: "Who says what, to whom, in what channel, and with what effect?" (Berger, 1995, p.13). In the late 20th century, scholars agreed that communication theories and models should focus more on relationships and meaning than on functionality. Schramm (1973) indicated early on that the study of communication is fundamentally a study of relationships: "Society is a sum of relationships in which information of some kind is shared" (p. 3). Schramm's circular model of communication (Osgood-Schramm model) was the first and most straightforward circular model of communication, viewing communication as the interplay between the sender and receiver of a message, whereby the role of the sender and receiver is interchanged and both parties reciprocate each other's messages continuously.

Later models of communication emphasise the importance of cultural and environmental factors in communication (for example, the Westley and Maclean model (Westley & MacLean, 1957), given that communication is shaped by the objects of orientations of the sender and receiver. Objects of orientation consist of the culture, background, and beliefs of the person involved in the communication. In addition, transactional models, for example Barnlund's model, (Barnlund, 2008) suggest that we communicate not merely to exchange messages but also to create relationships and to establish communities.

Although communication is a relatively new discipline of study, it has a long tradition and roots in philosophy and rhetoric. It is also inherently multi-disciplinary, drawing theory and sharing concepts from psychology, sociology, political science, and other social sciences. The National Communication Association (NCA, n.d.) in the United States sees communication study as a discipline focusing on:

"...how humans use verbal and nonverbal messages to create meaning in various contexts (from two person groups to

mass audiences) across cultures using a variety of channels and media. The discipline is especially interested in the impact of those messages on human behaviour. Communication as a discipline includes the study of communication in interpersonal relationships, groups, organisations, and across cultures; rhetorical theory and criticism; performance studies; argumentation and persuasion; technologically mediated communication; and popular culture".

More recently, Eady and Goret (in Copley & Schulz, 2013, p.17 and further) identified five perspectives in communication studies:

1. communication as shaper of public opinion;
2. communication as language use;
3. communication as information transmission;
4. communication as developer of relationships; and
5. communication as definer, interpreter, and critic of culture.

An addition to the existing communication models is our CMC model, which is based on Schramm's model (1954). It combines several of the above perspectives with an emphasis on the fourth, to understand how computer-mediated communication becomes meaningful and how online and offline communication are intertwined.

In the remainder of this section, the three main concepts of the model: content, dialogue, and commitment are discussed. The subsequent paragraph introduces the CMC model, with a discussion on how it is applied in the research efforts of our professorship. The paper concludes with an explanation of how the model and our research lines may guide future research.

Content

According to the Oxford dictionary, the term "content" as a noun is derived from the Latin: contentum (plural – contenta), meaning: things contained. This translates into material containing meaning that is designed for and to

be shared through media or nowadays in certain spaces. When referring to the content or contents of something such as a book, speech, or television programme, a referral is made to the subject that it deals with, the story that it tells, or the ideas that it expresses. In that sense, content can be seen as a synonym for a media text where a text, as a unit of meaning for interpretation and understanding, is seen as a bearer of information and a mover of meaning. For example, content shared among friends via a social media platform. Within media studies, television programmes, films, videogames, blogs, websites, songs, podcasts, newspaper articles, tweets, memes, games, Instagram posts, and so on, are all considered texts (Ouellette & Gray, 2017).

Texts are purposefully constructed to contain meaning and can therefore also be deconstructed, which has its premise in communication theories, some of which were mentioned earlier in this paper. Traditionally these theories have either focused on identifying the rhetorical devices involved in producing and organising meaning in media texts, on analysing media output, or media effects. Textual analysis has long been a primary mode of “doing” media studies, as scholars seek to ascertain what the meaning of a text is: how it means (what techniques are used to convey meaning), what its themes, messages, and explicit and implicit assumptions aim to accomplish, and what meanings it has for us as individuals and social beings. Meaning then refers to how we are affected psychologically, emotionally, culturally, physically, and intellectually by media output; the way in which it entertains, stimulates, and informs us – giving us pleasure, shock, or something to consider.

Besides this focus of scholars, the Uses and Gratifications Theory developed from the premise that audiences are not only affected by deliberately constructed texts but also actively seek to gratify their needs when choosing media and content. These audiences find meaning in the content they actively seek. Through the emergence of computer-mediated

communication, we have seen a revival of the Uses and Gratifications Theory being used in communication and media studies. As such it provided a theoretical approach in the initial stages of each new mass communications medium: newspapers, radio, television, and now the Internet and Social Media. For example, the use of personal computers has been linked to individuals’ motivations to use the Internet for communication purposes linked to the fulfilment of gratifications such as social identity, interpersonal communication, para-social interaction, companionship, escape, entertainment, and surveillance (Ruggiero, 2000).

Where media content and analysis become tricky is in their connections to the outside world. While they are often treated as a discrete unit of meaning, content can never be truly discrete. Meaning is always contextual, relative, and situated in a particular place, space, and time. The challenge of working with content then lies in tracking how context works, and hence in how texts connect and relate to each other, to the outside world, to their creators, and their stakeholders. Content can only become meaningful for its’ audience when viewed from the context it was created in. It is the context that determines how it is created, understood, and received.

In this paper, we consider content in terms of media texts and more specifically as movers of meaning within their context. Media texts or content can inspire and delight, or disgust and disappoint, but more importantly, they intervene in the world and in culture, introducing new ideas, attacking, contradicting, or reinforcing old ideas. This can only happen when content is shared in, for example, dialogue. In the following part, we will discuss how dialogue may add meaning to content.

Dialogue

We define the term “dialogue” as a noun that refers to a) a conversation between one or more persons; b) an exchange of ideas or opinions; c) a discussion between

representatives of parties to a conflict that is aimed at resolution (Merriam-Webster). Having a 'voice' about how specific products and services are used has become commonplace (Batchelor, 2018). Dialogue is often a way to use this voice in an interactive moment in which two or more people interact with one another (Holquist, 2002) to provide feedback, evaluate, learn about, or discuss content. In a forum discussion about the 'Processes of Dialogue', Heath (2006, p. 352, 355) assumes:

"My sense is that dialogue is a special form of communication, that also has special content. By special, I merely mean distinguishing. That is to say, we should be able to know when we are in dialogue or when we are not. Now, dialogue can be purely relational communication. Or perhaps it can be a superior form that allows us to make joint decisions that truly reflect the merits of some problem and solution rather than privileging one side that might be more clever or more powerful than another."

[...]

"I think that dialogue is like communication. The constitutive view is that meaning is the residue of the process, so that it is likely to continue as people reflect on the dialogues in which they participate. Also, each dialogue or phase of a dialogue is just that. As communication never really starts or stops, I would argue that dialogue does not either. Dialogues can become parts of other dialogues. One of the themes that seem to run through dialogues is respect/regard. As long as we engage in respect/regard for others, as persons and as holders of ideas and feelings, I think that we are joined in various ways and to varying degrees of enrichment. To return to one of the opening moments in this exchange, the desire to listen and learn is perhaps the essential part of giving regard and respect."

Heath's idea that 'Dialogues can become parts of other dialogues' (2006, p.355), can also be identified in social media dialogue that develops and continues in various ways. For example, by asking a question or commenting on

a post via various and multiple platforms (for example via Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Reddit or LinkedIn) and consequently offline in conversations with others based on dialogues that we have participated in or witnessed in online spaces. This continuous dialogue can also be identified as a 'sustainable form of dialogue' as the creators of content may aim to engage in an in-depth conversation to further an ongoing question or topic at hand, by providing regard and respect or by reflecting, listening and learning from others. Heath addresses this (2006, p. 346):

"...we must communicate to invite others to listen and speak, we may do that with an honest commitment to invite the examination of our own ideas. We should be bold in asserting the idea with its proof but do so for examination. We could aim to engage in a kind of persuasion where the merit of a case and the quality of the process can lead either side and perhaps both sides to cocreate a shared understanding that is superior to what either had held dear before the discourse".

On a critical note, practising a form of sustainable dialogue, by 'cocreating a shared understanding', also means that we must employ empathy in our online (and offline) conversations. According to Pounds et al. (2018), empathy is an essential part of human interactions, particularly in a communicative context through which we show our understanding of each other's viewpoints. However, the current interactional design of popular social media environments, such as Twitter, Instagram or TikTok may not stimulate citizens to 'engage in a high-quality process', 'reflect on' and 'respect' various viewpoints shared in online conversations. Not to forget that the response to others can be tackled through quick fixes such as likes and emoticons. Additionally, if the conversation does not work out as expected, people may simply leave an ongoing dialogue. Such instances of this occur when there is disapproval of what a user has said

or by 'ghosting' others. This refers to stepping out of an ongoing dialogue without prior notification, simply ending it and never responding to others even if they try to reconnect.

Besides this, a certain amount of 'mutual' trust is needed for participants/users to engage in dialogue. They need to trust each other and must feel safe about the environment (e.g., an online community, YouTube channel) where the ongoing dialogue is facilitated but where other members may be following the dialogue without participating. Online communities built by content creators (organisations or citizens) within such social media environments can provide these safe spaces. The success of those communities often comes with 'human obligations' such as being committed to each other as well as to the community as a whole. In the next part, we, therefore, discuss the role of commitment in online spaces, especially in online communities as part of meaningful communication.

Commitment

The desire to maintain valued relationships with a partner is called commitment (Moorman et al., 1992, p.316). This partner could be a person, an organisation, but also members of a community such as interest groups. Relationships between creators and stakeholders are built through continuous dialogue/interaction (Raïes, 2015). Interaction refers to "person-to-person communications among online community members, and essential for establishing and developing social and community relationships" (Wang et al., 2013, p.51). Hence, creators and stakeholders develop sustainable relationships through ongoing dialogues and interactions and create value such as information resources and social support.

Commitment can be conceptualized into three dimensions: affective, continuance and normative commitment (Meyer et al., 1990). Affective commitment is associated with emotional attachment and identification with

the partner. People want to continue the relationship because they feel part of the community, which is a feeling of "belonging" to the community (Algesheimer et al., 2005).

As discussed earlier, (see dialogue), they empathize by engaging in a dialogue that supports or criticizes their viewpoint. This directly relates to having a 'shared goal' as Rheingold (2012, p. 154) pointed out that online communities: "...are cooperative, but only become collaborative when they focus on a shared goal".

Continuance commitment is based on cognitive or calculative thoughts and refers to "...a profit associated with continued participation and a cost associated with leaving" (Meyer et al., 1990, p.3). From an individual perspective, community members are committed to relationships based on the value that those relationships provide for them. Social Exchange Theory posits that people evaluate their social relationships based on the rationale that benefits outweigh costs (Nambisan & Baron, 2010). Therefore, continuance commitment relates to benefits and gratifications an individual derives from a community, such as gathering quality information, the quality of interpersonal communications, and entertainment (see the section Content for a discussion about the Uses and Gratifications Theory).

Normative commitment is viewed as the moral obligation to support individual members and the whole community (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). Community members feel morally obliged to reciprocate the perceived value, i.e., derived benefits and gratifications, to the other party (Carlson et al., 2018). In online communities, participation is voluntary and could lead to opportunistic behaviour not reciprocating value to other community members (Tsai & Pai, 2012). In online spaces, actors rarely communicate face-to-face, and they often don't know each other personally. Therefore, online social interactions can be perceived as riskier and trust "...serves as a subjective substitute to such rules,

creating the necessary atmosphere that makes engagement with others more open” (Ridings et al., 2002, p.275). Trust is “...an expectation that others one chooses to trust will not behave opportunistically by taking advantage of the situation” (Gefen et al., 2003, p.54) and comprises a cognitive and an affective dimension. The cognitive dimension reflects the confidence in the knowledge or skills of other community members about a similar interest, such as a shared hobby, medical condition or lifestyle. The affective dimension consists of beliefs that other community members are interested in the wellbeing of others and will reciprocate with appropriate responses (i.e., benevolence) and that they are honest and sincere (i.e., integrity) (Ridings et al., 2002).

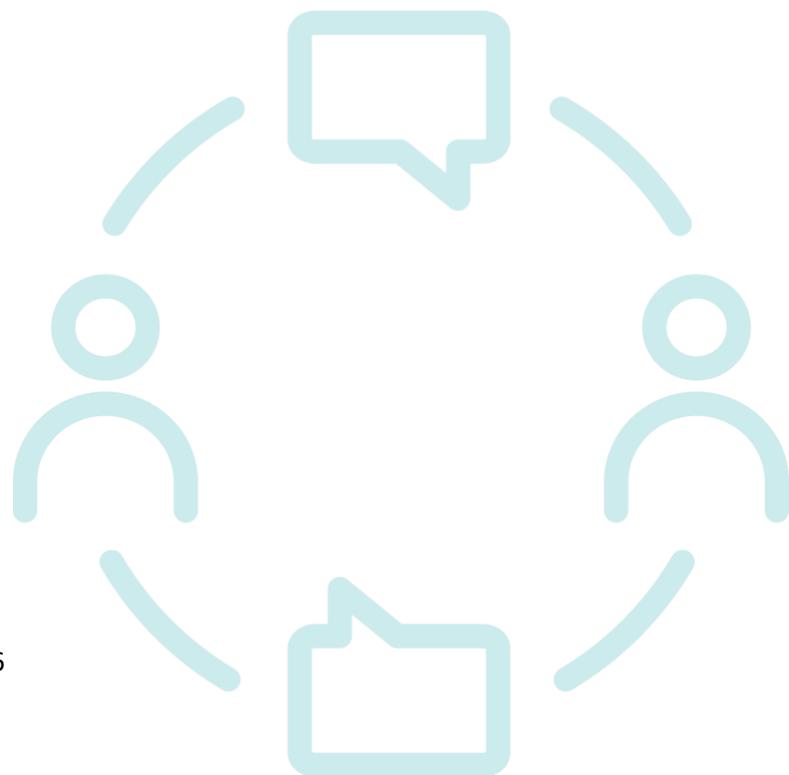
Commitment is critical to the success of online communities. Committed community members are more willing to stay in and put more effort towards maintaining relationships in the community. They may also extend these online relationships into offline actions. Members may motivate each other to stand up for a certain goal through offline protests, meetups or by visiting offline places they have learned about in the community intending to travel, shop for or educate themselves or others. A very recent and well-known example of this type of commitment regarding the interrelation between online communities and offline actions is the US Capitol Storming in 2021 (Frenkel, 2021). Frenkel wrote in her article in the New York Times about supporters of Donald Trump: “...the violence Wednesday was the result of online movements operating in closed social media networks where people believed the claims of voter fraud and the election being stolen from Mr Trump [...]”.

To conclude this section, in our research, the three elements of content, dialogue and commitment and their underlying elements such as quality of content, sustainable dialogue, empathy, trust and the interplay between online and offline (inter)action are important in creating meaning between creators and stakeholders. In the next section we further

elaborate on these elements when we introduce the Circular Model of Meaningful Communication that can be used to identify the elements and their interrelation in various research settings; for example, to develop ideas for future online community environments, to understand interaction within online communities (and their offline impact), to analyse and/or to test innovations or improvements within current online communities.

Model of Meaningful Communication

As we noted earlier in this paper, communication indicates the sharing of words, emotions, ideas, intent and messages between human beings. It is an ongoing, circular, process, not only to convey ideas and information but also to try to make meaning together. In the previous paragraphs, we discussed the separate workings of content, dialogue and commitment as parts of creating meaning. These three concepts form the key elements of the CMC model developed by the Professorship Organisations and Social Media, which is an elaboration of Schramm’s model of circular communication (1954), see figure 1.



Model of (Circular) Meaningful Communication

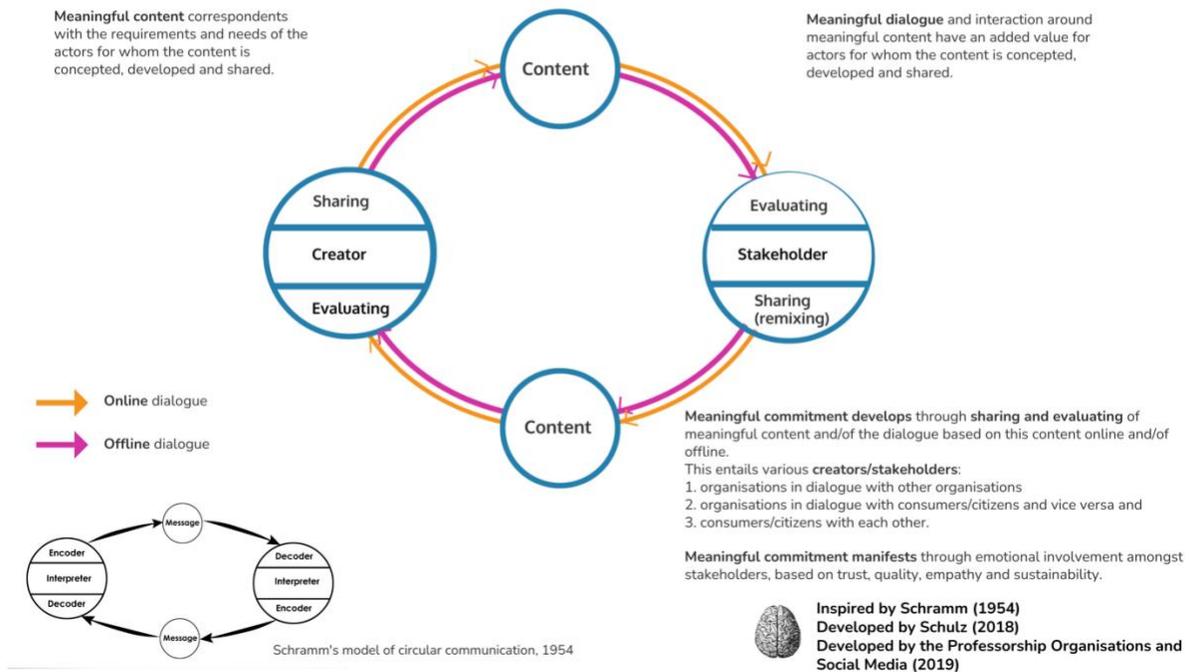


Fig. 1. The CMC model and Schramm’s model of circular communication

Schramm’s Model of Communication was proposed in 1954. It was the first non-linear model of communication. It assumes communication is a bilateral process making it a circular or cyclical model. As such it allows both the sender and receiver to compose and send messages to the other party, thereby allowing both to be in each other’s role. Schramm stated the latter is crucial to establish effective (meaningful) communication. The CMC model assumes meaningful communication is established when organisations and citizens create value individually and collectively for and with their stakeholders. Besides the interplay of the main previously: content, dialogue, and commitment, and their underlying elements,

there are additional aspects that we would like to provide insight into with regards to our CMC model. In the following paragraphs, we elaborate on these aspects to explain who the creators of content are, who their stakeholders are, and how content may be evaluated and remixed by these stakeholders.

Content creators

Content creators can be organisations as well as individuals, each with distinctive roles of interaction such as speakers, listeners, discussants or as organizers of the development, production or moderation of this interaction and its content and dialogue (Hepp, 2020). In our view, (Schulz, 2021) online communities involve

all these roles and can be organisational driven (e.g., influencer channels on Instagram or company Facebook groups) or based on content added by participants within an online community.

Stakeholders

Actors who receive, or 'see' the content (e.g., a video on YouTube) may evaluate, respond to and/or reshare content. This turns followers into 'participants' who have a stake in the development or continuity of a social media channel (e.g., a community). Based on this notion, receivers of content within online communities can be identified as stakeholders. According to Freeman (1984), stakeholders can be defined as: "... any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the organisation's objectives" (1984, p.46). Likewise, as organisations, influencers may communicate with multiple stakeholders via their social media platforms. This multiple-stakeholder communication is also known as stakeholder dialogue (Unerman & Bennett, 2004).

In contrast with Freeman's stakeholder definition, in our model, we identify organisations as stakeholders given they can affect or be affected by creators outside of the organisation who share content about, engage in dialogue about, and be committed to said organisation without being motivated to do so by the organisation. This may turn organisations into stakeholders of those creators as they evaluate and enter a dialogue about this content. Therefore, in the CMC model 'stakeholders' refer to organisations and citizens who interact with the content that was shared by the 'creators'.

Content evaluation, remixing and resharing

As dialogue develops in online spaces (such as online communities) stakeholders may actively or passively relate to the creators. In a study by Muntinga et al. (2011), a distinction is made between three types of participation,

which increase the degree of activity. The first type 'Consuming' concerns a passive form of participation since it includes the least amount of activity such as reading, listening, and watching content generated by other community members. The second and more active form of participation is 'Contributing', such as liking or commenting on content from others. The third and most active form is 'Creating new content', such as writing reviews and uploading images or videos (Muntinga et al., 2011). Finally, stakeholders may also 'recreate or remix' content by adding new content based on the original content shared by the creators. This new or remixed content may be shared to reach out to the original content creators or others inside or outside of the community. An example are memes which are digital items (such as gifs) designed to develop and signal communal belonging in web-based communities (Nissenbaum & Shifman, 2017). However, this new content may also be developed by stakeholders to signal 'critique' about the creators and their shared content.

As discussed, in our CMC model, organisations as well as individuals can all be content creators and/or stakeholders. To capture this view in our applied research we have developed three distinct research lines. These lines are based on the idea that content may be conceptualised, developed, and shared by organisations (inside-out) or by citizens (outside-in), who both serve as content creators (Schulz, 2021; Schulz et al., 2018). The research lines serve as a foundation for the research conducted in the professorship, which can be categorized as employing either the inside-out perspective, the outside-in perspective, or a circular perspective (a combination of these two). In the next paragraph we will discuss these research perspectives.

Research perspectives

With its' research, the professorship Organisations and Social Media aims to make clear what role content, dialogue and commitment play in communication processes

between organisations and their stakeholders and vice versa. Furthermore, we aim to stimulate responsible leadership amongst our stakeholders through developing approaches and media formats based on our research. Hence, research is carried out in different ways within the three research perspectives developed in line with the CMC model.

Figure 2 provides an overview of the three central research lines that support our research. This research can be either exploratory to understand a situation or problem or explanatory to analyse specific situations.

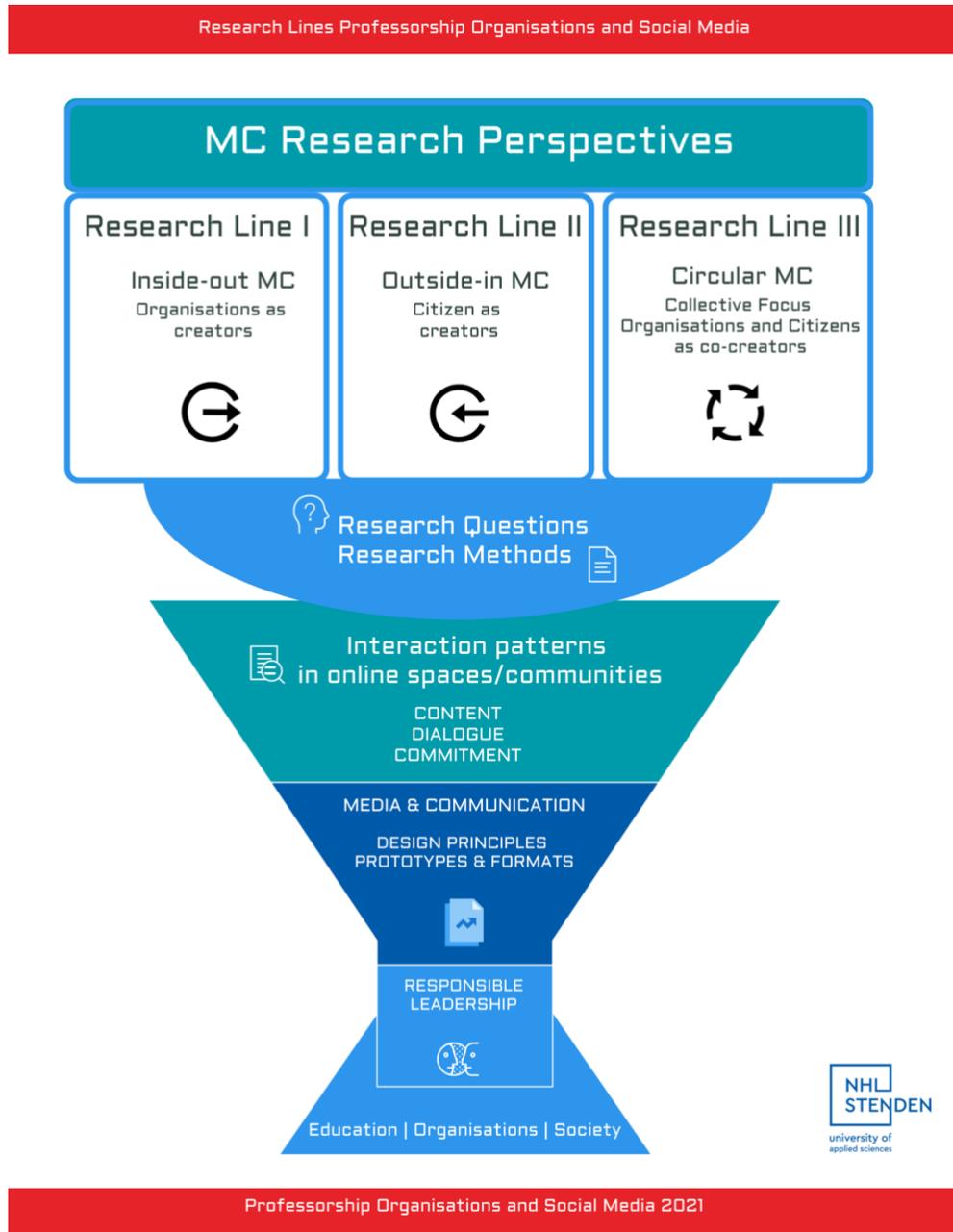


Fig. 2. The three research lines of the professorship OSM

Inside-out

The Inside-out perspective focuses on the organisation as content creator and initiator of a dialogue with the aim of stimulating commitment between the organisation and its stakeholders (Schulz, 2021). The emphasis is on (analysing and understanding) content. Research focuses on the question of which approach (content, dialogue) leads to more commitment to the organizations with whom the organisation wants to communicate. Example questions within this perspective include: Which content ensures more interaction with stakeholders (and therefore commitment)? What content should the organisation develop to reach their stakeholders? Does the content fit the needs of the stakeholders? How do specific communication/content characteristics and/or behavioural interventions influence people's knowledge/attitude/behaviour? What is the role of content in stimulating a dialogue between the organisation and their stakeholders, for example, in terms of 'tone of voice', 'visualization' or 'format' of the content?

Outside-in

The emphasis of the outside-in perspective is on dialogue in society (on topics that are relevant to organisations). The creators are actors/the public/stakeholders outside an organisation (Schulz, 2021), to stimulate commitment between citizens. Research questions here primarily focus on what is happening 'outside of organisations' and where organisations are not initiators actively sharing content.

Typical questions are: How does social interaction in online communities between citizens take place? What are the group dynamics? What are the group roles and rules? What trends are there in online interaction? How extensive is the dialogue between actors in an online community? Do they share rich content (such as lengthy text, information and personal stories) or mainly react to content? Why is that? What is the impact of the dialogue between citizens on organizations (and society)?

Does the dialogue also transfer into offline environments? How and why?

Circular

The circular/hybrid research perspective focuses on online conversation/interaction between an organisation and external parties (or stakeholders or the public) aimed at establishing commitment, where both parties are creators of content. An important question here is how the social interaction between an organisation (for example an influencer or a public organisation) and citizens takes place. Other questions within this perspective include: How do the social interactions between organisation and stakeholders take place? What is the role of organisations within online communities, and does it relate to social interaction in online communities?

Responsible leadership

As shown in figure 2 the central outcome of our three research lines is 'Responsible Leadership' (hereafter RL). In particular, the role of content creators and stakeholders as responsible leaders in creating, sharing and evaluating content, engaging in dialogue and in being committed as part of meaningful communication in online (and offline) spaces. Ethical leadership and *being a moral person* are considered to be vital parts of RL (Agarwal and Bhal, 2020). Using our three perspectives 1.) outside-in, 2.) inside-out and 3.) circular we would like to investigate the mindsets of creators and stakeholders. By analysing communication (content, dialogue, and commitment) between and across creators and stakeholders, we aim to understand how morality influences online (and offline) communication. Accordingly, our research can support us to create novel approaches for education, organisations and society that entail RL as an important outcome. For example, by understanding the communication between influencers and their followers through analysis of their YouTube channel (content and dialogue). Additionally, by discussing these outcomes with influencers to create awareness about their role

in an online community and how they engage with others about specific topics.

With regards to RL our aim is threefold: firstly, we aim to understand communication in online communities and how it becomes meaningful through sharing and evaluating content, engaging in dialogue, and becoming committed. Secondly, we also aim to transfer this knowledge from applied research into meaningful media and communication formats and advice for our stakeholders (education, organisations, and society). This is in line with Maak and Pless (2006, p.101) who defined and discussed RL as essential in developing and maintaining “*ethically sound relations toward different stakeholders in an interconnected stakeholder society*”. In the past years practitioners and academics have developed interesting tools to map out and research RL. For example, Muff and colleagues (2020) have developed the free Competency Assessment for Responsible Leadership (CARL) tool that can be applied to map out RL concerning the Sustainable Developments Goals. Thirdly, our professorship also uses the Institutional Analysis and Development framework (IAD) and its design principles by Eleonor Ostrom (Ostrom, 2005). These principles have been identified through worldwide community research. Ostrom developed these principles based on meta-research in rural sociology, economics, forestry, and other disciplines to understand how citizens and organisations managed ‘commons’ such as water or fishery through interaction and agreements in offline communities (Nordman, 2021). In particular, the eight design principles support researchers as well as organizations and citizens to understand how they engage in communities and which rules and actions are important to create communities based on mutual trust. In recent years commons related research and Ostrom’s principles have also been translated into the digital world, addressing online commons, such as ‘open-source commons’ or ‘knowledge commons’. Our professorship will aim to contribute to this applied research by

monitoring and analysing how citizens and organisations interact in online communities (and how these interactions may translate into offline actions), and which roles, rules and actions are essential to practice RL through meaningful communication.

Translating the CMC model and our research perspectives into applied research

To illustrate how we apply the MCM model through our research lines in practice-oriented research we discuss three cases, based on projects we have developed in the past years through the professorship OSM. These projects are all rooted in one or more of the three research lines.

Inside-out: LC Now

At the start of this project a regional Frisian Newspaper, the Leeuwarder Courant, wanted to meet the needs of young people in Friesland to stay up to date with regional news. They wanted to bring news, current affairs, and background stories from the region with a touch of fun. The content had to consist of accessible, recognizable, and relevant stories, especially for and created by these young citizens. Moreover, they want to motivate young citizens in the area of critical media literacy.

Based on these criteria and the aim to reach and bond with young people in Friesland an Instagram account was developed, called LC Now. In September 2019, students from the BA Communication were asked to conduct research and test what format the Instagram posts should follow, such as the right messages, images, calls-to-actions, topics, etc. to engage the youth with LC Now? The students started a private account on Instagram and carried out various tests with learners in Friesland. The Instagram account LC Now went live in May 2020 and various groups of students from the BA Communication and Associate Degree Online Content Creator

developed content in close collaboration with the editorial team of the Leeuwarder Courant. Furthermore, students analysed the results such as reach and engagement on published posts to continuously improve the content and advise the editors.

In the fall of 2021, students from the BA Creative Business developed a new concept by asking how content can engage young people in the news. In the research phase of this project, the professorship introduced a toolkit, based on the MC model that they used to map out and discuss the role of content, dialogue, and commitment in this project. As a follow-up, in the fall of 2022, students from the Associate Degree Online Content Creator created content (especially videos) and used the CMC model (and toolkit²) to map out how content shapes dialogue on LC Now. Images 1 and 2 show students from BA Creative Business that have been working with the CMC model and toolkit.



Image 1. Students BA Creative Business, members of the professorship OSM and editors of LC Now during brainstorming.



Image 2. Students BA Creative Business presenting their final concepts for LC Now.

Outside-in: The 'Best Indycaster' project

This project was one of the first projects carried out in close collaboration between students and the professorship. Key to this project is the circular perspective (identifying influencers as organisations, who share content via YouTube) and the outside-in perspective (how communities develop between influencers and followers through dialogue and commitment). Students were asked to choose a YouTube channel that connects with their interests and explore this channel through content analysis. Additionally, a codebook was provided to carry out this content analysis of the YouTube videos and the comments that go with them, with the invitation to add new codes or refine existing codes. Finally, the students presented their findings via infographics to other students, lecturers, and external stakeholders. Through these infographics, they provided insights into specific characteristics of the content of YouTube channels. The chosen channels were dedicated to a specific topic, such as history, sexual education, gaming, or sports. A key feature of the project was that students co-created research and gained an understanding of what makes content and the dialogue about the

² This toolkit includes a CC license and is available via the professorship. E-mail: lectoraat.osm@nhlstenden.com

content in online communities meaningful. Students also stepped out of their role as ‘consumers’ or ‘spectators’ of those channels. This supported them in becoming more aware of online communities. Through sharing their findings with others (and the YouTube content creators they analysed) they also stepped into the role of responsible leaders who support

others to learn about the pros and cons of online interaction and communication.

Figure 3 provides an overview of the process applied during the Best Indycaster Project.

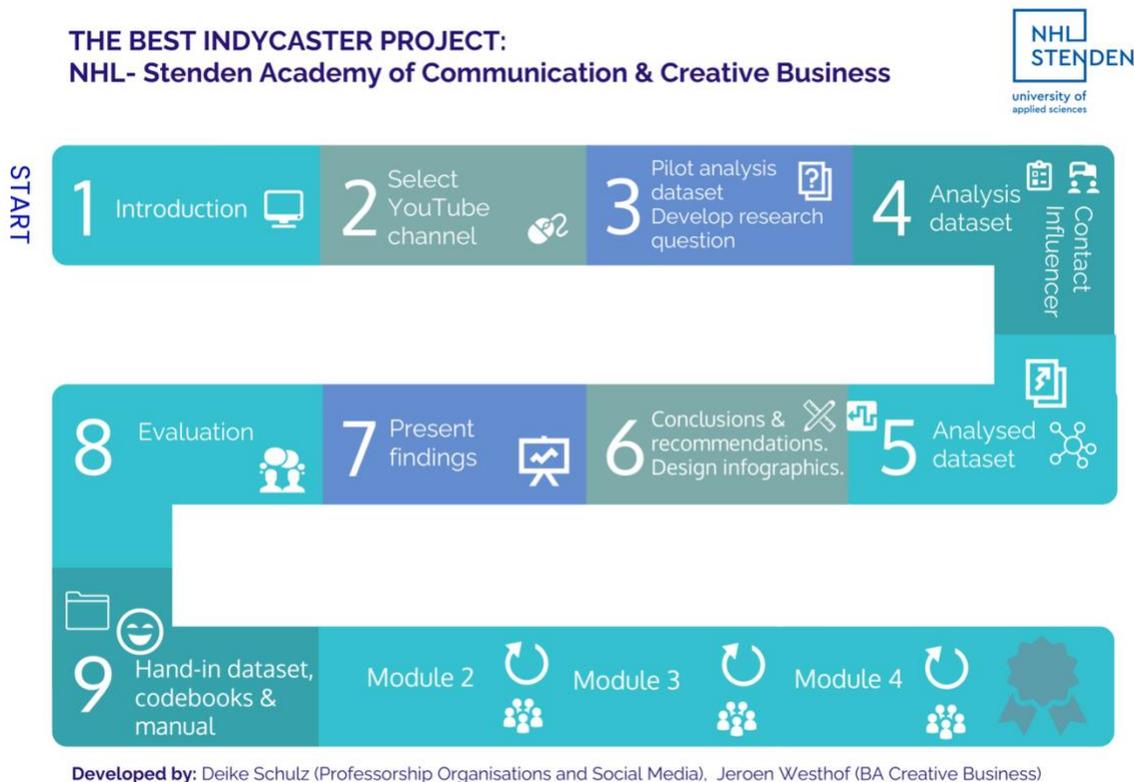


Fig. 3. The Best Indycaster Project; educational and research process.

Follow-up project Parents of YouTube

In the follow-up project, ‘Parents of YouTube’, we applied the same co-creating approach by asking students to look at specific YouTube channels focused on children in the age range of eight to twelve years old.

Students were also asked to research and produce prototypes of media formats that would stimulate dialogue between children and parents about the YouTube channels and their content creators. The following examples image 3 and image 4 illustrate these Parents of YouTube magazine prototypes.



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Images 3 and 4. Prototypes of the Parents of YouTube magazine developed by 3rd-year students of the course BA Creative Business.

Both projects were published in detail (Schulz et al., 2020; Schulz & Kleijweg, 2022). These publications can be downloaded via [The International Journal of Management Education website](#), and [the SAGE online research methods website](#) or can be requested via the

professorship to gain more insight into our educational and research approach.

Circular: The European Influencers Academy

[The European Influencers Academy](#) (EIA), an initiative by our professorship, aims to share knowledge among European influencers and create awareness of online content, dialogue and commitment between influencers and their followers. The EIA wants to increase the role of responsible leadership in the influencer economy by organising “Swipe Up Weeks”. During these weeks, ten European influencers are invited to follow a program, offline, in Leeuwarden to learn more about topics such as polarisation, cultural differences and responsible personal leadership. During these meetings, influencers are invited to reflect on their role and influence in social developments. Additionally, they are invited to share their perspective on their role as influencers and engage in meaningful dialogue with other influencers, students, local businesses and government representatives. Aside, the topics of the program include vision development concerning the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the United Nations. During the Swipe Up week, the professorship also conducts research, addressing the following subjects: To what extent do influencers think they have a role to play in social issues? To what extent are influencers aware of how and in what way do cultural factors influence social media communication?

By bringing together a group of (European) social media influencers we learn if and how influencers can play a role in reducing polarization in society and what role the EIA can play in this. Through the exchange with colleagues, students and regional organisations, the influencers themselves are given the space to reflect on their role and influence in social developments. Figure 4 illustrates the process applied by the OSM professorship as part of the EIA program.

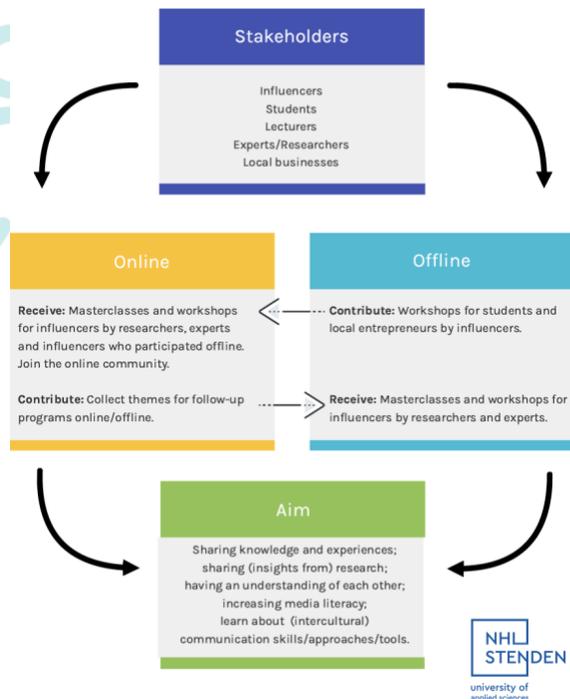


Fig. 4. Process applied by the professorship OSM as part of the EIA program.

Concluding thoughts

In this positioning paper, we aimed to discuss and explain how online interaction can be analysed, and how meaningful communication can be developed, supported, and achieved through creators and stakeholders on various levels. Furthermore, we have introduced the Model of Meaningful Communication (CMC model), a hands-on model that can be applied by students, researchers, and organisations to analyse and understand the (circular) meaning of content, dialogue, and commitment on social media platforms, such as online communities. Using the CMC model may support the development of new social media initiatives and support creators to identify essential elements that may create a shared understanding and shared values. This raises the question of whether meaningful communication is about communication for the better or the worse? For example, communication analysed

with the CMC model may concern social media interactions that aim to support or disrupt society or organisations. Creators may share content in an online community, experiencing meaningful dialogue and feeling committed to coming into action for others (online and offline). As our example of the US Capitol Storming in 2021 (Frenkel, 2021) shows, creators and stakeholders in online communities may experience content, dialogue, and commitment as meaningful even if this leads to disruptive social behaviour. The question then is more philosophically or ethically grounded, by asking if communication can be meaningful in these cases? Unfortunately, we cannot answer this question here. However, we can use the CMC model to understand when communication becomes meaningful for creators and stakeholders in their context (e.g., from various backgrounds), even if we disagree with their beliefs shared through content, dialogue and online and offline commitment. By trying to understand others we may be able to come up with ideas to support media literacy and motivate organisations and citizens to move outside their “bubble” and broaden their scope.

We consider the added value of our model is to assist students, researchers and organisations in learning to listen through social media analysis and develop creative solutions to tackle organisational and societal questions.

Future research

Of course, we will continue to carry out applied research using the CMC model through our research lines. Most of all, we have learned that students enjoy taking part in our applied research projects, particularly through conducting a qualitative and quantitative content analysis of social media channels and by using the CMC model to identify what kind of dialogue may be suitable in a specific community. Often students start with the general expectation that online research may be boring, but often we see that with every part of the analysis, they become more motivated to

gain an understanding of online environments, particularly given that our current students are all digital natives.

We have also experienced the struggles organisations face when engaging through social media and in finding communication approaches that fit their values while at the same time allowing them to connect with their stakeholders. Through the professorship, we would therefore like to continue to connect students and researchers as experts with organisations and initiatives aimed at gaining more understanding of online spaces, such as online communities. A very successful example of this approach is the work of junior researcher Sara de Hoog, who graduated as a member of our professorship for the BA Creative Business by investigating an online community on Reddit (quantitative content analysis), looking into emotions as part of group polarisations. Sara started by analysing the Reddit Trump Community (r/The_Donald, now closed), and later a second BA student, Eline Nijboer, investigated the opposite Democrats Community (r/TrumpCriticizesTrump). Based on both studies Sara has developed a specific workshop for Dutch learners/students about online group polarisation and ingroup-outgroup biases. Accordingly, this workshop inspired her to develop a research and workshop program within our professorship that contributes to the AD/BA program of various NHL Stenden courses, to the European influencer Academy, as well as to external post-secondary vocational education in the Northern Region of the Netherlands.

As Sara's example shows research activities that become successful through applied approaches take time, as does the development of relationships with all the stakeholders we work with. It is therefore important to also start research projects that have a longitudinal scope, studying interactions over a longer period to gain more insight into how exactly these relationships develop. We are interested in how commitment may influence the quality of dialogue between creators and stakeholders. Furthermore, we aim to continue

to study the relationship between content, dialogue, and commitment and factors that may influence the circular process that the CMC Model describes. As part of these analyses, we would like to investigate diverse platforms and channels, cultures, rules and routines circularly.

We are also interested in the rules and routines closely connected with the sharing of content, engagement in dialogue, and commitment. Therefore, we will work on (meta) research that will support us in identifying rules and actions common in online communities, inspired by the design principles of Eleonor Ostrom (see Responsible Leadership). As an example, in September 2021, we started a new project called 'De Pit', supported by the Dutch SIDN fund, based on a call on defending disinformation. Together with our partners (Fers, a regional public organisation focussing on digital citizenship, The Dutch Royal library, the library of the city of Drachten, ROC Friese Poort, Trollensics, a Dutch expert in analysing data to unmask disinformation, and the NHL Stenden professorship Cybersafety), we will develop four communities consisting of students from various backgrounds/levels and citizen in the Frisian region. These learning communities will work together in analysing and understanding disinformation as citizen investigators. The communities will be supported by experts who will share their insights into using open-source intelligence (OSINT) tools and processes to analyse data. Supported by research that both professorships will conduct, this one-year project aims to develop a blueprint based on rules, routines and (design) principles to tackle disinformation in local communities in the North of the Netherlands (Friesland). We are planning to integrate Ostrom's (Ostrom, 2005) Institutional Analysis and Development (IAD) framework and its design principles as part of the research during this project. We are, therefore, pleased that the Ostrom Workshop of the Indiana University Bloomington acknowledges our project and has invited us to share our findings for possible future publications.

Lastly, together with the professorship of Cybersafety, we will continue to work on and strive to develop a central NHL Stenden research line dedicated to digital citizenship. We aim to develop approaches, and course material, and do joint research to build a sustainable crossover among researchers and experts in this area.

Turning the CMC model into a hands-on toolkit

Right now, based on the CMC model we have developed a toolkit consisting of a set of canvases and definitions to support students, researchers, and organisations to start analysing social media content dialogue and commitment. They can use this toolkit in various phases of a social media project. For example, to analyse an existing online channel/community and produce improvements or innovative ideas. The toolkit can also be used to develop ideas for building new social media communities or to translate new/current initiatives into the offline world. The toolkit was successfully tested in 2021 by NHL Stenden students and can be requested via our [website](#). It consists of video tutorials and a set of digital canvases that can be used in a step-by-step approach.

Concluding remarks

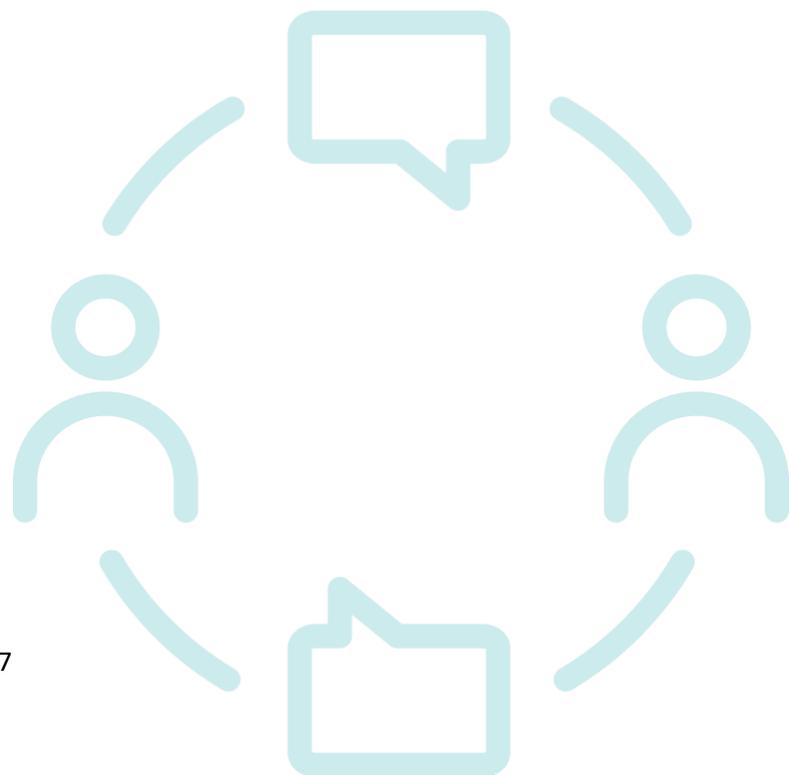
To close, we are very much looking forward to further developing the CMC model in the years to come. The CMC model was not designed to be a static model, so we must stay alert to social media developments faced by organisations and society in the future. For example, the development and use of artificial intelligence as part of social media dialogues. Moreover, we must be critical towards the elements and approaches related to using the CMC model as part of our research lines. Most of all, the CMC model should support us in asking the right questions to understand a problem we would like to solve. With this in mind, we aim to support our students, researchers, and the organisations we work with to become (and stay)

inspired and to practice meaningful communication through applied research!

Leeuwarden November 2022

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We like to acknowledge our colleagues from the OSM professorship, Charlotte van Hassel for providing additional information regarding the European Influencers Academy and critical thoughts on the final draft. The same goes for Maggie Dundas (member of the professorship, International Hotel Management), Dr Wiebren Janssen (member of the professorship and lecturer/researcher Communication) Dr Joyce Kerstens (associate professor Cybersafety) and Anke Vellenga (visiting lecturer of the professorship, Creative Business). Many thanks for being our 'open and critical' reviewers in the last phase of writing this positioning paper. Last, but not least, we would like to thank Jeroen Westhof, lecturer from the course Creative Business and co-developer of the Best Indycaster Project as well as leading developer of the Parents of YouTube Project, for inspiring us for so many years!



About the authors

Deike Schulz, PhD

Professor Organisations and Social Media



Deike Schulz grew up on the most beautiful sandbank in the world called 'Juist'. In the 1990s she moved from Germany to the Netherlands to study Media Art in Groningen. After graduation, she started a web agency and worked in IT and online publishing. In 2002 she switched to higher education. As part of her MSc graduation project (2009/10) in Strategy and Innovation at the University of Groningen, Schulz analysed how citizens horizontally shared information about products and services within special-interest channels on YouTube. The findings encouraged her to carry out a PhD project at the Nijmegen School of Management on the influence of online communication, specifically legitimacy judgments, within citizen-driven online communities. Professor Schulz currently heads the professorship Organisations and Social Media at NHL-Stenden, University of Applied Sciences. Together with colleagues, students, and external stakeholders, she researches how online communication, in particular online content, dialogue, and commitment, develops and becomes meaningful for organisations and their stakeholders.

Afke van der Woud, PhD

Member of the professorship OSM and lecturer researcher Creative Business



Afke van der Woud has her roots in a small village just south of Friesland's capital Leeuwarden. There was a strong community feeling in the village, which left a lasting mark on who she is and what she stands for. She obtained her PhD. from Michigan State University, where she was involved in community recreation research projects. Her promotion research focused on the relationship between leisure participation and public engagement. She has been working as a teacher at NHL Stenden since 2003, moving from school to school within the university. Since 2012 she has been working as a research coordinator for the bachelor of Creative Business, where her work mainly revolves around developing a research line in the curricula. Being a member of the professorship Organisations and Social Media, provided her with the opportunity to work, once again, on research projects. She is currently mainly involved in advising and working on data analyses for the different professorship projects. Her research interests still revolve around community development issues.

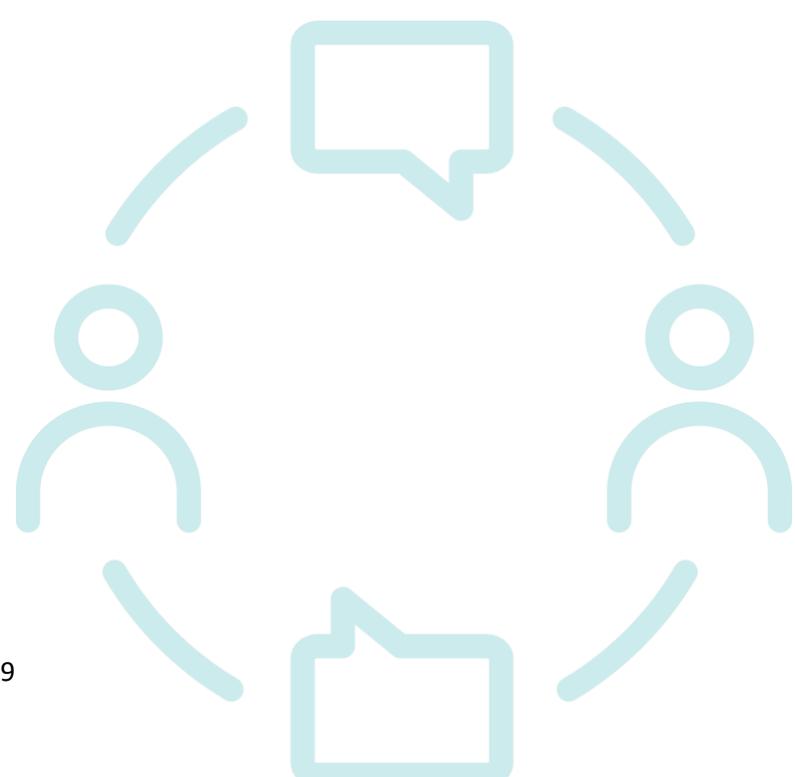
Mirjam Lasthuizen, drs.

Member of the professorship OSM and lecturer researcher Communication



After studying business economics at the University of Groningen, Mirjam Lasthuizen worked for 16 years at various commercial organisations in marketing and management positions. Since 2009 she has been working as a lecturer at the Communications program of NHL Stenden University of Applied Sciences. In addition to teaching, she has been active as a researcher at the RAAK project Social civil communities, at the professorship Social Media and Reputation Management, and in 2019 Mirjam officially joined the professorship Organisations & Social Media. As part of her research activities, Mirjam conducts qualitative and quantitative research with students from the Communications program, such as content analysis and testing of news media. Online communities have sparked her interest, because with the advent of online communities, social interaction has changed: between people, between consumers and companies and between governments and citizens.

With her PhD research at the University of Twente, Mirjam wants to gain insights into social interaction and participation patterns and factors that influence participation in online communities.



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