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# Digital strategic communication through digital media-arenas

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## Abstract

Digital technologies have empowered an increasingly participatory communication environment that challenges the ability of organizations to maintain control over their messages. In this new environment, stakeholders not only receive these messages through organizational digital media, which this chapter argues are typically understood as transmission channels, they also are able to re-interpret and re-communicate these messages across multiple participatory, omni-directional digital arenas seemingly beyond organizational strategic control. This chapter examines the tension in strategic communication between a traditional message-controlling approach through digital media and a more nuanced message-facilitating approach in participatory digital arenas. It addresses this challenge by proposing a framework of Digital Media-Arenas (DMA) to assist strategic communicators in navigating the conflicting digital terrain where stakeholders reign. Drawing on the PESO (Paid, Earned, Shared and Owned) model, the framework incorporates newer forms of communication such as Advocated, Rented, Hijacked and Searched DMA. Implications of this framework are discussed.

**Keywords:** Advocated, arenas, digital media-arenas, Hijacked, Rented, Searched

## Introduction

Perhaps one of the most evident and yet compelling aspects of Twenty-first century strategic communications is the increased use and spread of information and communication technologies (ICT) as means to communicate, get in touch, and acquire knowledge of world events. The increasing digitalization of professional activities in all areas as well as the increasing presence of digital technologies in our daily lives is shifting the focus of strategic communication activities towards those online, that is taking place in a digital ecosystem. More and more strategic communications are today digital strategic communications. Digital strategic communications are essentially as an organization and/or actor's purposeful use of data, digital technologies and digital means to manage its communications to fulfill its mission and communicative purposes. Research by Gartner in 2018 showed that there are distinct opportunities for organizations to improve their performance and transform themselves by utilizing digital technology across their products, channels and operations. However, organizations have largely struggled to make effective use of technologies for communication purposes (Bryan, 2018).

The opportunities have been numerous and well-studied in strategic communication literature. For example, digitalization produces masses of data that can be used and managed for strategic communication purposes (Knebel and Seele, 2019). It provides new opportunities for accessing and making use of this data to dialogue with stakeholders through social media (Shin, Pang & Kim, 2015), reach and collaborate with more stakeholders faster than ever before (Wang, Reger & Pfarrer, 2021), look for and participate in online spaces where stakeholders discuss issues related to organizations (Luoma-aho et al., 2010), understand, listen to and respond to stakeholder needs through efficient database management (Knebel & Seele, 2019; Macnamara, 2016), and manage data-based automation of communication (Helbing, 2015; Werder et al., 2018).

However, digitalization has also presented challenges. A challenge, for example, is the limited control that strategic communicators have over organizational messages intended for stakeholders in the digital communication environment (Falkheimer & Heide, 2015; Murphy, 2015). Some digital communication channels, such as an organization's website and social media accounts, provide useful controlling mechanisms for communication and thus communicators gravitate towards these for strategic dissemination purposes. Because strategic communication scholars typically, although not exclusively, still tend to make assumptions about media as transmission channels, including social media and news media, in this chapter we refer to these as digital media, partly to offer a conceptual contrast to the more omni-directional and less-controllable discussion forums that exist everywhere in the digital world.

However, the participatory nature of social media (Falkheimer & Heide, 2015) and other discussion forums in digital spaces is more suited to digital arenas (see e.g., Frandsen & Johansen, 2010, 2016; Luoma-aho & Vos, 2010; Vos, Schoemaker & Luoma-aho, 2014), a concept that essentially encapsulates the idea of a space of interactions as we explain later in this chapter. Digitalization also challenges the traditional uni-directional and even two-directional communications that characterise for the most digital media, as previous studies indicate. Within digital arenas, stakeholders and potential stakeholders have more control over organizational messages because they are empowered to not only re-interpret these messages but also transform them into oppositional messages and subsequently spread these re-shaped messages fast and formatively through, for example, their social media. One example of content re-appropriation by stakeholders is hijacking (Luoma-aho, Virolainen, Lievonen & Halff, 2018), in which hateholders (Luoma-Aho, 2015) may take over the meaning of an organization-created hashtag, share it among their networks, and attract a crowd of vociferous opponents to the organizational message. Given the dual nature of the digital environment, that is, a collection of both spaces of interactions (arenas) and vehicles of communication (media), in this chapter, we hyphenate and use the term *media-arenas* to encompass all digital means through which organizations, stakeholders and others may engage in communicating with each other and propose a framework addressing the dual nature of the digital environment. This framework extends the PESO (Paid, Earned, Shared and Owned) model to incorporate newer forms of communication practices such as Advocated, Rented, Hijacked and Searched DMA. This extended framework recognizes the importance of engaging with employees, social media influencers, stakeholders critical of the organization, and people searching for organizational information in online search

engines. The framework is an attempt to address professionals' compelling needs to know how to use digital media for effective digital strategic communications.

To illustrate the applicability of our framework to a real digital communication situation, we examine the VW April Fool's Day prank case (2021), as an example, and explore how this car manufacturer initiated an unusual organisational message in one or more DMAs and how various stakeholders responded, re-interpreted and re-shaped that message utilizing a range of DMAs.

The chapter is structured as follows. First, it offers some conceptual clarifications of central concepts such as digital media and digital arenas. Then it reviews key underpinnings of digitalization and how it is challenging the field of strategic communication. Next, to address these challenges, the chapter introduces the framework of Digital Media-Arenas (DMA) and proposes its value as a heuristic device to help professionals navigating and managing stakeholder conversations and other communicative interactions that occur in the digital ecosystem. Finally, limitations of the framework are discussed and suggestions for future research are offered.

### **Digital media in digital strategic communication**

To understand the environment in which digital strategic communications take place, we begin by reviewing the different understandings related to the concept of *digital* as a defining element where strategic communication takes place. The concept of *digital* is highly coupled with that of media. Nevertheless, *media* is a term used ambiguously among communication scholars, partly because of constant technological changes and partly because it is used across multiple industries and academic disciplines. Within media studies, media is implicitly understood as the means of mass communication and are delivery technologies such as radio and television (Jenkins, 2006). In the literature on strategic communication, the term *media* generally is understood as a communication channel or medium (plural and singular), encompassing traditional mass media, digital media and social media (e.g., Holtzhausen & Zerfass, 2015; Zhao, Falkheimer & Heide, 2017), through which content passes in a linear fashion; senders communicate with receivers via a medium both in a one-directional and two-directional manner. Senders and receivers may interact via media, but interaction is rather limited and some types of media are more conducive to interaction than others. This understanding of media mirrors the conduit model of communication and also applies to news media such as newspapers and news programs on television and radio, because they can be seen as a means through which a source such as an organization can disseminate messages to mass audiences.

Today, professionals and scholars prefer to use either *digital media* or *social media* as terms to indicate the transmission channels where communications take place online, such as via the Internet. *Digital media* is a broader term, often defined according to its separation from traditional media (e.g., Holtzhausen & Zerfass, 2015, p. 500; Tandazo, Galarza & Benavides, 2016, p. 212). It includes the Internet as well as websites, blogs, vlogs, video games and may incorporate social media (e.g., Camilleri, 2020; Killian & McManus, 2015;

Fraustino & Connolly Ahern, 2015; Moreno, Navarro, Tench & Zerfass, 2015; Ruehl & Ingenhoff, 2015; Troise & Camilleri, 2021; von Platen, 2016).

Social media, on the other hand, are generally considered specific groups of Internet-based applications that allow for the creation and exchange of user-generated content (Valentini & Kruckeberg, 2012), a characteristic that is shared with most common digital media definitions too. An interesting element that social media features have added to the transmission understanding of medium is the “focus [...] on how users interact, that is, attention on users’ behaviors” (Valentini & Kruckeberg, 2012, p. 6). Social media were initially conceived as a medium for friendship and social exchanges, characterised by participation and collaborations among users. Despite the participative and collaborative nature of social media that could potentially help organizations foster rich connectivity among users, most studies dealing with social media and organizations show that these media are for the most part used as channels of communications, rather than environments where connectivity, participation and social reality is constructed communicatively (Bortree & Seltzer, 2009; Kent, 2013; Shin, Pang & Kim, 2015; Taylor & Kent, 2014; Valentini, Romenti & Kruckeberg, 2016).

Finally, in the professional parlor *digital platform* is another term widely used to refer to digital media. When strategic communication studies refer to *digital platforms* they generally mean online spaces, predominantly set up by technology companies for business purposes, that utilize digital technology to enable exchanges of information, content and opinions between senders and receivers accessible through digital devices such as smartphones, tablets and computers. Example platforms include portal news sites, consumer review sites, online forum sites, online community sites, online discussion groups, and social media.

One common element across these terms is that these ICT-based media are treated by most professionals and the industry more as a communication channel for organizational messages than as environments for many-to-many conversations. Because organizations can maintain a degree of control over their messages conveyed through digital media such as their own websites, their own social media accounts, their own apps and even the news media, these vehicles are more conducive for organizational strategic communications than stakeholders’ conversations. Despite the limited two-way communications, we argue these digital media should be used more by organizations to engage and involve stakeholders in discussion of matters of relevance. For these reasons, we argue professionals are asked to become more proficient in understanding and managing their arenas, that is their spaces of interactions with stakeholders.

### **Digital arenas in digital strategic communication**

As we have earlier mentioned, the digital element has expanded the opportunity for increasing two-way interactions and for empowering stakeholders to create and co-create their own content with or without organizations. This specific feature of digital media has permitted the creation and diffusion of parallel, multiple communications outside the traditional circuit of transmission from organization to news media to public. At the same time organizations’ opportunities to bypass news media have increased and these have taken advantage of the digital technologies and the many different digital media to communicate and interact

with their key stakeholders. All these parallel communications occurring in the digital ecosystem through digital media contribute to the establishment of several parallel flows of conversations among producers (Bruns, 2008). These flows of conversations usually crystallize around certain issues, topics, organizations or events and create virtual spaces of interactions. In an Habermasian sense, these spaces are forms of virtual public spheres where topics, issues, organizations and events are discussed and meanings are created, interpreted and changed across multiple stakeholders, organizations and spaces.

Some strategic communication scholars refer to these spaces of interactions as arenas (e.g., Frandsen & Johansen, 2010, 2016; Luoma-aho & Vos, 2010; Luoma-aho & Juholin, 2017; Vos, Schoemaker & Luoma-aho, 2014). Arenas are understood as places of interaction where individuals and organizational actors more or less formally or informally communicate with each other and where relationships are formed, maintained and discontinued (Badham, Luoma-aho & Lievonen, forthcoming). Digital arenas are seen as online forums for participatory, two-directional and omni-directional communication with less organizational control over messages (content). They are online spaces (e.g., discussion forums) where stakeholders come together to discuss, debate and contest opinions. They empower two-directional communication (i.e., between stakeholder and organization) and multi-directional communication (i.e., stakeholders-to-stakeholders). In this interactive process, they form around topics or situations that may express assessments of organizations and their reputation, legitimacy and social capital. In sum, the conversational dynamics in arenas are less conducive to organizations' strategic communications when these are meant to uphold control over messages about and from organizations.

Despite this, they are still valuable for strategic communicators willing to engage stakeholders interacting in their own digital playgrounds; that is, on their own turf. As conversations tend to be perceived more authentic, especially when initiated by stakeholders, and show organizational reciprocity towards stakeholders, if organizations respond and address publicly stakeholders' concerns, arenas have become more and more important in the study and practice of strategic communication. As van Ruler (2018) describes, "the playing field of strategic communication" is characterized today by an "ongoing and very complex processes of constantly moving presentations of and negotiations about meanings in these external and internal arenas" (2018, p. 379). To manage this environment, professionals need to understand "the internal and external arenas in which meanings are presented, propagated, and negotiated in a continuous, nonlinear, and complex way" (2018, p. 379). This is not an obvious or simple task. Digital arenas introduce several challenges whose solutions are not univocal. In the following section, we outline the main challenges that professionals face as indicated by previous scholarly work in the discipline.

### **Contemporary challenges of strategically communicating in the digital environment**

The participatory nature of communication taking place today in digital environments presents both opportunities and challenges to strategic communicators. Digital arenas, encompassing social media, present organizations with a medium through which they can technically initiate and maintain online conversations

with individual and multiple stakeholders. In their study of strategic communication in participatory culture, Falkheimer and Heide (2015) argue that organizations should take advantage of the participatory, dialogue-rich nature of social media. However, Macnamara and Zerfass (2012) argue that, given the clash between strategic management practices and the online philosophies of openness and participation, there is a general lack of knowledge about how organizations can strategically communicate through digital arenas, including social media.

The participatory nature of digital communication is that organizations lose control of the communication process and the intended meanings embedded in their communication. The participant–participant communication process taking place in different cultural contexts across the globe leads to stakeholders' varying interpretations of organizational messages (Zhao, Falkheimer & Heide, 2017). When organizations initiate communication with stakeholders in a public environment, those stakeholders are able to mediate, re-shape and re-interpret the originally intended meanings conveyed by organizations. In today's participatory environment enabled by digital technologies, stakeholders are entitled to renegotiate the meaning of organizational messages conveyed either publicly or privately. They are even able to hijack an organization's message (Luoma-aho, Virolainen, Lievonen & Halff, 2018) by re-interpreting that message in a completely different and antagonistic way. Often these organizational messages are distorted and take on new meaning without stakeholders' intention, and they spread quickly and contagiously through social media (for crisis arena crossovers, see Badham, Luoma-aho & Lievonen, forthcoming).

With organizations' limited gatekeeping powers in these digital spaces, the result is often message entropy (Murphy, 2015). This is what Murphy (2015) described as contextual distortion. When an organizational message enters the public arena, particularly in a digital environment, the original intent of that message is very easily distorted, whether intentionally or otherwise. This then begs the question: "How strategic can 'strategic communication' be, given the distortions imposed by the outside environment?" (Murphy, 2015, p. 113) A follow-up question is: "What can organizations do to maintain some semblance to the original content and intent of their message after it leaves their hands?" (2015, p. 113)

Murphy (2011) understood this interconnected, fluid, volatile and participatory nature of the digital environment and concluded: "In this environment, 'management' means finding a way for strategic communicators to play a continuing role—not control, but a role—in shaping their messages, so they can at least participate in issue arenas that determine public opinion" (2011, p. 14). This understanding is shared by Zhao, Falkheimer and Heide (2017) who point out that the traditional sender-recipient framework for planning communication has been challenged by the current digitalization of media systems. These scholars, in fact, argue that "the roles and strategies of organizations and communication professionals are changing from planners/senders to facilitators or strategic improvisers (Falkheimer & Heide, 2009)" (2017, p. 2). In other words, should strategic communicators try to fiercely maintain the original meaning and context of their message once it has entered the digital public arena or rather should they embrace stakeholders' interpretations of their messages and improvise their message strategies accordingly?

To address the above challenge posed by digitalization of communication coupled by the inherent tension of digital communication understood both as strategic and participatory communication, we propose a framework of Digital Media-Arenas. In the next section, we elaborate on this proposed framework.

### **Digital Media-Arenas: A framework for digital strategic communication**

The DMA Framework addresses the paradoxical challenge organizations face in communicating in the digital realm, in which strategic communicators have to balance both the free-for-all participatory nature of digital arenas as well as the more controlling nature of traditional strategic communication through use of digital media. Accordingly, we propose the term *digital media-arenas* to integrate these two seemingly competing communication paradigms while highlighting the tension of organizational strategic communication between (1) *media* suited to traditional uni-directional and therefore more controlled communication and (2) *arenas* empowering two-directional and omni-directional communication and therefore less-controlled communication. We build on conceptualization of arenas in strategic communication and corporate communication literature (Coombs & Holladay, 2014; Frandsen & Johansen, 2010, 2016; Luoma-aho & Vos, 2010; Luoma-aho & Juholin, 2017; Vos, Schoemaker & Luoma-aho, 2014) to define *digital media-arenas* (DMA) as online communicative spaces ranging between uni-directional communication channels and omni-directional communication discussion forums that can be utilized to varying degrees by strategic communicators adopting blended roles between senders of messages, facilitators of stakeholder engagement in organizational messages, and strategic improvisers of organizational messages gone rogue.

Next, we build on the PESO model of Paid, Earned, Shared, and Owned media use (Macnamara, Lwin, Adi, & Zerfass, 2016; Xie, Neill & Schauster, 2018) to integrate other emerging forms of communication into our framework of DMAs. Burcher (2012) originally categorized *media* (which we now term *media-arenas*) into paid, owned and earned which later merged into the current PESO model as an effective approach to categorize media use and content (Bayles, 2015). Organizations have increasingly transitioned from use of predominantly paid media-arenas to use of shared and owned media-arenas (Macnamara, Lwin, Adi, & Zerfass, 2016). Although traditionally these were quite distinct entities, the boundaries between them are blurring as a result of the convergence of media genres and practices (Macnamara, Lwin, Adi, & Zerfass, 2016). This convergence or integration of multiple media-arenas in strategic communication campaigns improves message delivery (Nowak, Cameron & Delorme, 1996), reflecting the practice of strategic communication as “a unifying framework to analyze communications by organizations” (Hallahan, Holtzhausen, Van Ruler, Verčič, & Sriramesh, 2007, p. 9).

In strategic communication research, *Paid* digital media-arenas (DMAs) are understood as “traditional advertising and other forms of content commercially contracted between organizations and mass media” (Macnamara et al., 2016, p. 377). This includes sponsored campaigns, advertorials or branded content, which refers to paid content designed and produced according to the editorial standards of a media outlet (Wilcox et



al., 2015). Increasingly, advertisements are placed across a wide spectrum of digital spaces, from Facebook and YouTube to online news sites. Organizations have a high degree of control over design, placement and timing of their messages through Paid DMA. This gives the organization a high level of control over the targeting of its message to receivers. The organization can expect predominantly positive responses from stakeholders to messages placed on these DMA.

*Owned* DMA are considered communication channels and content controlled by organizations, also known as corporate media or corporate publishing (e.g., corporate magazines, newsletters, and websites). Like paid DMA, organizations have a high degree of control over the location, length and look of messages disseminated in this way. This gives the organization a high level of control over the targeting of its message to receivers. Accordingly, the organization can expect predominantly positive responses from stakeholders to messages placed on these DMA.

*Earned* DMA are the communication channels and content through which organizations attract editorial publicity through media relations activities (Stephen & Galak, 2012). Through the symbiotic relationship between public relations practitioners and editorial staff, organizations are able to negotiate how much of the core organizational message can be embedded in news reports and when this message gets disseminated to news audiences. Organizations have a mixed (low-high) degree of control over the creation, transformation and dissemination of organizational messages depending on factors such as level of public relations skill, relation with journalists and editors, and whether the organization is linked to a crisis. However, organizations have less control over news media outlet's own internal communication moderation features. Accordingly, the organization can expect mixed stakeholder responses (in terms of sentiment) to messages placed on these DMA.

Finally, *Shared* DMA are understood exclusively as social media that are "open for followers, friends, and subscribers to contribute and comment" (Macnamara et al., 2016, p. 378). Of course, organizations can maintain their own social media accounts and thus manage a high level of editorial control over the creation and dissemination of messages and over the moderation features embedded in those social media accounts. However, through their own personal social media accounts stakeholders also are able to interact with organizational messages such as commenting on them and replying to and sharing these messages within their social network. Because there are far more social media accounts of stakeholders, organizations have a low degree of control over messages disseminated in this way. Accordingly, organizations can expect mixed stakeholder responses (in terms of sentiment) to messages placed on these DMA.

To encompass strategic organizational communication with various other types of stakeholders such as employees, social media influencers, antagonistic stakeholders (e.g., activists) and anyone searching for organizational information, we extend this PESO model to include newer forms of DMA use which we term *Advocated*, *Rented*, *Searched* and *Hijacked*. *Advocated* DMA refers to situations in which employees communicate about their employing organization with the public in either sanctioned or unsanctioned ways

through social media and the news media. These may take the form of employee stories advocating *for* the organization or photos of defective products posted in social media, thus advocating *against* the organization. In this situation, internal and thus private discussions related to organizational matters may become public as employees share them online (e.g., corporate whistleblowers leaking information to the public about corporate wrongdoing). We note, however, that these adversarial occurrences are rare. Communication can take any form, from social media posts on employees' personal accounts to leaked documents to the news media. Through employment contractual agreements, the organization has a moderate degree of control over what employees say publicly, such as through communication training and guidelines. However, the organization has less control over communication moderation features in employees' social media accounts and news sites. Thus, the organization can expect predominantly positive engagement from stakeholders.

*Rented* DMA refers to situations in which an organization enters into an agreement with external social media influencers (Enke & Borchers, 2019; Sundermann & Raabe, 2019; Woodcock & Johnson, 2019) inviting them to communicate an organizational message to their stakeholders. Typically, communication takes the form of a blog or vlog (Allen, 2017, p. 383), and thus the organization has some level of control over the positioning of its message within the influencer's blog/vlog. Given the collaborative nature of this DMA, this organization has a high level of control over the messages conveyed by influencers, but less control over how the influencers' stakeholders respond. The organization has moderate editorial control over communication moderation features within influencers' blogs/vlogs. Overall, it can expect predominantly positive engagement with stakeholders.

*Hijacked* DMA refers to situations in which stakeholders take over an organizational message, purposefully change it to convey a different, often opposite, message, and then share it across their social network. Typically, the organizational message is embedded within a hashtag created by the organization for strategic communication purposes and this message is reconverted by one or more stakeholders into an antagonistic message. Memes may also be used. Accordingly, an organization has very low level of control over hijacked messages (Luoma-aho, Virolainen, Lievonon & Halff, 2018). The organization can expect predominantly negative engagement with stakeholders in these DMA

*Searched* DMA refers to situations in which stakeholders conduct online searches for information related to organizations. An organization has some level of control over its messages discovered through this process, such as through search engine optimization (SEO) tactics. The organization can expect mixed sentiment-engagement with stakeholders in Searched DMA.

These newer forms of DMA are important considerations for strategic communicators. Increasingly organisations are collaborating with employees (Advocated DMA) and influencers (Rented DMA) to assist in conveying an organizational message to stakeholders beyond direct organizational reach. And yet some stakeholders such as activists and hateholders (Luoma-Aho, 2015) are able to seize an organizational message and transform and spread it through their own social networks to reach newer and a wider range of audiences.

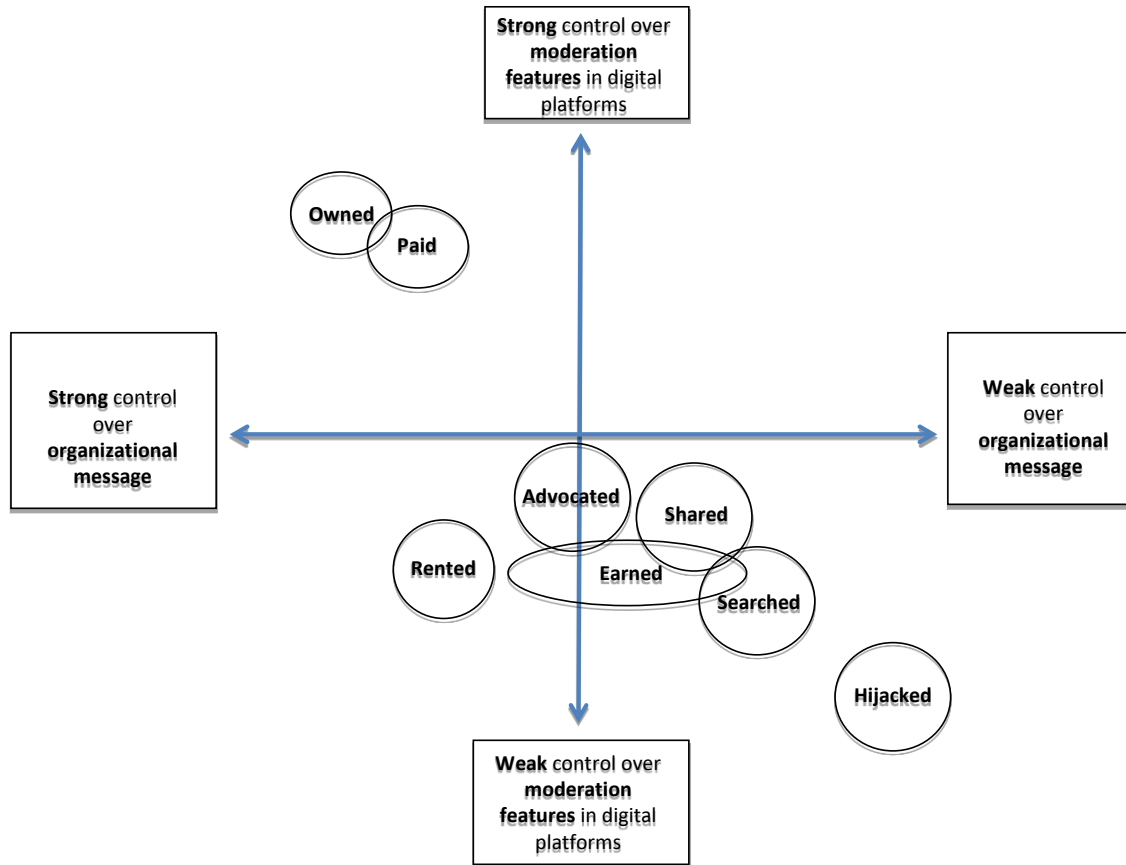
Organizations should not ignore those stakeholders (especially potential stakeholders) who regularly seek information about them through online search engines; organizations can strategically attempt to manage this search process for the purpose of engaging these searchers in their organizational messages. While the Advocated, Rented and Searched DMA can be somewhat controlled by organizations, Hijacked DMA are largely beyond organizational influence. Yet organizational communicators need to be aware of these DMA, monitor them, and be prepared to deal with them when the situation requires.

Each DMA demands a different strategic approach essentially because each attracts distinct types of stakeholders and therefore organizational messages need to be uniquely addressed to these stakeholders. The DMA Framework illustrates, as shown in Table 1, the different typologies of possible DMAs that characterise an organization's digital environment and the best approaches to be used in each of them. The Framework can be used as a planning or evaluation grid to help guide communicators with strategic choices or assessing previous choices when deciding how much and how best to control organizational messages when dealing with different types of stakeholders. The DMA Framework offers insights to organizations on how best to manage the communication of their messages through the dual functions of *media* as channels for organizational messages disseminated to stakeholders as well as *arenas* for discussion of organizational messages between organizations and their stakeholders and between stakeholders themselves.

Table 1. DMA planning grid: Organization’s degree of control over messages, over communication features within digital platforms, and the likelihood of stakeholder sentiment within each digital media-arena (DMA).

<b>Type of Digital Media-Arena (DMA)</b>	<b>Degree of control over organizational message</b>	<b>Degree of control over moderation features enabling &amp; restricting communication in digital platform</b>	<b>Likelihood of stakeholder sentiment</b>
<i>Paid</i>	Very strong	Very strong	Positive
<i>Owned</i>	Very strong	Very strong	Positive
<i>Shared</i>	Weak	Weak	Mixed
<i>Earned</i>	Weak-Strong	Weak	Mixed
<i>Rented</i>	Strong	Weak	Positive
<i>Advocated</i>	Moderate	Weak	Positive
<i>Searched</i>	Weak	Weak	Mixed
<i>Hijacked</i>	Very weak	Very weak	Negative

It is important to note that each DMA determines how much control organizations have over their message and therefore over the way their messages are interpreted by the recipients. In other words, these DMA are differentiated according to their ability to enable organizational control over (1) the creation, transformation and uni-directional dissemination of messages and (2) the digital platform features enabling and restricting moderation of two- and omni-directional communication (e.g., enabling comments and sharing). Figure 1 below shows examples of each DMA positioned between these two tensions.



**Figure 1:** Digital Media-Arenas positioned between control over organizational message and control over platform communication features (adapted from Luoma-aho & Juholin, 2017)

### Illustrative Example of DMAs: Volkswagen’s April Fool’s name change

Next, we use our proposed Framework to illustrate, via an example of how an organization communicates through multiple DMAs within the context of a crisis, the applicability of our framework in explaining how organizational messages are influenced by and across DMAs in extremely challenging situations. On March 29th, 2021 Volkswagen in the USA (henceforth VW) released a seemingly unfinished press release on its online media newsroom announcing a change in the company name to promote their electric vehicles. This was the company’s first message in this case, conveyed through Owned DMA. The press release was dated April 29th, thus suggesting a mistake in the time of publishing, and it was removed a few hours after publication.

The following day VW published a media release stating that VW of America would be rebranding itself as “Voltswagen” in the U.S. (Coppola & Rauwald, 2021; Wayland, 2021). That same day VW changed its name on its US website, launched a new VW Twitter handle, and posted related content on its social media channels. This led to publicity in news media such as BBC (BBC, 2021) and CNBC (Wayland, 2021), as well as discussions on social media and industry forums revealing people’s opinions and emotions concerning the change. Discussion centred around whether it was an April Fools’ Day joke and the company’s involvement

in World War Two. This indicates VW's second organizational message in this case, rebranding its name into Voltswagen, as well as stakeholders' attempts to re-interpret and reshape this message into related messages such as one about VW's history. DMAs included Owned (VW website), Shared (VW's and stakeholders' social media channel as well as industry forums), and Earned (BBC, CNBC, Al Jazeera etc.).

On March 30th, VW's employees released information anonymously revealing that renaming of VW was indeed a prank to promote the company's first all-electric SUV, the ID.4 (Boston, 2021). The next day, VW announced that its renaming was done in the context of April Fools' Day (Coppola & Rauwald, 2021). It made this claim via its official Twitter account, stating: "What began as an April Fool's effort got the whole world buzzing. Turns out people are as passionate about our heritage as they are about our electric future. So, whether it's Voltswagen or Volkswagen, people talking about electric driving and our ID.4 can only be a good thing" (Volkswagen @VW Mar 31). This indicates a third organizational message from VW: the renaming was an April Fool's joke. This message was reported by several online news media and industry magazines as a sequel to their previous reports about the prank, which led to discussions in the news media and social media linking VW to past indiscretions, such as VW's emissions scandal known as 'dieselgate'. Stakeholders speculated whether VW had fooled anyone or whether VW itself was the fool. Stakeholder sentiment ranged between positive and negative. Some praised VW's cleverness while others expressed disappointment that the renaming was a prank. Among the critics were public figures such as TV news anchors. VW posted a meme (an electric wall socket in the image of a face) conveying its message on Twitter. However, stakeholders transformed this meme into new versions and disseminated them on social media and other online platforms, including 9GAG. Even its competitor Tesla took part in hijacking VW's meme to ridicule VW's message. Advocated DMA is identified through the employee's anonymous message revealing the prank. Earned DMA is identified through reports by Bloomberg, Wall Street Journal, Reuters, Mototrend and many others, while we identify Shared DMA through VW's Twitter account as well as discussions in stakeholder social networks. The re-interpretation of VW's original message conveyed through its meme and subsequent transformation into anti-VW memes indicates Hijacked DMA. Interestingly, we found four different #Voltswagen accounts that were established in March 2021 and yet there was no engagement with these hashtags, perhaps indicating failed hijacking attempts.

Later that same day, VW's U.S. unit released a press announcement on its online newsroom apologizing for its false announcement (Shepardson, Steitz & Schwartz, 2021). While VW's stock prices had initially reacted to the prank by rising, they fell after VW's admission of the prank, which led to conversations beyond VW's own media-arena accounts to discussions across social networks and online news media questioning the lawfulness of manipulating the market. A predominant message spreading through some DMAs was that VW was responsible for an April Fools' Day prank that went wrong. Thus, we identify VW's final fourth message within a two-day timeframe: the company was sorry for misleading stakeholders over the name change. This message of course was rejected by many and reframed as an April Fools' Day prank that went wrong and that VW may be responsible for manipulating the markets. Owned DMA included VW's online newsroom (where

the company published its press release). Earned DMA included Reuters, Global News and many other news outlets. Shared DMA was in evidence through message contagion in social media networks and VW's own social media accounts.

Overall, VW's message was re-shaped by many types of stakeholders participating in multiple DMAs in dramatic and impacting ways over the course of just a few days. A quick search through discussions across these DMAs showed a dominance of negative engagement with VW's message.

Although we did not find evidence of Paid DMA in this case, strategic communication scholars and practitioners would be very familiar with examples from other cases. However, Rented DMA and Searched DMA were involved in this VW prank case. For example, the renaming prank can be seen as a part of VW's recent campaign to increase awareness of its electric vehicle production. Around the same time of the renaming announcement, VW released a "Before..." campaign focusing on the ways its electric SUV (ID.4) can improve everyday life. As part of the campaign three short films were produced with VW's brand ambassador, racing driver Tanner Foust, appearing on one of them (Volkswagen, US Media Site, Press Release). Here we identify Rented DMA through VW's collaboration with a social media influencer in Foust's own social media sites.

VW's strong presence on Searched DMA was evident on search engines results, such as via Google, between April 8 and 8, 2021. The search term "Volkswagen" resulted in relevant hits across the first few pages of Google. These search results included VW's country-specific web pages. However, the search terms "rename" and "prank" combined with "Volkswagen" resulted in an extensive list of Earned DMA (multiple news reports) across the first few search pages. VW's Owned DMA only appeared several pages into these search results, indicating VW's weak control over its message in Searched DMA during this period. Thus, we would expect dominance of negative engagement with VW's message in these Searched DMA.

## **Conclusions**

This chapter introduces the reader with the main opportunities and challenges offered to strategic communication professionals as result of the increasing digitalization of communications in the last decade. The chapter outlines an important tension between understanding digital media as transmission channels and participatory environments. The dual nature of the digital environment has implications for the practice of strategic communication as well as for the handling of an organization's overall stakeholder relations. To address these challenges in part, the chapter presents a theoretical framework that can be used to explain, plan and assess digital strategic communications.

The DMA framework promotes the usefulness of two-way dialogic-yet-strategic communication across all eight DMAs. The practical value of the DMA framework is that it may assist organizational communicators to make strategic choices in what, where, how and with whom organizations can communicate. Theoretically, this framework bridges two different strains of literature lines by encompassing digital media (i.e., transmission channels) and digital arenas (i.e., discussion forums) under one banner: DMAs.

One of the limitations of this framework is that the boundaries between different types of DMA are not always rigid. Instead, strategic communication must acknowledge the ambiguity related to each DMA and the blurred boundaries between them. Another limitation of this chapter is that the framework does not show digital strategic communication through DMAs as a process. Future research should consider examining how organizational messages progress through DMAs, at what speed, as well as how they change in this process.

Another fruitful line of inquiry could be conceptualization and measurement of how engagement in these DMAs shapes varying levels of stakeholder perceptions on trust in the organization and its message. Research has shown that audiences place a high level of trust in messages reported in the news (Earned DMA). We would expect similarly high levels of trust in messages conveyed through Rented and Advocated DMA and lower trust in messages conveyed through Hijacked and even Paid DMA. Trust in Searched DMA would prove interesting, given public concerns and debate over Big Tech's powerful influence over search algorithms. This issue of DMA trust is important to strategic communication professionals handling digital communications for their clients and organizations and planning how to effectively manage stakeholders' perceptions of and responses to organizational messages.



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