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# COURSE NOTES

## Communicating with Influence in a Digital and AI-Enabled World

This workshop explored how the communications environment has fundamentally changed over the past decade and what these changes mean for organisations seeking to engage stakeholders, build trust and communicate effectively.

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## The Persuasion Landscape Has Shifted

The workshop began by exploring how digital transformation has changed the way people consume information and interact with organisations. Traditional communication models, where organisations largely controlled the flow of information through mainstream media, have given way to a highly connected digital environment where audiences have unprecedented access to information and can actively participate in public conversations.

Participants discussed how digital platforms have altered stakeholder expectations. Audiences increasingly expect timely, transparent and authentic communication, while misinformation, competing sources of information and information overload have made it more difficult for organisations to capture attention and maintain credibility.

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## The Overall Objective: Understanding the Digital Content Feedback Loop

One of the central concepts introduced during the workshop was that digital communications operate very differently from traditional media. Rather than publishing content and hoping it reaches an audience, digital platforms continually analyse audience behaviour and adapt what they display based on that behaviour.

This process was described as a **continuous feedback loop**, where every interaction contributes to determining which content receives greater visibility.

## The Continuous Feedback Loop

The workshop described the process as follows:

1. **Readers interact with articles or content.**
   Every click, view, comment, share, reaction or period of time spent reading provides information about audience behaviour.
2. **Behavioural data is collected in real time.**
   Digital platforms constantly monitor how audiences engage with content, recording thousands of interactions every second.
3. **Analytics identify which content performs best.**
   Engagement data is analysed to determine which stories generate attention, conversation and meaningful audience interaction.
4. **Algorithms and editors reorganise content.**
   Based on audience behaviour, digital platforms—and increasingly news organisations—prioritise or reposition content that appears most relevant or engaging.
5. **Readers encounter the updated layout.**
   The revised content hierarchy influences what audiences see next, shaping future reading behaviour.
6. **New behavioural data is collected and the cycle repeats.**
   Every new interaction feeds additional data back into the system, creating a continual cycle of measurement, optimisation and redistribution.

## Why this matters

The workshop highlighted that this continuous optimisation process has fundamentally changed the communications environment. Organisations are no longer competing simply for publication—they are competing for sustained engagement.

An important observation made during the session was:

> **Editorial judgement still matters... but less and less.**

While professional editors and communication practitioners continue to make strategic decisions, algorithms increasingly influence which content audiences actually encounter. This reinforces the importance of creating communication that encourages genuine engagement rather than simply broadcasting information.

For communications professionals, the implication is clear:

- understand how audiences behave online;
- create content that is useful, relevant and engaging;
- monitor performance using analytics;
- continually refine communications based on evidence rather than assumptions.

The workshop highlighted that while professional judgement remains important, data increasingly influences how information is presented and prioritised.

Participants also explored the concept of the **attention economy**, recognising that attention has become one of the most valuable resources in modern communications. With audiences exposed to enormous volumes of content each day, organisations must work harder to create communication that is relevant, meaningful and valuable rather than simply producing more content.

The discussion reinforced that effective persuasion today relies less on controlling messages and more on earning trust through consistent, authentic engagement.

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## Social Media as Stakeholder Advocacy

The second module challenged the traditional perception of social media as simply another communication channel. Instead, participants examined how social platforms can become powerful tools for building stakeholder relationships, encouraging advocacy and demonstrating organisational value.

The workshop highlighted the importance of shifting from organisation-centred communication towards audience-centred communication. Rather than asking "What do we want to say?", participants were encouraged to ask, "What does our audience need to know, understand or feel?"

Storytelling emerged as a central theme throughout this session. Participants explored how stories help audiences connect emotionally with organisations by demonstrating impact, purpose and outcomes rather than simply describing activities. Effective stories focus on people, experiences and change, enabling organisations to communicate their value in a more compelling and memorable way.

The session also emphasised that stakeholder advocacy develops through ongoing engagement rather than one-way broadcasting. Building trust requires organisations to participate in conversations, respond to stakeholder feedback and consistently deliver communication that aligns with organisational values and audience expectations.

## Practical Workshop – Reframing the Story

Working individually and in groups, participants analysed examples of existing organisational communications and considered how they could be reframed to become more engaging,

audience-focused and persuasive. Rather than describing organisational processes or activities, participants were encouraged to focus on outcomes, community impact and the value delivered to stakeholders.

The practical exercises reinforced several important communication principles, including:

- identifying the primary audience before developing messages;
- communicating purpose before process;
- using clear, accessible language;
- demonstrating impact through evidence and storytelling; and
- ensuring communication encourages meaningful stakeholder engagement.

This workshop demonstrated that relatively small changes in framing and language can significantly improve how messages are received.

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## Artificial Intelligence: Opportunity, Risk and Practical Application

Rather than presenting AI as a replacement for communication professionals, the workshop positioned AI as a practical assistant capable of improving efficiency, supporting creativity and enhancing productivity when used appropriately. Participants explored both the opportunities and limitations of generative AI and discussed where AI can add value throughout the communication process.

Practical applications discussed during the session included generating content ideas, drafting communications, summarising complex information, improving writing, adapting content for different audiences and supporting funding or grant applications. The importance of effective prompt writing was emphasised, with participants learning how clearer instructions generally produce higher-quality outputs.

Alongside these opportunities, considerable attention was given to the responsible use of AI. Participants discussed issues relating to bias, misinformation, privacy, confidentiality, intellectual property and organisational governance. The workshop reinforced that

AI-generated outputs should always be critically reviewed by humans before publication or use in decision-making.

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## Practical Workshop – AI in Practice

The workshop demonstrated how iterative prompting can significantly improve results and highlighted the importance of editing AI-generated content to ensure it reflects organisational voice and meets professional standards.

The exercises also reinforced the importance of maintaining appropriate governance when integrating AI into everyday communication workflows. Participants were encouraged to view AI as one component within a broader communication process rather than a complete solution.

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## Key Themes and Learning

Several important themes emerged consistently throughout the workshop.

- First, communication is becoming increasingly audience-driven. Organisations can no longer rely on simply publishing information and expecting stakeholders to engage. Instead, successful communication requires a deep understanding of audience needs, behaviours and expectations.
- Second, trust has become one of the most valuable assets an organisation can develop. Trust is built through consistent, authentic and transparent communication, and is strengthened when organisations demonstrate competence, integrity and genuine engagement with stakeholders. As highlighted during the session, **trust is now built digitally first**, making an organisation's online presence a critical component of its overall reputation.
- Third, effective communication depends on telling meaningful stories rather than simply reporting organisational activities. Stories help stakeholders understand why an organisation's work matters and create stronger emotional connections than factual reporting alone.
- Finally, artificial intelligence represents a significant opportunity for communication professionals, provided it is used responsibly and thoughtfully. AI can improve productivity, support creativity and streamline routine tasks, but it cannot replace human judgement, ethical reasoning or strategic decision-making.

# The Communications Planning Model

Participants were introduced to a simple but effective **Communications Planning Model** designed to help structure communication activities around organisational objectives rather than individual channels or tactics.

The model was presented as a straightforward planning sequence:

**Project**

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**Stakeholders**

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**Messages**

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**Channels**

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**Evidence**

Each stage builds logically on the previous one.

## 1. Project

Begin by clearly defining the initiative, programme or piece of work that requires communication.

At this stage, communicators should understand:

- what is being communicated;
- why it is important;
- what organisational objectives it supports; and
- what successful communication should achieve.

Communication planning should always begin with organisational purpose rather than selecting communication channels.

## 2. Stakeholders

The next step is identifying the audiences who need to receive, understand or act upon the communication.

Rather than treating "the public" as a single audience, participants were encouraged to consider the specific needs of different stakeholder groups, recognising that each audience may require different information, different language and different communication approaches.

Questions include:

- Who needs this information?
- What matters to them?
- What action do we want them to take?
- What barriers might prevent engagement?

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## 3. Messages

Only after understanding the audience should key messages be developed.

The workshop reinforced that effective communication is audience-centred rather than organisation-centred. Messages should be:

- clear;
- concise;
- relevant;
- focused on benefits and outcomes;
- supported by stories and evidence where appropriate.

Participants were reminded that people are generally more interested in why something matters than in organisational processes or technical detail.

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## 4. Channels

Once messages have been developed, appropriate communication channels can be selected.

The workshop emphasised that channels should support the communication objective rather than drive it.

Possible channels may include:

- social media;
- websites;
- newsletters;
- email;
- media engagement;
- presentations;
- community meetings;
- internal communications; or
- face-to-face conversations.

Different stakeholder groups often require different channel combinations.

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## 5. Evidence

The final stage considers how communication effectiveness will be measured.

Rather than relying solely on outputs (such as the number of posts published), participants were encouraged to identify evidence that demonstrates whether communication has achieved its objectives.

Examples include:

- engagement levels;
- stakeholder feedback;
- changes in awareness or understanding;
- participation rates;
- media coverage;
- website analytics;
- enquiries generated; and
- behavioural change.

The inclusion of **Evidence** as the final stage reinforces one of the workshop's recurring themes: effective communication is an ongoing cycle of planning, delivery, evaluation and continuous improvement, with future communication informed by measurable results.

# Conclusion

Effective communication is no longer defined by the volume of information organisations produce, but by their ability to build relationships, earn trust and create meaningful engagement with stakeholders.

Participants left the session with practical frameworks, communication techniques and AI skills that can be applied immediately within their own organisations.

The overarching messages of the workshop can be summarised simply:

- **trust is built digitally,**
- **social media should create advocacy rather than simply broadcast information,**
- **stories are more influential than activities,**
- **AI is a practical assistant rather than a replacement,**
- **communication should always begin with a clear purpose,**
- **consistent small improvements produce lasting results.**