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Measurement and Evaluation: Framework, Methods, and Critique

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Abstract

Measurement and evaluation (M&E) is the cornerstone of strategic communication: Whether and how the purposeful use of communication contributes to realizing the mission, strategy or particular objectives of an organization, builds on and is assessed through M&E. The relevance of the M&E debate has significantly increased over the course of recent decades as budgets in various areas of strategic communication have continued to grow. This has increased the pressure to develop evidence-based strategy and tactics and provide 'hard proof' of how communication contributes to organisational goals. This chapter reviews the state of the debate by introducing foundational M&E concepts as well as an integrated framework for M&E in strategic communication. Based on this framework, this chapter discusses the state of the art in M&E methods and tools, and develops critical perspectives and future directions for research and practice in this important strategic communication domain.

Key words: strategic communication management, evaluation, measurement, key performance indicators, communication value, alignment

Introduction

One of the biggest challenges facing communication practitioners today is using measurement and evaluation (M&E) to provide sound evidence that their activities are creating value and contributing to fulfilling their organization's goals (Zerfass et al., 2017). This challenge notwithstanding, communication M&E has been a major focus in the professional and academic debate for over 50 years (Likely & Watson, 2013). Most of this long-standing debate has focused on M&E of public relations campaigns in particular. When addressing M&E of strategic communication more broadly, however, this campaign focus has to be widened significantly to encompass not only the various types of the *purposeful use of communication* by an organization or other entity to engage in conversations of strategic significance to its goals (i.e., strategic communication activities). It needs to include also the various attempts to *manage communication* of strategic significance with regard to an organization or entity -- c.f. Zerfass et al.'s (2018) distinction between strategic communication and strategic communication management. While the former encompasses the M&E of, e.g., different messages, channels, campaigns or entire programs, the latter consists of M&E of, e.g., management systems, dashboards and tools, processes, or communication practitioners. Furthermore, a discussion of M&E in this domain has to develop and work with concepts and approaches broad enough to be able to relate diverse fields including corporate communication, public relations, health communication, financial communication, marketing communication, public diplomacy, political communication, and other specialized communication areas.

In this chapter, we introduce key concepts of for the M&E debate from the perspective of strategic communication, placing a prime focus on the role of M&E in strategic management and on the significance of alignment for (organizational) value creation, which should be the starting point for identifying and defining appropriate measurement methods and metrics. Further, in reviewing different types of M&E, as well as typical stages (such as inputs, outputs, outcomes) and units of assessment (such as campaigns or communication channels), we lay out an integrated framework for M&E in strategic communication. We argue that an expanded understanding, covering both the activities and the management level of strategic communication, is fitting to conceptualize M&E for strategic communication and to develop subsequent M&E approaches. Based on this framework, we then review central methods, tools, and measures that can be applied for M&E at various dimensions of the introduced framework. Finally, we address current critical perspectives and discuss future directions for research and practice in strategic communication M&E.

Theoretical Framework

Foundational concepts

Evaluation is the systematic assessment of the value (quality and cost) of an object. The root term *value* signals that any evaluation makes value judgments. In strategic communication, numerous rationales are used to explain the *value of communication*, such as building reputation, trust, corporate brands, employee motivation or legitimacy. Based on models of value creation from the organizational and business literature as well as on the literature on value creation through strategic communication, four generic and interrelated dimensions of value creation can be distinguished (Zerfass and Viertmann, 2017). Following this understanding, strategic communication:

1. enables operations, as it raises publicity, attention, customer preferences, and employee commitment and thus keeps the organization running and ensures immediate success in terms of primary objective;
2. builds intangible values, as it fosters reputation, brands, and corporate culture and, thus, creates the immaterial assets that are the basis for sustainable long-term success;
3. ensures flexibility, as it builds relationships, trust, and legitimacy and, thus, secures the organization's license to operate and increases its room for maneuver;
4. adjusts strategy, as it monitors the organization's environment, thus increasing the reflective capacities of strategic management decisions. This secures thought leadership, innovation potential, and crisis resilience.

Accordingly, the value of communication can be seen on both the strategic (long-term: dimensions 3 and 4) and operational (short-term: dimensions 1 and 2) level. As it is both a function that supports primary activities across the whole organization and a resource for learning and strategic decision-making, strategic communication needs to be evaluated not just in terms of the intended effect of a message or campaign, but in terms of its strategic and operational contributions for the whole organization (Zerfass & Volk, 2018). Further, according to the distinction between the level of strategic communication (activities) on the one hand and strategic communication management on the other, M&E in in this domain has to assess the value added both with a view on messages, channels, campaigns etc. *as well as* on the structures, practitioners, management systems, processes etc. that the former activities are based on.

All such evaluations, on the level of activities and management practices alike, in turn, are based on *measurement*, which is the use of qualitative or quantitative (social scientific) research methods to generate data and insights as a central element of value assessments. This is done with research instruments (such as survey questionnaires or semi-structured interview guides for focus groups) that generate metrics or qualitative insights which can be used as performance indicators to compare targets and actual results (target-performance comparison). Metrics that aggregate critical and strategically relevant information in a single result are called key performance indicators (KPIs) (van Ruler & Körver, 2019).

Ultimately, the value contribution of communication to the realization of organizational strategy depends on the *alignment* of communication with organizational strategy (Volk & Zerfass, 2018). Figure 1 illustrates how alignment for communication value creation can be achieved by a) deriving communication goals and objectives[1] from organizational strategy, using these objectives to b) define measures for the validation of the achievement of communication goals, and c) verifying that these measures are able to meaningfully capture actual communication activities (at the level of products, campaigns or more long-term programs). Value creation, in turn, can then unfold 'upwards' (and substantiated with evidence through M&E) when communication activities d) move and directly affect the chosen measures, which are e) relevant and informative to an evaluation of activities in light of communication goals and f) show how communication goals ultimately drives organizational-level value creation.

[1] Objectives are precisely formulated targets that form the steps or 'building blocks' to achieve more general (and often aspirational) goals. Communication objectives can be formulated based on the so-called "SMART" formula, an acronym for setting objectives that are specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time bound. Precisely formulated communication objectives are a necessary prerequisite for effective evaluation.

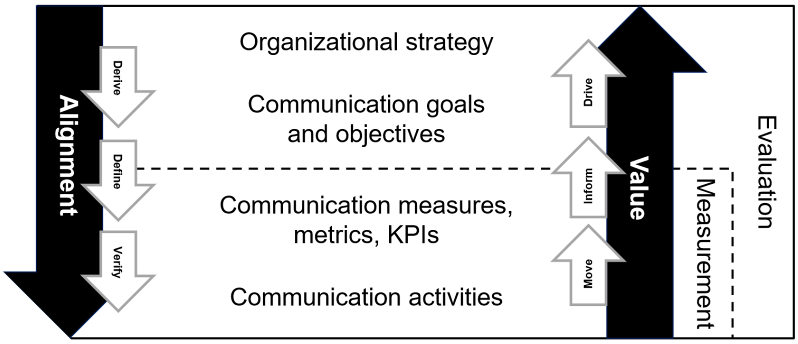

Figure 1: The role of alignment and value creation in communication measurement and evaluation

Three types of measurement and evaluation

In relation to the broader management process, M&E in strategic communication can be further specified alongside to the basic *management cycle* that consists of four core elements (Figure 2): 1) situation analysis (formative research and needs assessment with a view on the organization and its environment); 2) planning (strategizing, objective setting, tactical planning); 3) implementation (strategy execution), and 4) evaluation to show if objectives were met (accountability) and how they were met (improvement/learning), which may provide feedback for future planning.

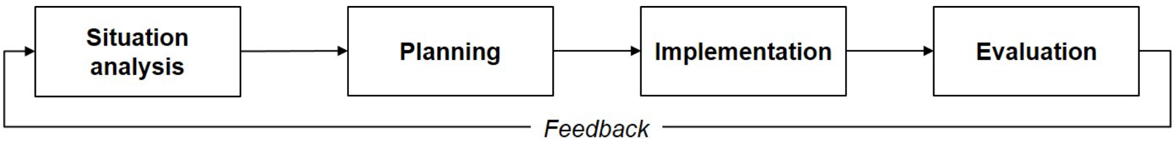

Figure 2: The basic management cycle

Actual strategic management processes are, of course, more 'disordered' than this cycle would suggest and usually play out in an iterative fashion. This emphasizes the importance of evaluation for all elements of the cycle to continuously reinforce the linkage between strategy and operations. For this, three basic and interrelated types of evaluation can be distinguished. First, *formative evaluation* (sometimes: formative research) comprising elements of situation analysis and strategic planning and providing intelligence and insight for strategizing. A baseline for strategic decision-making is provided through organizational listening, environmental scanning, and public opinion research. Specific outcome objectives for purposeful communication activities/products, campaigns and programs are set in the strategic planning stage and later evaluations are conducted against these objectives. Second, *process evaluation* (sometimes: monitoring) tracks ongoing activities during strategy implementation and gathers (often in real time) insights on immediate message distribution and reach, audience attention and engagement, or shifts in stakeholder attitudes. This type focuses on an evaluation of operations and on determining whether processes are 'on track' in relation to predefined targets. Third, *summative evaluation* determines results, looking at how communication activities or the attempts of their management have met their objectives and are contributing to realizing broader communication and organizational strategy. This type emphasizes feedback for both accountability and learning.

Models and stages for measurement and evaluation

Measurement and evaluation models are representations of different (often chronological) stages of M&E and their presumed (causal) relationships. Development of such models dates back many decades and all resemble, more or less, the structure of 'logic models' (see Kellogg Foundation, 2004) and often reflect program theory and the theory of change (Clark and Taplin, 2012) -- see also Macnamara (2018): In their most basic form, these logic models distinguish between inputs (the resources that go into a program), activities (the activities the program undertakes), outputs (the products as a result of the activities), and outcomes (the short-, medium-, and long-term changes or benefits that result from the program). Common models in communication M&E literature -- e.g., Cutlip et al.'s (1985) often-cited Planning, Implementation, Impact Model, Lindenmann's (1997) PR Effectiveness Yardstick, or AMEC's Integrated Evaluation Framework (2016), to name just a few -- distinguish anywhere between four and seven stages with varying labels and definitions (for a historic overview of models see Macnamara and Gregory, 2018). An effort to integrate such models (Buhmann & Likely 2018) has condensed these varying approaches into five main *stages*.

1) *Inputs* comprise the resources needed to prepare and produce communication (e.g., strategic objectives, budget, employee assignment; as such, the inputs stage is the bridge between planning and implementation).
2) *Outputs* comprise the communication that is published and received by the target audience and can be further distinguished between primary outputs (e.g., number of press releases, websites, events, etc.) and secondary outputs (actual media coverage, event attendance, reach etc.).
3) *Outtakes* comprise what the target audience does with the communication (e.g., attention, awareness, engagement etc.). The importance of this stage grew significantly with the spread of social media and the ability to measure different forms of stakeholder engagement digitally (e.g. through likes, comments, shares, return visits to websites etc.).
4) *Outcomes* comprise the effect of communication on the target audience (e.g., knowledge, attitudes, intentions, behavior, etc.).
5) *Impact* (sometimes also referred to as 'outgrowth') comprises the long-term value created (often only in part) by communication at the organizational level (e.g. reputation, relationships, customer loyalty) or the societal level (e.g., social equity, public trust, justice).

Units of assessment

In line with the prior distinction between strategic communication (activities) on the one hand and strategic communication management on the other, two basic clusters of evaluation objects can be distinguished. At the level of communication activities, units of assessment can be distinguished according to their level of aggregation, ranging from: individual *products* (evaluated rather in the short term according to, e.g., distribution, reach, tonality, or likes), to *campaigns* (evaluated in the short- and mid-term with an emphasis on campaign engagement and outcomes such as attitude change), to entire *programs*, i.e., 'bundles' of campaigns (evaluated across the whole range of implementation, reaching all the way to the long-term impacts on organizational or even societal value creation). As such, these units of strategic communication assessment are 'nested', meaning that strategic communication products are elements of campaigns, which in turn are part of larger programs. The level of complexity and the time horizon (short-, medium-, and long-term) of M&E increases with each unit and therefore requires the aggregation and combination of diverse methods, measures or KPIs. With increasing aggregation levels (low, medium, high), data granularity will typically decrease.

At the level of strategic communication management, units of assessment can be distinguished between the level of *individual* units (such as communication practitioners, but also processes, systems or tools) and the level of the communication *function* (comprising the aggregation of all the former individual units charged with managing communications across the organization, not bunt to an individual department).

The above discussion, which builds and further extends on previous work on M&E in strategic communication (cf. esp. Buhmann & Likely, 2018), can be visually summarized in an integrated framework that relates the basic management cycle to a) the three types of formative, process, and summative M&E, b) the five stages of M&E during implementation (inputs - outputs - outtakes - outcomes - impact), and c) the five units of assessment at the level of strategic communication *activities* as well as strategic communication *management*.

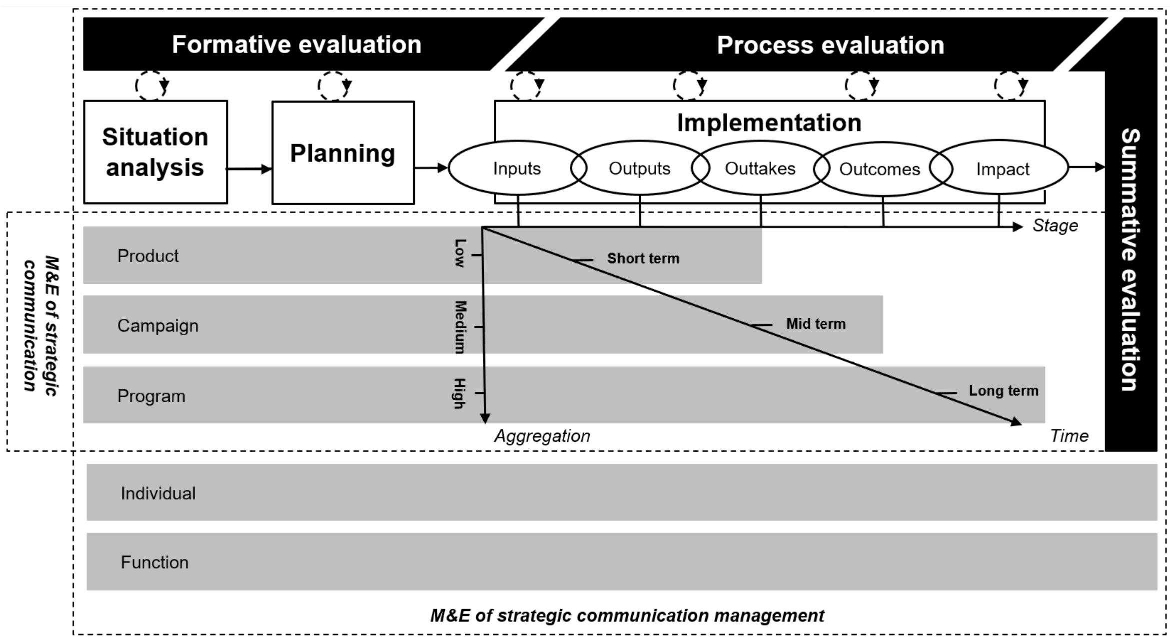

Figure 3. An Integrated Framework for Measurement and Evaluation in Strategic Communication (based on Buhmann & Likely 2018)

Tools, Methods, and Measures

A variety of methods and tools may be applied for measuring and evaluating the effects of strategic communication along the previously described stages . Methods for M&E typically comprise the full spectrum of quantitative and qualitative social scientific research methods, such as content analyses, surveys, interviews, focus groups, experiments, or observations. Besides such formal methods, informal methods can also be used, for instance when gathering feedback though informal conversations. Several models and frameworks of M&E have allocated appropriate methods for each stage (see e.g., Macnamara, 2016; Volk & Zerfaß, 2021), but most attention has been directed towards describing methods for the *output, outtakes and outcome* stages and towards the M&E of communication *products* and *campaigns*. These typically include clippings and media response analyses, stakeholder surveys, or social network analyses. In contrast, few models have specifically delineated methods and tools suitable for the M&E of the *input and impact* stages and for the management-level units of the *function* and the *individual*.

A holistic M&E approach to strategic communication encompasses the input and impact stages as well as the function and individual unit and, hence, requires the use of empirical research methods not only from the social sciences, but also from related fields such as management and business administration (Zerfaß & Volk, 2019). These often foreground evaluation or analysis "tools", an umbrella term for methods, frameworks, or standardized procedures that support managers in solving problems in a structured manner during situation analysis, strategy formulation/planning, implementation, and evaluation. Many such analysis and evaluation tools have already been adapted and applied to strategic communication. Recent research shows that, among these, tools such as benchmarking, SWOT analyses, scenario analyses, process analyses, or scorecards are increasingly popular (Volk & Zerfass, 2020).

Table 1 summarizes typical methods and tools as well as measures for the M&E of strategic communication according to the previously introduced units of assessment, differentiating between the level of (1) *M&E of strategic communication* and (2) *M&E of strategic communication management*. Importantly, this collection is not exhaustive and the utilization of specific methods is not mutually exclusive for each unit, as these are 'stacked entities' (see above). For each unit, it is possible to identify the *typical emphasis* on specific stages as well as *typical methods and measures* (for a recent overview of methods see, e.g., Watson & Noble, 2014).

Units of assessment	Tools and methods (examples)	Measures (examples)
	(1) M&E of strategic communication	
Product	*Emphasis on outputs and outtakes*	
(press release, social media post)	- Media resonance analysis - Press clippings - Web statistics - Social media tracking - Sentiment analyses	- Distribution - Reach / volume - Visits / impressions / views - Share of voice - Tonality - Likes / shares / comments
Campaign	*Emphasis on outtakes and outcomes*	
(CSR campaign)	- Stakeholder surveys - Touchpoint analysis / customer journey - Comprehensibility analysis - UX research - Eye tracking - Physiological testing - Experiments / pre-testing - Market / audience research	- Awareness - Attention - Recall - Recognition - Comprehensibility - Usability - Understanding - Engagement
Program	*Emphasis on outcomes and impact*	
(change communication)	- Stakeholder surveys - Focus groups - Experiments - Observation - Big data / social media analytics - (Influencer) Network analysis - Conjoint analyses - Reputation valuation - Brand valuation	- Employee commitment - Emotions / feelings - Brand value / equity - Reputation indices - Willingness to recommend / NPS - Intention to buy / vote / donate - Conversion rate - Sales / revenues / donations - Voter turnout - Vaccination rates - Project / contract closure - Cost reduction
	(2) M&E of strategic communication management	
Individual (practitioner, system, platform)	- Management by Objectives (MbO) - Objectives and Key Results (OKR) methodology - Competency analysis - Critical skills gap analysis - Goal achievement matrix - Performance reviews	- Individual performance - Competencies - Skills - Digital readiness / fitness - Job satisfaction
Function (communication department)	- Benchmarking / audits - Materiality analysis - Landscape analysis - Risk, trend, scenario, issues analysis - Process analyses - Performance / efficiency analysis - Budget analyses - Outsourcing - Cost-benefit analysis - Communication maturity index - Digital maturity assessment - Business analytics - *Communication strategy house* - *Value driver trees/Strategy maps* - *Communication scorecards*	- Budget fidelity - Lead times - Error rates - Cost reduction - Productivity - Process quality (internal satisfaction, client relationships)

Table 1. Methods and tools for M&E of strategic communication

Methods and tools for the M&E of strategic communication *activities*:

1. Product (e.g., press release, social media post): For the M&E of communication products, the emphasis is often on outputs and outtakes. Many of the traditional social science research methods already discussed in M&E literature can be applied, including media resonance analysis, web statistics and social media tracking, sentiment analysis, or counting of likes/comments/reach.
2. Campaigns (e.g., CSR campaigns): Numerous works have outlined methods and measures for campaign evaluation (also beyond the PR literature, e.g. in health communication), typically focusing on the outtakes and outcomes stages. A variety of methods from the social sciences can be used, including: stakeholder surveys, experiments and pre-testing of campaign messages (Kim & Cappella, 2019), usability testing or user research (UX), touchpoint analysis or customer journeys, or market or audience research. Typical measures include attention, recall, comprehensibility, usability, or attitude and behavioral changes.
3. Programs (e.g., change program): This unit typically requires the use of long-term measurements of cognitive, attitude or behavioral changes of stakeholder groups, using surveys, focus groups/interviews, or observations. The impact of communication programs on organizational objectives can be measured by means of reputation analyses or brand evaluations (intangible assets), or sales tracking, cost saving analyses, or conjoint analyses (tangible assets). The communicative contributions to society can be analyzed with the aid of population surveys, e.g., to evaluate public trust in the social responsibility or the shared value created by the organization.

Methods and tools for the M&E of strategic communication *management*:

4. Individual (e.g., communicator, platform, tool, system, processes): At the unit of the individual, for example a *communication practitioner*, a range of methods can be applied to evaluate the competencies (management competencies, social media skills, etc.), motivations, organizational identification, or individual job performance, e.g., by means of the Objectives and Key Results (OKR) methodology (Niven and Lamorte, 2016). Efficiency analyses, performance analyses, or benchmarking can be used to assess other individual units, e.g., IT platforms for virtual collaboration. At a meta-level, individual M&E systems (or methods, tools, practitioners) themselves should be subject to annual evaluation to verify that the methods, measures, metrics, and KPIs used are serving their purpose efficiently and effectively (Weiner, 2021), e.g., based on different stages of M&E 'maturity' (Gilkerson et al., 2019).
5. Function (e.g., communication department, units communicating): Methods to evaluate the function include traditional tools from the management field, such as: internal analyses, process analyses, budget analyses, risk / trend analyses, cost-benefit-analyses, outsourcing, or the assessment of client relationships (e.g., with external agencies, internal business partners). These tools are typically used to evaluate the input or primary output stages. At the impact stage, the value contribution of the function to the bottom line of an organization can be assessed with the aid of tools that primarily serve the *strategic planning* and alignment of communication with organizational objectives. Well-known tools include, for instance, the communication strategy house, value driver trees/strategy maps, or communication scorecards. If backed by KPIs and the aforementioned M&E methods, these tools enable a holistic evaluation of communication in the sense of the second perspective.

Once data has been collected through M&E, it is critical to turn data into insights or learnings that can be used to inform future strategy and planning. This requires presenting data gathered by M&E in a meaningful and appropriate manner that addresses different audiences (e.g., communication employees, project managers, top managers, business partners, etc.). Methods for *visualization* become key for presenting M&E insights for all stages and units, especially when presenting large amounts of data. Two of the most popular methods are dashboards and reports (Volk & Zerfass, 2020):

- *Dashboards* are used for presenting data on relevant communication activities at a glance and often in real time. Dashboards visualize data in a clear and comprehensible way, using diagrams and charts, traffic lights or arrows to support quick information processing. Insights gained from real-time social media monitoring and website tracking are usually displayed in dashboards and enable practitioners to make quick but evidence-based decisions, which is essential in crisis situations but also useful for "right time" microtargeting of stakeholders.
- *Reports* show the results achieved in a specific reporting period (e.g., daily, weekly, monthly, quarterly) in a structured way and thereby provide relevant information for future planning and strategic decision-making. Reports can be compiled at the level of individual media/channels, campaigns, programs, or for entire teams or functions. Management reports typically present the value contributions of the whole function by selecting the most strategically relevant KPIs and are composed specifically for upper management.

Critical Perspectives and Future Directions

The state of M&E practice

For years, survey data has suggested that practitioners rarely measure communication effects on the outcome and impact stages and rather focus on more immediate stages of outputs and outtakes (Wright et al., 2009). Two recent survey studies across more than 60 countries in Europe, Southeast Asia, Australia, and New Zealand with more than 2,500 respondents (Macnamara et al., 2017; Zerfass et al., 2017) reveal that among the M&E methods with the highest popularity are press clippings and media response analysis and web tracking; contrarily, analyses of stakeholder attitudes or behavior change, or more sophisticated valuation methods to assess communication impact are rarely used. The fact that communication activities are only seldom linked to intangible or tangible assets is noteworthy, considering that the core value contribution of communication to organizational objectives is typically described as building immaterial values such as reputation or brands (see Zerfass & Volk, 2021).

The critically low level of M&E at the outcome and impact stages in the practice has led to numerous studies investigating the causes of this situation, proclaimed by some as a "stasis" or "deadlock". Survey findings show that practitioners report experiencing barriers such as: lack of time and budgets, lack of management support or interest among clients, lack of M&E knowledge and competencies, or lack of standards on how to perform sophisticated outcome M&E (see Macnamara, 2015 for an overview). Recent conceptual research has identified contextual factors for the successful implementation of M&E in organizations (e.g., pointing to the critical role of culture, leadership, cf. Romenti et al., 2019), but empirical research on the conditions is still lacking.

In recent years, we have also seen a surge in efforts to develop practical frameworks, guidelines and standards for communication M&E, e.g., with the Social Media Measurement Standards Conclave in 2012, the Barcelona Declaration of Measurement Principles (or "Barcelona Principles") in 2010 and again in 2015 and 2020, the Integrated Evaluation Framework proposed by the International Association for the Measurement and Evaluation of Communication (AMEC) in 2016, or the Professional Practice Review on Research, Measurement and Evaluation by the British association CIPR in 2021, as well as the Communicator's Guide to Research Analysis, and Evaluation published by the US-American Institute for Public Relations (IPR) in 2021. Such attempts at standardization in the practice are important as they may resolve impasses in implementing M&E practices, enable better comparability of measurement results, and ultimately, may help to better demonstrate the value of communication—thus ultimately helping to raise the credibility of strategic communication practice (Buhmann et al. 2019).

Empirical evidence also reveals that practitioners sometimes use discredited methods and non-established metrics. Two typical examples include attempts to calculate the *return on investment* (RoI) of strategic communication or *advertising value equivalents* (AVEs) (Watson & Zerfass, 2011). Calculating a RoI would presuppose that both the efforts and costs (investment) and the results (return) can be determined in financial terms (Euros, U.S. dollars, etc.) and that the proportional influence of communication on the financial result can be calculated unambiguously with the help of an input-to-impact value driver chain. Obviously, this is not the case due to the complexity of communication effects and because it is often impossible to break down the costs of communication to targets or stakeholders. Efforts to measure RoIs for strategic communication should therefore be critically questioned. Similarly, attempts to calculate *advertising value equivalents* (AVEs) are invalid and should not be used to assess the 'success' of an organization's media coverage. Researchers and practitioners alike have repeatedly warned against the use of AVEs (e.g., see Barcelona Principles 3.0, Michaelson & Stacks, 2017). The ignorance of established methods or standard models often results in the lack of compatibility with organization-wide evaluation procedures and hampers the comparability of M&E of strategic communication between organizations. Relying on simplified ideas of direct, strong, and linear persuasion models moreover comes with a risk of mis-calculating the actual effects of communication processes and overestimating or overpromising the success of communication (Nothhaft and Stensson, 2019).

A major challenge of contemporary M&E practice is to cope with disruptive changes in organizations, media use patterns of stakeholders in hybrid media ecosystems, new gatekeepers, and technological and environmental trends. In view of current concepts of new work and agility, M&E practices are challenged by the introduction of agile methods (e.g., Scrum, Kanban, etc.) in organizations, which require corresponding target systems and KPIs in line with new agile organizational forms (van Ruler, 2019). In times of disinformation and fragmented audiences, real-time monitoring across platforms, media outlets, and new gatekeepers (e.g., influencers, corporate ambassadors) becomes key to recognize potentially risky developments (e.g., fake news) more quickly and create "right time" responses. Digitalization and innovations in artificial intelligence and automation open up many new opportunities for M&E of digital strategic communication. Ultimately, in view of current ecological debates, organizations will also have to find suitable answers to questions about the sustainability and ecological footprint of M&E processes and structures.

The state of M&E research

While the lack of M&E at the level of outcome and impact as well as the reasons for it (M&E 'barriers') have been studied extensively, extant research heavily relies on descriptive data, mostly from standardized surveys relying on self-reports of practitioners. While these help identify potential barriers, they do not explore the actual motivations behind performing M&E or not and they do not show how strongly these different motivations actually affect practitioners' M&E behavior.

Most research in M&E follows a functionalist, positivist and partially normative approach, which can be attested, e.g., by quantitative practitioner surveys assessing "the state of the field" or the development of applicable best practice models for M&E. Further, this is evident in the ignoring of intervening variables or elusive, hidden, indirect or prevented effects of communication in M&E models. The prevalence of rationalistic and instrumental assumptions has recently been problematised for being too narrow, control focussed and organisation centric, combined with a call for more open, continuous, dynamic and expanded approaches (Macnamara and Gregory, 2018). Yet, critical inquiries and qualitative and interpretive approaches remain strongly underrepresented in the M&E literature (Macnamara, 2014).

Research following this direction could move beyond the strong focus on normative models to build a better understanding of actual M&E practices, e.g., exploring what motivates or hampers the application of different M&E approaches in practice. Improving practices and fostering professionalism through the development of positivist, prescriptive, functionalist or normative scholarship should not be the only goal. Responding to earlier calls, we instead advocate for research employing a practice perspective on M&E theorizing and studies. We believe that a turn towards a practice perspective would allow scholars to better reflect the logics and (ir)rationalities of practice and, e.g., shed new light on the often-discussed barriers of M&E practices. By observing and studying how M&E practitioners act and interact in the organisation on a day-to-day basis, scholars would gain a deeper understanding of the social mechanisms underlying M&E practices.

Relatedly, few works have so far explored the possible "pathologies" in specific evaluation practices and of evaluation as a whole. For instance, previous research has shown that communicators may feign expertise in evaluation, whitewash data and produce invalid or unreliable reports (Place, 2015). From this perspective, evaluation becomes rather a form of self-justification that fixates on performance, rationality and objectivity to stabilise some particular ideology. It is conceivable that evaluators shade, over generalize, or tamper results to support particular goals or decisions in compliance within an established power structure. Such "pseudo-evaluations" are a recognised issue in evaluation in many other domains (Stufflebeam and Coryn, 2014), but are rarely addressed in research on M&E in strategic communication.

Finally, especially the wider 'field-agnostic' view of strategic communication scholarship should be utilized to continue recent efforts to overcome the fragmentation of the debate into siloed subfields. Such research could relate the M&E debates taking place, e.g., in the fields of health communication, science communication, public diplomacy, marketing and brand communications, or political communication. One recent attempt to reach out for insights from one of the neighbouring fields has been put forward by Macnamara and Likely (2017), who suggested a disciplinary "home visit" to the field of programme evaluation that could inform the search for standards and overcome the long-standing stasis in practice. Strikingly, the majority of M&E literature has so far neglected to import highly relevant knowledge generated in the neighbouring disciplines - including business administration, public administration, or controlling - and communication subfields.

Looking ahead, we advocate for continued cooperation between science and practice to search for answers to some of the aforementioned directions and we call for interdisciplinary perspectives on M&E.

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