



CORPORATE COMMUNICATION INTERNATIONAL at Baruch College/CUNY
A global center for information and knowledge on corporate communication

CONFERENCE ON CORPORATE COMMUNICATION 2015

June 2 – 5, 2015

Baruch College/CUNY, New York, NY USA

PROCEEDINGS

OFFERED IN ASSOCIATION WITH ...

Corporate Communications: An International Journal





Michael B. Goodman, Ph.D., Conference Chair & Director
CCI - Corporate Communication International at Baruch College/CUNY, USA
Regional Editor - North America
Corporate Communications: An International Journal, UK

Christina M. Genest, M.A., Conference Coordinator & Associate Director
CCI - Corporate Communication International at Baruch College/CUNY, USA

Wim J.L. Elving, Ph.D., Editor
Corporate Communications: An International Journal, UK

In partnership with...

CCI – The Baruch Chapter, Department of Communication Studies, Baruch College/CUNY, USA

CCI – The Hong Kong Chapter, Department of Chinese & Bilingual Studies, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Hong Kong

Centre for Corporate Communication, Department of Business Communication, Aarhus University, Denmark

Corporate Communication, Department of Communication, Aalto University School of Business, Finland

Department of Strategic Communication, Lund University, Sweden

Department of Strategic Communication, University of Johannesburg, South Africa

Grady College of Journalism and Mass Communication, University of Georgia, USA

IULM University of Milan, Italy

Richard T. Robertson School of Media & Culture, Virginia Commonwealth University, USA

Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore

Writing, Editing & Publishing Program, The University of Queensland, Australia

Published June 2015 by CCI - Corporate Communication International at Baruch College/CUNY, New York, NY. Please contact the authors for permission to reprint.

From Output to Impact

How to Increase the Accountability of a Communication Department by Making Use of Available Data within the Organization

Carlijn Remmelzwaal & Caroline Wehrmann
Delft University of Technology, Department of Science Education and Communication,
The Netherlands
C.L.Remmelzwaal@gmail.com / C.Wehrmann@tudelft.nl

Frank Körver
GKSV, Consultancy on Reputation Communication and Public Affairs,
The Netherlands
Korver@gksv.nl

Purpose: Currently, there is little insight into how Chief Communication Officers (CCOs) perceive accountability in communication and how they make use of data to increase accountability in their organizations. The aim of this paper is to identify the problems CCOs face in this context and to find ways to solve them.

Approach: A literature review, expert interviews, in-depth interviews and a survey, were the tools used to identify problems related to accountability and data use in communication departments. In response, the Accountability Cylinder, a 3D model to visualize the concept of accountability, was developed.

Findings: The problems revealed a need to discuss accountability within organizations, and to strengthen the analytical skills of communication practitioners, allowing them to interpret and use available data effectively.

Practical and research applications: The Accountability Cylinder helps to improve understanding of accountability and can be used to critically reflect on the accountable role of communication departments.

Key words: Accountability, Data, Corporate Communication, Professionalization

Paper Type: Research paper

Due to the economic climate in Europe, all departments and business units in organizations have to critically reflect on their roles and positions within organizations. This is particularly the case for communication departments (Vos and Schoemaker, 2012). A communication function can be of great strategic importance to many organizations if it meets two main criteria: developing an integrated, strategic approach to communication and ensuring that communication practices contribute directly to corporate strategy implementation (Argenti, 2005). Unfortunately, the link between strategy and its implementation is often tenuous in practice. Many companies take a tactical, short-term approach to communicating with stakeholders, which may be inconsistent with the corporate strategy or even impede it (Argenti, 2005). Not surprisingly, the European

Communication Monitor (2014) shows that linking communication with business strategy has become the biggest challenge for many communication practitioners.

Still, many Chief Communication Officers (CCOs) confront this challenge and want to demonstrate their contribution to an organization's objectives (Wehrmann, 2012): they strive for accountability. However, insight into how CCOs put accountability into practice is still limited. What do CCOs actually mean when they talk about accountability? What kind of challenges do they experience when they want to practise accountability? And to what extent and how can they make use of data? After all, being accountable depends on many variables, including the availability and use of relevant data. Organizations generate and have access to large amounts of data, which could help managers to increase accountability (McAfee and Brynjolfsson, 2012). In this paper these queries have been considered together to form the following research question: "*How can communication departments increase their accountability by making use of available data in organizations?*"

Four qualitative research methods were used to answer this research question. The outcomes of the research led to recommendations about the opportunities for communication departments to exploit the data in organizations to *potentially* increase their accountability. The emphasis is on *potentially*, because the perceptions of CCOs are central to this exploratory research project.

Firstly, this paper describes the research methods used and their relevance to answering the research question. Next, the theoretical background is presented, followed by an overview of the research results. The hurdles that need to be surmounted to achieve accountability are then discussed, along with the Accountability Cylinder, a tool developed to visualize the concept of accountability and potential conflict areas. This paper concludes by answering the research question.

Methodology

Several methods were used to answer the research question: literature reviews on accountability and (big) data, exploratory interviews with experts, in-depth interviews with CCOs and analysis of a survey completed by CCOs of large Dutch organizations. The relevance of these methods is explained below.

The *literature* on accountability was derived from the communication, public administration and organizational disciplines. The literature review on big data in organizations was based on scientific literature from business and organizational disciplines.

Five exploratory *interviews with experts* were carried out to confirm the understanding of the literature and to link insights from theory to practice. The research team interviewed four communication experts (one scientist, two senior communication consultants and one communication consultant specializing in accountability) and an expert from the field of business intelligence and data warehousing.

In-depth interviews with fourteen CCOs were aimed at developing a global and broad view of how they perceive accountability and data use in practice. The CCOs were *not* selected on the basis of their up-to-date knowledge on accountability; key to their selection was the diversity of organizations they work for, ranging from hospitals and universities to energy firms, telephone operators and banks. All fourteen organizations were middle sized to large (semi) public or

private organizations with a minimum annual turnover of 4.2 million euro and an average of 12,500 full time employees. All communication departments in these organizations are staff departments that sit directly below their boards of directors. The CCOs report directly to the CEOs or boards of directors. The questions asked during the in-depth interviews related to four themes: (1) the responsibility of the communication department, (2) the CCOs vision of accountability, (3) the current data the communication departments use, and (4) the data the communication departments would like to have. All data were clustered and analysed.

The objective of the *online survey* was to supplement and compare the provisional outcomes of the in-depth interviews with findings from the survey. The survey was sent to 79 CCOs who met the criteria of the target group described above. The survey was completed by 45 CCOs: a response rate of 57 percent. The survey questions were created on the basis of the first outcomes of the in-depth interviews, and were pre-tested three times to ensure reliability and validity. Special attention was given to preventing socially desirable answers for reasons of reliability.

Theoretical background

Accountability from different perspectives

Accountability exists in many forms, and the definitions and types of accountability vary according to the discipline and context (Sinclair, 1995). This study searched for a definition that was relevant from communication, organizational and public administration perspectives. This paper adopts the definition of Van Ruler (2013) as a starting point, explaining it and showing how it differs from descriptions used in the organizational and public administration fields.

Van Ruler (2013) differentiates between four types of accountability: on the one hand *professional* and *social* accountability, which involve taking responsibility, and on the other hand *decisional* and *performative* accountability, which involve being accountable. Van Ruler defines these types of accountability as follows:

- professional accountability: having a clear vision of the profession and the role and responsibilities of communication
- social accountability: making sure that decisions and activities are morally and socially acceptable
- decisional accountability: intermediate monitoring and managing activities on the basis of research and theory
- performative accountability: demonstrating the results of specific efforts.

Literature from the organizational and public administration disciplines shows similarities and differences with the communication perspective on accountability. Bovens (2007) approaches accountability from a public administration perspective. He views accountability as an ambiguous concept and applies the concept in a narrow sense: “Accountability is a relationship between an actor and a forum, in which the actor has an obligation to explain and to justify his/her conduct;;the forum can pose questions and pass judgment, and the actor may face consequences”. Bovens’ (2007) definition relates to Van Ruler’s definition of performative accountability. Boven emphasizes that organizations must account for their performance, instead of simply ‘taking responsibility’.

Sinclair (1995), and Roberts and Scapens (1985) view accountability from an organizational perspective. Their definition states that accountability, in the simplest sense, entails a relationship in which people are required to explain, and take responsibility for, their actions. This definition is closely related to Van Ruler's (2013) definition. It implies taking responsibility for actions as well as explaining them, which relates to being accountable.

Three levels

Vos and Schoemaker (2012) note that accountability in communication can play a role on three different levels: on an organizational level, a departmental level and an individual level. Accountability on an organizational level implies the impact of communication on the organization. At the departmental level, accountability concerns the added value of the communication department. It involves having a clear vision of the role of the department in the organization, the department's key tasks and how the communication department contributes to the organizational objectives. Accountability at the individual level covers being competent, have the willing to grow and develop, and be open to adapt to new situations. It is about the added value of the individual communication professional. The three levels all involve creating and justifying choices, and showing others how communication activities contribute to the organization.

Data

There are various types and definitions of data. This paper focuses on master data: "data about the people, places and things that are involved in an organization's business", as defined by McGilvray and Thomas (2008).

In their focus on accountability in communication Vos and Schoemaker (2012) distinguish three types of data that can be used to measure accountability: *output data* (data about the performance of communication activities, such as the number of followers, likes, press releases etc.); *interaction data* (data about the communication processes with audience groups, such as the degree of satisfaction, engagement etc.); and, *impact data* (data about the results and effects with audience groups: awareness, reputation etc.). In addition to the data to measure accountability, communication practitioners make use of a variety of other data. This paper will refer to those data as 'input data'.

Results

How do the CCOs perceive accountability?

The in-depth interviews and surveys showed that almost all respondents perceive themselves as being accountable. However, most of the respondents have a rather narrow view of accountability. They are only familiar with performative accountability, or demonstrating the results of specific communication efforts afterwards. Many CCOs interviewed indicated that the dominant negative connotation of accountability is 'being judged'.

How is the communication department accountable?

The research outcomes point out that almost all approached CCOs acknowledge that accountability is important. The main reasons they want to increase their departments' accountability are (1) to demonstrate that their department is an investment and not a department of expense, and (2) to contribute to the organizational objectives. They stress that being accountable is necessary to demonstrate that a department is 'need-to-have' rather than a 'nice-to-have'.

Social accountability: The research outcomes show that none of the respondents CCOs see accountability as 'taking responsibility'. As a consequence, social accountability is not taken into consideration by the respondents in the context of accountability. Several of the interviewed CCOs regard social accountability as something that is not necessary to discuss: "I think social accountability is an open door. That is a 'no brainer' for me" (R10).

Professional accountability: Professional accountability means having a clear vision of the profession, role and responsibilities of communication within the organization. Only a few of the CCOs interviewed viewed professional accountability as part of accountability. For example, in response to the questions about the role of the communication department, all CCOs indicated that their efforts need to contribute to the organization's objectives. "At the beginning of each year I determine the communications objectives that should be linked to organization's objectives that define our organization", stated R10. R6 said: "Given the business objectives, we determine how we are going to contribute to this objective with communication". But none of these respondents linked the need to contribute to organizational objectives with being accountable.

Performative accountability: It was clear, from the research outcomes, that CCOs view their communication departments as mainly falling into the performative type of accountability. Communication directors are mainly accountable at the departmental and individual levels, respectively, by demonstrating how their communication efforts contribute to the communication objectives and to the set objectives and targets in their personal development plan. The CCOs note that communication departments are more 'countable' than accountable: they are mainly performative accountable by collecting data. Some CCOs indicated explicitly that they would like to be able to interpret these output data and to give meaning to it.

Decisional accountability: Most CCOs indicate that they would like more decisional accountability: "I would like to get the whole picture, not only separate sets of data, to make decisions" stated R9 during the interview. R1 said: "I think the notion of accountability is still too limited in communication departments. We have to combine data to see the effects of what we do". This implies decisional accountability at organizational and departmental levels by measuring and investigating how and to what extent communication departments contribute to organizational objectives.

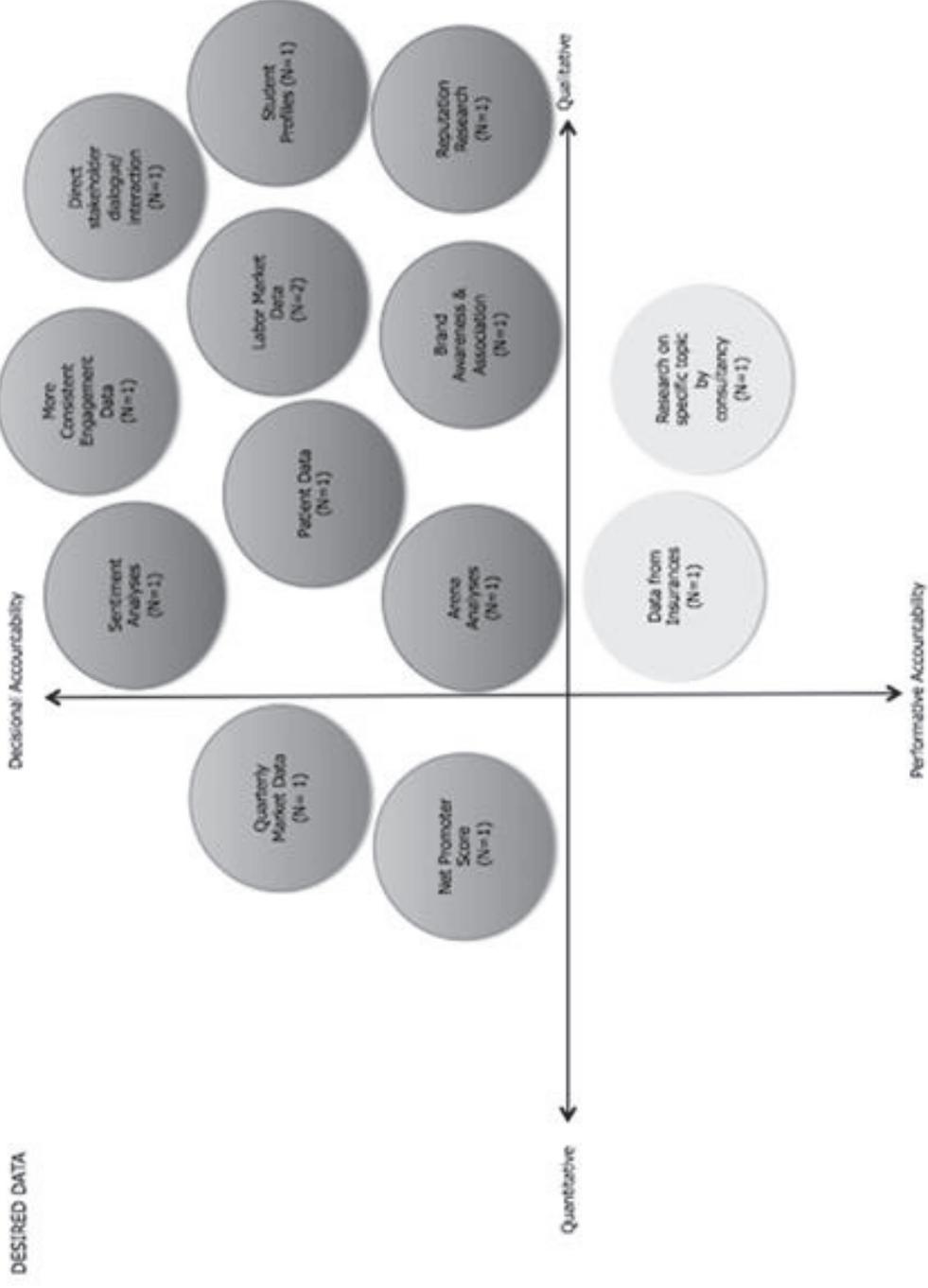


FIGURE 2. Outcome of in-depth interview question: What data would you like to have in order to be accountable?

In this context it is notable that most communication directors emphasize the difficulty with being accountable. They regard accountability as working quantitatively, and they experience difficulty interpreting the data. Moreover, making decisions and results meaningful sometimes seems to be a difficult task for them. It often requires making tough decisions, focusing on one set of activities instead of the other, and having intense conversations with executive management about those decisions. Currently, this does not appear to be easy. The interviews and surveys demonstrated that there is a difference of opinion between the board of directors and CCOs about the need to be accountable. While the CCOs see accountability as an important theme, the board of directors usually does not expect the communication department to be accountable. Only a few survey respondents indicated that accountability is an important issue across an entire organization.

Therefore, it is difficult for CCOs to become accountable if the board of directors has a different view on the matter. However, even if the board of directors and the CCO take a different stand on the matter, it does not mean a CCO stops being accountable. During the in-depth interviews seven CCOs indicated that they put accountability on their agenda themselves, although they are not expected to be accountable by the board. As R3 stated: “My manager has never asked me how I am doing in the field of accountability”.

What data do communication departments use to be accountable?

Communication departments currently make use of output data in order to show performative accountability. Output data is data about the performance of communication activities and projects, such as the number of press releases, and the number of likes or followers on social media. During the in-depth interviews six out of fourteen respondents stressed that they do not need more output data, or other data, but wish to be able to analyze and interpret the currently available data. “We have enough data, however, it is more about the interpretation of that data” (R8).

Although the need to have output data does not seem to be high, CCOs emphasize their need for impact data. In order to be able to steer communication activities, they need this type of data.

What are the challenges regarding accountability and data in communication?

The research outcomes indicate that there are two main challenges concerning accountability and data use at the surveyed communication departments. Firstly, performance must be demonstrated intermediately: the effects of communication activities must be monitored and managed during a project instead of only at the end. This implies the change from performative to decisional accountability.

The second challenge is to cope with the quantity of available data. Most CCOs struggle to use the available data in the best way. They indicate that they would like to be able to analyze and interpret the available output data. And, in this context, they stress the fact that they do not dispose of enough professionals in their team, or that the professionals in their team lack the analytical skills and expertise to analyze and interpret the data.

Discussion

Hurdles

The results show that to achieve accountability a number of hurdles must be overcome. The respondents indicated that:

- being accountable is essential in order to be a ‘need-to-have’ communication department rather than a ‘nice-to-have’ department, but little attention is paid to what accountability really is
- accountability is important and CCOs want to improve accountability, but few communication departments are expected to be accountable to the board of directors
- their communication departments are accountable, but they are more ‘countable’ than accountable
- qualitative interpretation of quantitative output data is essential to becoming more accountable at a decisional level, but communication departments lack practitioners with analytical skills and expertise to give meaning to output data.

Five measures to increase accountability

The research undertaken for this paper shows that there are five measures that can potentially be taken by communication functions to increase accountability:

1. Improve understanding of the concept of accountability

The research outcomes demonstrated that there are various concepts of accountability. Lack of understanding of what accountability truly is and how organizations and professionals can benefit from accountability, hinders communication functions. Therefore, it is suggested that organizations invest in increasing communication departments’ understanding of accountability. Regular conversations and discussions about the essence and importance of accountability will not only improve understanding, but also increase practitioners’ awareness and commitment.

2. Develop a vision of accountability and communicate this vision frequently

The interviews showed that CCOs find it difficult to address accountability within the organization. In order to discuss the essence and importance of accountability an organization needs to have a vision of accountability. Becoming accountable is not only about taking the right measures; it is also about changing mindsets. This requires an inspiring story. Moving too quickly and acting without communicating the bigger picture could slow progress and prevent communication functions from becoming more accountable.

3. Create ownership and improve commitment throughout the communication function

The interviews and survey showed that many CCOs feel responsible for accountability. It is difficult for CCOs to become accountable if the board of directors has a different view on the matter. Mutual understanding and shared ambitions are vital. This implies broader ownership of these objectives throughout the entire organization as well as the need for the board of directors to stimulate accountability.

4. Partner with other departments or functions to access and use relevant data

Having access to relevant data is crucial, according to the CCOs who participated in this research. The interviews demonstrated that communication functions already partner with other functions or departments. Marketing, for example, provides relevant consumer insights, and human resources departments can provide employee and engagement insights. But being unaware of the availability of these data or not knowing how to collect or use them is a matter of concern.

5. Strengthen analytical skills within the communication functions to fully use available data

The research outcomes showed that many communication departments lack practitioners with analytical skills. In reality, practitioners with social science backgrounds dominate most communication functions. In the short term, practitioners from other departments (such as IT departments) could help collect and analyze these data. In the future, most communication professionals should seek to combine conceptual and analytical skills to successfully address strategic challenges.

The Accountability Cylinder

The measures listed above demonstrate the need for organizations to discuss the concept of accountability. But how should this occur? The Accountability Cylinder was developed to visualize the current state of accountability within an organization. This model links the four types of accountability in communication (social, professional, performative (PF) and decisional), the three levels of accountability in communication (organizational, departmental and individual), and the three data categories to measure accountability in communication (output data, impact data and interaction data).

The Accountability Cylinder can be used as a tool to discuss the accountability. It shows, at a glance, how the various types of accountability on the different levels are interrelated (Figure 3). When the current state of accountability within an organization is analysed by using the cylinder, 'conflict areas' can be identified (Figure 4). The Accountability Cylinder therefore helps to improve understanding of accountability, and can be used to critically reflect on the accountable role of communication departments in the organization. This makes the cylinder a valuable professional tool.

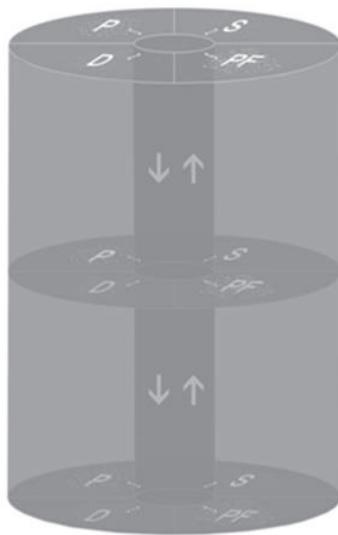


FIGURE 3. The Accountability Cylinder

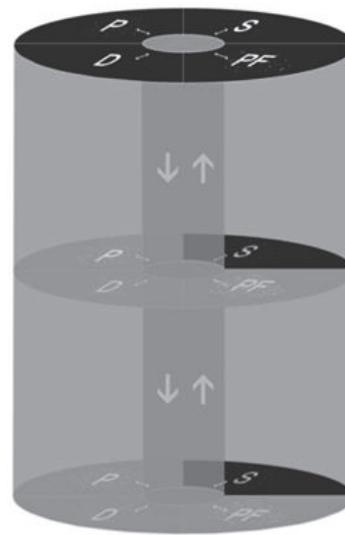


FIGURE 4. Conflict areas visualized in Accountability Cylinder

Conflict areas identified in this research

If the research results of this study are positioned in the Accountability Cylinder, several conflict areas are visible, allowing an organization to decide what data are required to be accountable. These conflict areas are: social accountability at all levels, professional accountability at the organizational level, performative accountability at the organizational level, and decisional accountability at both organizational and departmental levels.

Social accountability (at all levels): Social accountability means considering whether decisions and activities are morally and socially acceptable. Data needed in order to be socially accountable at the organizational level is interaction data and impact data. Because ethical and moral items are time-bound and contextual, codes of conduct and ethical choices have to be the result of ongoing discussion and debate. Therefore, interaction data are required to be socially accountable. Since interaction is only possible when one has accurate data on the effect and impact of communication activities, impact data (for instance data on identity, strategy and policy related to the objectives of the organization) are essential as well.

Professional accountability (at the organizational level): Professional accountability is about having a clear vision of the communication profession, the values and responsibilities of communication, the communication department and communication practitioners in the organization. The data needed in order to be professionally accountable at the organizational level are primarily general input data about the communication profession, professionalization and societal developments.

Performative accountability (at the organizational level): Performative accountability is demonstrating the end results and effects of particular communication efforts. At the

organizational level, it is about how the communication department's performance contributes to organizational objectives. CCOs have to demonstrate how their activities create business value. Therefore, the communication departments must be able to interpret their output data. As seen earlier, this is one of the challenges CCOs encounter.

Decisional accountability (at the organizational level): In order to have decisional accountability at both the organizational and departmental levels, impact data is needed as well as input data about, for example, stakeholders and societal developments. In order to provide insights that contribute to the organization's objectives and add value to the organization, impact data can be combined. Examples of basic data are the Net Promoter Score, and data from reputation research, customer satisfaction research, brand awareness and association, market development data, and sentiment analyses. Several communication directors indicated that since they do not have sufficient expertise in their team to combine and interpret the relevant data, decisional accountability is, in many organizations, still in its infancy.

Conclusion

In order to maximize value and to best serve an organization's interests, communication functions need to become more strategic (Argenti, 2005). Strategic communication is communication aligned with a company's overall strategy aimed at enhancing its strategic position. This is the core of accountability: being accountable and taking responsibility for activities, products, decisions and policies in the field of communication to enhance the performance and strategic position of an organization.

The question posed in this paper was: "How can communication departments increase their accountability by making use of available data in organizations?" The results show that it is important to discuss the concept of accountability within the organization and to strengthen the analytical skills of communication practitioners so they can interpret and use available data effectively. The Accountability Cylinder can help improve the understanding of accountability and can be used to critically reflect on the accountability of communication departments in the organization.

References

- Alford, R.J. (2001), "The Regenerative Organization", *National Productivity Review*, Vol. 19, No. 4, pp. 495-6
- Boucher Ferguson, R. (2014), "Better Decisions with Smarter Data", MIT Sloan Management Review. http://sloanreview.mit.edu/article/better-decisions-with-smarter-data/?article=better-decisions-with-smarter-data&post_type=article, Retrieved March 20, 2014.
- Bovens, M. (2007), "Analysing and Assessing Accountability: A Conceptual Framework", *European Law Journal*, Vol. 13, No. 4, pp. 447-468
- Boyd, D. and Crawford, K. (2012), "Critical Questions for Big Data", *Information, Communication and Society*, Vol 15, No. 5, pp. 662-679
- Davenport, T.H. (2006), "Competing on Analytics", *Harvard Business Review*, Vol. 84, No 1., pp. 99-107
- European Association of Communication Directors. (2014), *European Communication Monitor 2014*, www.communicationmonitor.eu, Retrieved April 6, 2014
- Macnamara, J. (2014), "A new paradigm and model for measurement and evaluation of PR and corporate communication", *Paper presented to the Association for Measurement and Evaluation of Communication (AMEC) International Summit on Measurement*, Amsterdam.

- Manyika, J., Chui, M., Brown, B., Bughin, J., Dobbs, R., Roxburgh, C. and Hung Byers, A. (2011), *Big Data: The Next Frontier for Innovation, Competition and Productivity*. McKinsey Global Institute, McKinsey & Company, San Francisco
- McAfee, A. and Brynjolfsson E. (2012), "Big Data: The Management Revolution", *Harvard Business Review*, Vol 90, No 10, pp. 1-9
- McGilvray, D. and Thomas, G. (2008), *Executing Data Quality Projects: Ten Steps to Quality Data and Trusted Information*, Morgan Kaufmann Publishers, Burlington, Massachusetts
- Reputation Institute. (2014), "The RepTrak Framework", available at <http://www.reputationinstitute.com/about-reputation-institute/the-retrak-framework>, Retrieved 2 May 2014.
- Roberts, J. and Scapens, R. (1985), "Accounting systems and systems of accountability: understanding accounting practices in their organisational contexts", *Accounting, Organizations and Society*, Vol. 10, No. 4, pp. 443-456
- Ruler, B. van, Elving, W., Hooff, B. van den, Smit, E., Verhoeven, P. (2005), *Communicatiemanagement in communicatiewetenschappelijk perspectief*, Boom Onderwijs, Amsterdam.
- Ruler, B. van (2013), *Reflectieve Communicatie Scrum. Zó ben je accountable*. 1st ed., Afdo Groep, Amsterdam
- Sinclair, A. (1995), "The Chameleon of Accountability: Forms and Discourses", *Accounting, Organizations and Society*, Vol. 20, No. 2/3, pp. 219-237
- Vos, M. and Schoemaker, H. (2012), *Accountability van communicatiebeleid*. 2nd ed. Boom Lemma uitgevers, Den Haag, The Netherlands
- Watson, W. (1999), "Linking Communications with Strategy to Achieve Business Goals", available at <http://home.bi.no/fgl96053/CommStudy.pdf>, Retrieved January 8th, 2014
- Wehrmann, C., Pagen, M. and van der Sanden, M. (2012), "Communication Benchmark 2011: Connecting organization and performance of the corporate communications function", Proceedings of the 2011 Bled Conference
- Zerfass, A. (2008), "Corporate Communication Revisited: Integrating Business Strategy and Strategic Communication" in Zerfass, A., van Ruler, B. and Sriramesh, K(Eds), *Public Relations Research*, VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, Wiesbaden, pp. 65-93