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Communication maturity: The next big thing? A critical review of maturity models in strategic communication and their contribution to measurement & evaluation and excellence

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THE CHALLENGE

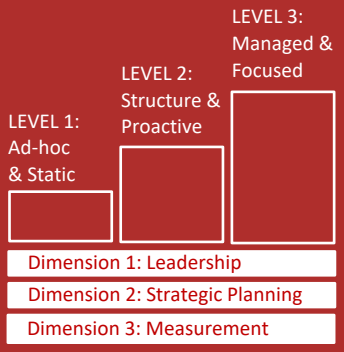
- In response to the increasing importance of digital technologies and AI for communications, researchers and practitioners have become interested **in analytical concepts and management approaches from informatics and software engineering** like agile planning or business intelligence (van Ruler, 2021; Weber & Zerfass, 2023)
- Another promising approach that originates in these disciplines are **maturity models** (Hein-Pensel et al., 2023)
- Many practitioners have already started to develop and promote maturity models for strategic communication. They focus on different aspects of managing communications, e.g., content management (Contently, 2018), internal communications (Staffbase, 2021), or communication measurement and evaluation (M&E) (AMEC, 2018)
- However, only a few scholars have been examining communication maturity and maturity models so far (Bochenek & Blili, 2013; Gilkerson et al., 2019; Johansson et al., 2019; Swenson et al., 2018)
- **Research gap**: No consistent definition of the concept of communication maturity; the academic debate is not linked to the professional discourse; unclear contribution of the concept to prevailing debates in our discipline

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

- Scholars from interdisciplinary research have criticized the lack of a concise theoretical foundation of maturity modeling (e.g., Pöppelbuß et al., 2011; van Looy et al., 2011; Wendler, 2012), which is also evident for work on maturity and maturity models in the field of strategic communication
- At the same timw, concepts like M&E (e.g., AMEC, 2018; Gilkerson et al., 2018; Swenson et al., 2018; UNECE, 2021) and communication excellence (e.g., Akhtar, 2016; Contently, 2018; Johansson et al., 2019; Staffbase, 2021) are frequently debated in the context of communication maturity

MATURITY AND MATURITY MODELS:

- Maturity defines the state of an organization or function in relation to **"a desired or normally occurring end stage"** (Mettler, 2011, p. 83)
- Maturity models delineate patterns in the development of organizational capabilities based on successive stages that map **a desired development path from a baseline state to a target** maturity level (Fraser et al., 2002)
- The concept of maturity and maturity models have attracted the attention of scholars and practitioners in various disciplines, such as **strategic management, political science, and innovation management** (Röglinger et al., 2012; Wendler, 2012)



Example for a maturity model.

RQ1: HOW CAN THE CONCEPT OF COMMUNICATION MATURITY BE USED IN THE FIELD OF STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION?

An extensive literature review shows:

- Most of the academic and professional literature **does not conceptualize communication maturity** at all.
- The few definitions of communication maturity in research are **too specific** (Gilkerson et al., 2019; Johansson et al., 2019) and cannot be used broadly.
- Nevertheless, **six generic characteristics** were identified in the analysis, which help to define the term ➔

Communication maturity is…

(1) a **dynamic** concept

(2) that describes successive stages of development of **communication management capabilities and practices** in relation to a target state depending on

(3) the **alignment** of communication strategy with organizational strategy,

(4) individual **perceptions** of organizational members,

(5) and **capability-specific characteristics** that influence creating and demonstrating the value of communication for organizational success.

(6) The purpose of the concept of communication maturity is to **support the creation and demonstration of the value creation** of corporate communications to the overall organizational success.

RQ2: HOW DOES THE CONCEPT OF COMMUNICATION MATURITY RELATE TO THE DISCOURSE ON COMMUNICATION EVALUATION, MEASUREMENT, AND EXCELLENCE IN STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION?

Figure 2. *Comparing communication evaluation, excellence, and maturity.*

Concept	Dimension(s) of analysis	Associated models	Auxiliary concept	Application in practice	Result
Communication evaluation	Communication activities & Communication management	Communication evaluation models/frameworks, e.g., • PR Effectiveness Yardstick (Lindenmann, 1997) • Integrated Framework for Evaluation & Measurement (Buhmann & Volk, 2022)	Measurement	M&E methods and tools (for specific units of assessment), e.g., • Social media tracking • Stakeholder survey	Descriptive, prescriptive and/or comparative evaluation
Communication excellence	Communication management	Communication excellence models/frameworks, e.g., • Grunig et al., 2002 • Tench et al., 2017	Measurement	No auxiliary tools and programs for standardized application	Descriptive, prescriptive and/or comparative evaluation
Communication maturity	Communication management	Communication maturity models, e.g., • CMI (Johansson et al., 2019) • M3 (AMEC, 2018) • The Staffbase Internal Communications Maturity Assessment (Staffbase, 2021)	Measurement	• Assessment tools and methods (e.g., questionnaires, checklists) • Maturity model tools for evaluation, improvement, and/or benchmarking	Descriptive, prescriptive and/or comparative evaluation

- The liaison of debates in maturity research and communication research and practice has shown that maturity models can support value creation and the demonstration of relevance of strategic communication.
- Maturity models operate at the interface of communication evaluation and excellence.
- Communication maturity is therefore a **bridging concept** between communication evaluation and excellence.
- At the same time, maturity models cannot serve as universal tools for the discipline.

Implications for the profession:

- ✓ Use maturity models for evaluating and improving communication management practices, not for communication activities
- ✓ Critically reflect on the suitability of using a maturity model for your object of investigation
- ✓ Do not introduce maturity models separately from the existing approaches in the field of M&E, excellence, and value creation in your organization

Next steps for research:

- Expand this foundational work empirically
- Explore the triangular relationship between communication maturity, communication M&E, and communication excellence
- Explore how organizations progress along the continuum of communication maturity
- Explore how communication maturity affects organizational improvement culture and organizational learning