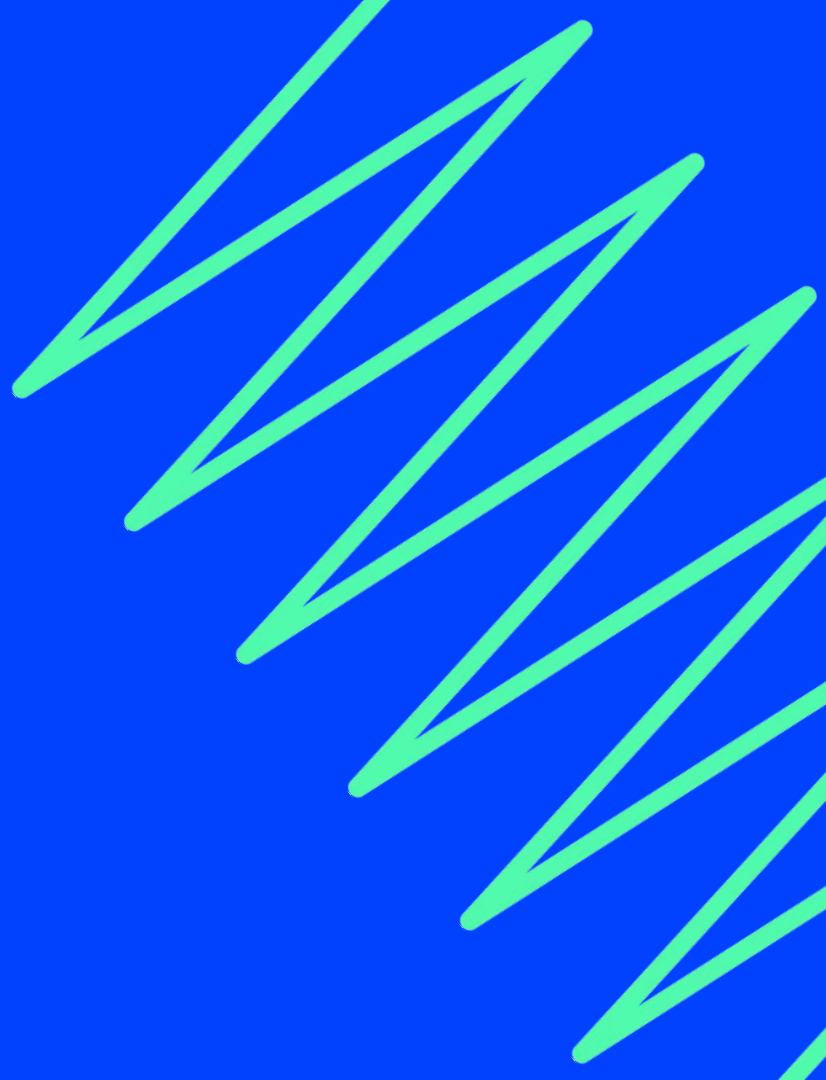# The evolving nature of crisis communications management

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Understanding the need for crisis communications management

This Vuelio best practice guide takes a contemporary view of crisis communications management. It is designed to help organisations understand the need for a crisis communications management strategy and how to prepare for, respond to, and recover from a crisis.

We've spoken to a range of experts and organisations to understand best practice approaches to managing risk from a communications perspective.

Let's start with some definitions and perspectives on organisational issues and crises.

A crisis is a situation that develops suddenly and threatens to have a severe negative impact on an organisation. Crises disrupt normal day-to-day operations and activities and can jeopardise an organisation's financial performance, safety of employees or companies, ability to function, and reputation.

A crisis is distinct from an issue, but the two are related. An organisational issue represents an ongoing, persistent concern rather than a sudden event. It is less severe than a crisis but has the potential to escalate and become a crisis if it is not addressed by management.

We operate in an increasingly complex world of interconnected systems. An issue in one area can result in an unforeseen crisis in another. Brexit, COVID-19, and geopolitical tension are all examples of this situation. It has given rise to the concept of perma-crisis or the permanent state of crisis.

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The global risk outlook for 2024

The [World Economic Forum](#) reports annually on global risks. It explores some of the most severe risks we may face over the next decade against rapid technological change, economic uncertainty, a warming planet, and conflict. It's an important source to consider as part of an organisation's risk register.

The top five risks identified over the next two years by [The World Economic Forum Global Risks Report 2024](#) are set out below.

1. Misinformation and disinformation
The rapid spread of false and manipulated information could undermine public trust in facts and institutions. This could fuel polarisation in societies and trigger unrest that disrupts organisations.

2. Extreme weather events and climate change
The UN highlights dangers like extreme heat, drought, wildfires, and flooding that could disrupt business operations and supply chains. There are also longer-term risks, such as rising sea levels, that could affect organisations in coastal areas.

3. Social polarisation
This is an interconnected risk, with the potential to trigger and be influenced by many other risks, such as economic downturn, erosion of human rights, and technological risks. Consequences of polarisation include declining social cohesion, gridlocks in decision-making, economic disruption, increased political polarisation, and violent unrest.

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4. Cyberattacks
Cyber insecurity is a significant threat that could paralyse critical infrastructure and systems. Ransomware attacks could hold organisations digitally hostage and cause significant financial and reputational damage. These are also a potential form of insider-based attacks.

5. Geopolitical conflict
The outbreak or escalation of conflicts impacts global supply chains, financial markets, and access to resources. Organisations with international operations face significant geopolitical uncertainty.

The World Economic Forum analysis is based on a core source of original risks data, harnessing insights from nearly 1,500 experts across academia, business, government, civil society, and thought leadership. The severity and impact of 34 global risks are evaluated over a scale across different time horizons.

As we look to a ten-year outlook, issues related to the impact of climate change rise up the leaderboard of issues. These include migration and pollution. The overreach of artificial intelligence is also cited as a long-term significant concern.

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The changing nature of organisational risk

The value-based crisis
The list of issues highlighted by the World Economic Forum marks a significant shift in crisis communications from product and organisational risk to values-based risk.

The collective response to COVID-19 humanised crisis communications. It marked a shift in how organisations respond to events. Progressive organisations prioritise wellbeing and mental health alongside other aspects of the response effort. It has led to organisations leaning into their values and reflecting these in external communications.

Three years on, this has created a new form of crisis in which the political and social values of the organisation conflict with at least half its customers. While some organisations, such as Patagonia, build political values into their brand identity, most prefer to avoid culture wars and polarising issues.

The values-based crisis is a new dynamic for crisis communications management.

An organisational or product crisis follows a U-shape through the stages of crisis over two to four years. Harvard Business Review characterised the values-based crisis as L-shape where reputation damage has a long tail due to the culture backlash that permanently alienates some customers.

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The rise of insider risk
A report and accompanying toolkit published by the
[National Protective Security Authority (NPSA)](#) in October
2023 noted a significant increase in so-called insider
events. These are events caused by individuals who
have authorised access to an organisation's resources
acting intentionally or accidentally against the
organisation's interests.These types of cases have
increased significantly in recent years.

Factors driving insider risk include societal changes,
economic pressures, declining trust in institutions, and
rapid digital transformation.

As cyber defences increase, bad actors are likely to
target an organisation's workforce to secure intelligence
or to cause disruption.

In 2021, a departing employee from Pfizer was accused
of downloading 12,000 files, including those pertaining to
its COVID-19 vaccine to share it with a competitor.

The year before, an individual was prosecuted by Cisco
for accessing its network months after they had left the
company to sabotage 456 virtual machines, causing
millions of dollars in damages.

'People may be an organisation's most important asset,
but if you have people, you have insider risk. Effective
communication is critical in helping leaders be insider
risk-ready,' says the NPSA.

'It goes so much further than managing reputational risk,
it can make an organisation less vulnerable to attack in
the first place, and should an event occur, enhances how
well it recovers reputational trust, inside and out.'

'Risks are often viewed as an externality that happens to
an organisation. The vast majority of threats stem from
internal issues – including operational, leadership,
structural, governance, decision-making, behavioural,
and cultural factors,' said Rod Cartwright.

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Cartwright is a board advisor and independent counsellor on reputation, crisis, risk, and resilience. He is also a special advisor to the [CIPR Crisis Communications Network](#).

The Post Office Horizon IT scandal is an example of an event created because an internal issue is overlooked or covered up.

Cartwright suggests that in focusing on external factors, organisations should consider whether they have developed a blind spot for sources of internally-generated reputation and enterprise risk.

Planning for risk from a communications perspective

If handled poorly, crises can negatively impact a company's operations, revenue, valuation, and reputation. However, companies that prepare well can emerge from crises stronger.

The basics of good crisis communications management in terms of preparation and management process are timeless. However, threats and channels will constantly change, meaning regularly reviewing and developing plans is essential.

In large organisations, risk management is a management discipline in its own right. An organisation's risk register will categorise risk areas and mitigation in case of a risk issue.

The robust capability of the corporate communications function to respond to issues and crises as part of an integrated organisational response is a legacy of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Communications teams tested crisis plans and their execution in terms of technology, media, and processes.

Horizon scanning is a best practice way of understanding organisational risk from a communications perspective. It should bring together a cross-functional team representing all areas of the organisation, including but not limited to management, operations, legal, IT, marketing, and communications.

There are several tools to help support risk management from a communications perspective.

'No tool offers a crystal ball, but asking the right questions helps you understand internal and external risk issues and how you may need to respond,' said Sarah Waddington CBE, a management consultant and professional advisor.

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The role of the corporate communications or public relations function is to provide an external perspective and consider the reputational impact of a crisis as part of these activities.

Risk planning should focus on examining all aspects of risk around an organisation. A relationship perspective or environmental, social, and governance context can be useful. It should be a creative activity that envisages worse-case scenarios.

The threats identified during this activity will be based on their potential impact on the organisation in terms of business operations, revenue, valuation, and reputation. These should be categorised into common areas and characterised by likelihood and impact.

This risk matrix should form the basis of a crisis management plan. It should set out action steps for the first 24 hours for each threat level including plans for decision-making processes, communications strategies and guidelines, stakeholders to contact, background materials, and checklists.

The role of corporate communications or public relations during a crisis is focused on managing crisis communications, maintaining public trust, coordinating stakeholder outreach, upholding reputation, and exhibiting leadership.

Crisis preparedness should be tested through simulation exercises. These will reveal process gaps, build team resilience under pressure, and allow you to refine your plans. Finally, continuously monitor for new threats and regularly review and update plans, especially for high-severity risks.

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The importance of diversity and representation in communications teams

Since the Grenfell Tower disaster and the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been a growing recognition of the need for diversity and representation within a crisis response team. The response effort should involve community members that it seeks to engage.

Ronke Lawal is the founder of Ariatu PR. She's a public relations specialist focusing on reaching Black audiences and engaging with African and Caribbean diaspora communities.

'There have been many instances where unnecessary crises arise because the team has a limited understanding of cultural diversity. Hiring diverse talent can help mitigate these risks by providing cultural insights and guiding the team towards more informed decision-making,' said Lawal.

There's a second driver that makes a culturally diverse workforce a critical issue. Shifting from product and organisational communications to values-based communications means authenticity and integrity are crucial. This is where diversity and inclusivity become a business-critical issue.

Aby Hawker is the founder and CEO of TransMission PR, a communications consultancy specialising in transgender and non-binary inclusion and awareness.

'Language matters profoundly. Organisations must seek input on appropriate terminology and consider the impact of communications on marginalised communities. At the same time, it is vital to avoid the use of blanket inclusive terms, which can be reductive, leading to a backlash with far more significant repercussions from a brand perspective than the ones the campaign was originally designed to avoid,' said Hawker.

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Preparing for a communications response in a crisis

Crisis preparedness needs to focus not just on reputational risk but also on mapping and managing relationship risks. It should look at internal operational, cultural, and behavioural factors.

There is a tendency for a prescription approach to crisis planning. Technology, policies, processes, and plans are locked down during a planning exercise and triggered in the event of a crisis.

While best practice risk preparation should involve risk assessment, scenario planning for potential crises, and developing response plans and procedures, an overly prescriptive approach can also be counterproductive.

Cartwright says that the best-laid plan rarely survives impact with a full-blown crisis.

'Risk registers, heat maps and risk appetite statements are essential for any organisation. But they are also only the start. Resilience is a cultural outcome, not an operational process or a job title,' he said.

'Unless you are systematically and imaginatively preparing for potential real-world crisis scenarios - the foreseeable manifestation of 'paper' risks - your preparedness is almost guaranteed to fall short.'

'The first response of communications teams in a crisis is often to jump to writing statements and think about communications channels rather than thinking strategically,' said Kate Hartley, author of 'Communicate in a Crisis' and founder of Polpeo, a crisis simulation platform.

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Lucy Easthope, an expert and adviser on emergency planning and disaster recovery, advocates for training in plans and personnel across an organisation, rather than an elite response team.

'Crisis response often relies on a partnership between local government, public health, public and private sectors. Assumptions from even one or two years ago may no longer apply, so refreshers are vital,' she said.

Easthope was speaking to the CIPR Crisis Communications Network in January 2024. She is a Professor in Practice of Risk and Hazard at the University of Durham, co-founder of the [After Disaster Network](#) and author of 'When the Dust Settles'.

Hartley founded Polpeo to support organisations with crisis preparedness and response.

Its software platform allows organisations to prepare for potential crises and threats. A crisis simulation exercise enables organisations to identify weaknesses in their plans, leading to better crisis readiness.

'Management realises the importance of communications when in an actual crisis, but only sometimes invest enough in preparation. Simulations demonstrate the value of crisis planning,' said Hartley.

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CIPR guidance on crisis management planning

The CIPR published a skills guide called [Drafting a Crisis Communication Plan](#) in September 2023. It outlines the stages of a crisis and the steps to cover when assessing risk and writing a crisis communication plan.

The key points set out in the document are outlined below.

Definition and scope
- Clearly define what constitutes a crisis for your organisation. A crisis poses an existential threat and requires swift action.

- Understand how your organisation's crisis management team is structured, the roles, and decision-making authority. The communication team must integrate with them.

Risk assessment
- Identify and prioritise reputational risks. Analyse how they could unfold into a real-world crisis. Use a red/amber/green framework.

Stakeholders
- Map all internal and external stakeholders. Understand their needs and expectations during a crisis. Keep contacts updated.

Channels
- Identify channels to reach stakeholders during a crisis - media, social media, website, intranet, etc. Select channels based on stakeholder preferences.

Messaging
- Develop high-level messages for likely crisis scenarios. Focus on empathy, responsibility, and action. Establish sign-off procedures to enable swift approvals.

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Simulation

- Test plans via crisis scenarios and simulations. Involve decision-makers.

Evaluation

- Build processes for wash-up evaluation and lessons learned. Review what worked well and what needs improving in terms of plans, processes and relationships.

Leading industry practitioners and CIPR Crisis Communications Network Committee members wrote the guide. These include Adelaide Arthur, Rod Cartwright, Destiny Hollern, Sara Naylor, Felix Ostman, Katherine Sykes, and Chris Tucker.

The changing nature of crisis communications

Public inquiries into crisis events such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the Hillsborough disaster, and the Post Office Horizon IT Inquiry highlight the importance of a public relations perspective in a crisis response effort.

Any attempt by an organisation to cover up a crisis event will lead to a reputational issue. A crisis event becomes worse and trust is eroded with each new wave of public disclosure.

It is also essential to communicate clearly about the nature of the crisis. 'Inauthentic communications ultimately hurts trust while authentic messaging aligned with action builds credibility,' said Easthope.

Social media has forced a new level of openness and transparency in crisis communications as part of a response effort over the past decade. The media and public see beyond messaging and any contradiction between an official position and first-hand accounts or experience.

Easthope is very clear on this issue. She says an organisation should not communicate anything it wouldn't be prepared to see posted in a family incident room after a crisis event.

The constant, always-on nature of social media and messaging applications presents a new challenge for crisis response. Practitioners who are part of a response effort are encouraged to use separate devices to separate their work and personal lives during a crisis to prevent a situation from becoming overwhelming.

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Leaks are an almost inevitable part of any crisis. Speaker notes may be captured on camera, inappropriate content posted on social media, and individuals in the response effort may speak out inappropriately.

Technologies such as Slack and WhatsApp allow messages to be communicated quickly during a crisis event. This has the potential to introduce informality into conversation. I, but it should be remembered that they are important records and may be published.

There has been a focus on record-keeping following recent public inquiries. The failure of politicians to disclose WhatsApp messages eroded public trust.

The fake news or misinformation crisis

Management and corporate communication teams are developing robust strategies to deal with the increasing fake news attacks on organisations. These are events that uniquely place the communications response front and centre.

A study by Kent State University, Ohio, US, published in the Journal of Communication Management in February 2024, set out a framework for dealing with crisis events resulting from fake news or misinformation.

The study found that misinformation and fake news stories have become a central element of crises that corporate communication and public relations practitioners confront. They require specific strategies to respond effectively.

The critical issue is understanding when and if to respond to a fake news crisis. The study proposes a "watchful waiting" approach to decide if a response is warranted by evaluating factors such as whether it's a re-emerging issue, the source, and the momentum of the conversation.

When a response is required, key strategies include ensuring an expedited approval process for information dissemination, choosing an appropriate spokesperson, and including all relevant stakeholders.

To control media narratives, practitioners use owned channels to share counter-narratives, build relationships with credible news media, and directly address the fake news source.

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Horizon scanning with monitoring and listening tools

Media monitoring and social listening tools such as Vuelio and Pulsar allow public relations practitioners to identify early signs of crises and gauge your brand's presence and relevance with your key audiences.

For planning effectively in a fast-changing environment, Vuelio's unique technology identifies risks and trends across your sector, and allows you to respond, in real-time.

For a view of the wider political and legislative landscape, Vuelio also provides weekly sector specific horizon scans and consultation updates for identifying upcoming events, as well as important discussions in Parliament.

Pulsar uses artificial intelligence (AI) to synthesise visual and textual data points from millions of online sources to provide a real-time and historical understanding of public opinion and shifting consumer behaviours.

These solutions can help you find your key stakeholders, separating human beings from trolls and signal from noise.

AI could have a significant impact on public relations practice. The combination of machine learning, natural language processing, and the ability to make sense of large media and social media datasets makes AI a powerful communications tool for emergency and crisis response.

Practitioners should familiarise themselves with the intellectual property, data management, and privacy controls of any tool they plan to incorporate within their crisis communications workflow. Native AI large language models such as Anthropic, Bard, and ChatGPT are not ready for deployment in crises because of risk issues.

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A survey conducted by Philippe Borremans, an emergency risk and crisis communications consultant, in December 2023 found that practitioners don't yet understand the implications of using AI tools.

The analysis based on data from 84 specialist practitioners raised risk issues, including bias, culture, data security, management, and misinformation. This is consistent with the view of Kate Hartley, who urges caution when deploying AI tools within crisis communications workflows.

'Organisations are highly sensitive to confidential information being cut and pasted into native AI tools such as ChatGPT. Crisis simulations deal with an organisation's biggest secrets and vulnerabilities. We don't use AI as part of our simulation exercises,' she said.

The impact on the mental health of practitioners

Managing the mental health and wellbeing of communication practitioners in a crisis is an issue that has not received much attention until recently. It must be considered alongside the victims of a crisis and all the participants of a response effort.

The shock of a crisis has a long-term effect on anyone involved. It will often remain with response team members for the rest of their lives. There's also the fatigue and stress that comes with working in a high-pressure crisis environment day after day for an extended period.

Crisis communication consultant Amanda Coleman was one of the first practitioners to address these issues. Her book 'Crisis Communication Strategies', published in 2023, includes a chapter on communication practitioners' mental health and wellbeing.

Coleman believes that, like much crisis communication management best practice response, it's an issue that comes down to planning and preparation.

'Plan and have mental health resources mapped out proactively, including employee assistance programmes, counsellors, and support groups. It may be a case of signposting to external support. Communicate these resources clearly to employees,' said Coleman.

There is an important management component for anyone responsible for managing a team as part of a crisis management response. Managers need training on sensitively handling trauma and identifying post-crisis stress in team members.

'Watch for warning signs like changes in mood, behaviour, and work performance as cues that someone may be struggling. Intervene and support early. Allow time off without guilt for employees to manage mental health needs,' said Coleman.

Anniversaries and milestones can be particularly challenging. Extra support services need to be wrapped around these trigger points.

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Rebuilding and the post-crisis communications response

No organisation wants to go through a crisis, but they are an inevitable factor of life. The threats raised in this report, from misinformation to extreme weather and from social polarisation to cyberattacks, will impact even the strongest organisations.

After the initial response to a crisis, there is often a slump in morale within an organisation. This is a normal part of a crisis recovery cycle and should be expected.

'Organisations often try to promote a heroic in-together narrative after a crisis. It can ring hollow if it's not authentic. Organisations should strive for authentic communication,' said Easthope.

Crises present opportunities for organisational learning, adaptation, and growth. Those who learn from the experience can build back better than before. A crisis event exposes weak spots and vulnerabilities as the organisation is pushed to its limits.

'If you approach crisis management as an opportunity for an organisation to learn, adapt and grow, the medium to long term outcomes can be radically different, as painful as the short term may feel,' said Cartwright.

Crises force change where it would usually be resisted. Management must make difficult decisions under tight deadlines and constraints. Innovation and creativity become a necessity.

'Reflective crisis preparedness and resilience building can help and change fundamental organisational issues and unlock untold upside value in the process,' added Cartwright.

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The COVID-19 pandemic forced rapid workplace changes, as remote work became essential overnight. Organisations had to roll out new technology quickly, communicate with greater care and precision and measure productivity differently.

An organisational crisis can stimulate growth by breaking down old, inefficient ways of operating. It clears space for new, improved systems and capabilities.

Crisis communications management checklist

In this final section, we've summarised the key points raised within this document as a checklist.

1. Understand potential risks and threats
- Conduct a risk assessment to identify potential crises and threats
- Categorise risks by type (e.g. operational, reputational) and level of severity
- Focus on emerging threats such as climate events, cyberattacks and geopolitical conflicts

2. Develop a crisis communications plan
- Outline roles, responsibilities and decision-making authority
- Have pre-approved messaging templates and holding statements ready
- Identify priority stakeholders and how to reach them
- Prepare background materials such as fact sheets and FAQs
- Test and evaluate the crisis communication plan through simulation exercises

3. Prepare spokespeople and teams
- Brief management, subject matter experts, and communicators
- Ensure spokespeople and communications teams reflect organisational and community diversity
- Train for handling media inquiries and managing misinformation

4. Have the tools and infrastructure in place
- Communication channels and contact lists for an internal alert system
- Media monitoring, social listening, and AI tools with robust controls
- Mechanisms for coordinating across departments and partners

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5. Support mental health and wellbeing
- Provide access to mental health resources and counselling
- Watch for signs of trauma and secondary stress, particularly around anniversaries
- Allow time for communication practitioners to recover

6. Learn, adapt and rebuild
- Conduct a thorough assessment of strengths and weaknesses
- Implement changes to address root causes and systemic gaps

How Access Intelligence can help with crisis management

Vuelio Media Monitoring
Prove the effectiveness of your PR and comms tactics and provide a base for future planning through multi-channel media coverage categorised by sentiment, Share of Voice, and bespoke tags.

Vuelio Political Monitoring
Vuelio gives you full visibility of everything that's happening across Government, Parliament, stakeholder organisations and social media, delivered in a way that works for you.

Pulsar
Apply audience intelligence to your strategy with social listening and audience segmentation. Spot potential crisis ahead with this AI-driven trend detector to plan your strategy.

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About Stephen Waddington

Stephen is the founder and managing partner of Wadds Inc., a professional advisory firm for the corporate communications industry. He's an entrepreneur who has benefited from disruption in media and technology during his career in public relations.

He built an agency, Rainier PR, during the 1990s, supporting companies creating the infrastructure and applications that were the foundation of the internet. He did it again ten years later, scaling Speed, one of the first agencies to work across paid, social, and earned media.

Stephen is a founder and director of Socially Mobile, a Community Interest Company that supports and inspires public relations practitioners across the UK to increase their earning potential. He is also a PhD researcher at Leeds Business School, investigating the relationship between public relations and management.

He was a Visiting Professor in Practice at Newcastle University for ten years until 2021. He has written ten books on management and communications, including 'Exploring Public Relations and Management Communication', and served as President of the CIPR. He is an Honorary Fellow of the CIPR and Fellow of the PRCA.

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Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the following individuals for their comments and perspectives in researching and writing this report.

Philippe Borremans
Rod Cartwright
Amanda Coleman
Lucy Easthope
Kate Hartley
Aby Hawker
Ronke Lawal
Sarah Waddington CBE
Louise Watson

Further information

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