Theoretical Aspects of Communication Maturity Models and Draft Concept of Communication Maturity Model Adapted for Latvian Situation

Inga Latkovska

University of Latvia
E-mail: inga.latkovska@lu.lv
iD 0009-0007-7190-7653

Abstract. In order to assess the capacity of the communication function in an organization, as well as the relationship between the potential and practice of the function, there is an increasing interest in theoretical literature on communication maturity models, or how and according to what principles to assess the actual communication function and compare it with communication excellence, or a mature, full-fledged and professional communication function. In the search for maturity models, researchers focus on various aspects of communication management, such as the institutionalization of communication function and the mandate given to the function, the enabling of the function, available resources, content management, assessment practices, understanding of communication functions and tasks both at the communication specialist level and at the institution's management level, etc. aspects. There is no unified concept of communication maturity in academic literature, and the approaches and criteria for assessing communication maturity are also different. A group of researchers from the University of Latvia and Vidzeme University of Applied Sciences, as a part of the evaluation of the communication function of state direct administration institutions and grounded in the theoretical concept of internal and external institutionalization of the communication function, prototyped a communication maturity model for assessing the communication function of public administration in Latvia.

Keywords: communication function, institutionalization, communication maturity, public administration

Introduction

In Latvia, in 2024, public administration communication received repeated criticism from both the President of Latvia and other officials and the media. Is it justified? As usual, there is no single explanation of the criticism. On the day

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of the Annual conference of public administration communication specialists in November, *Dr. pol.* Rihards Bambals, Director of the Strategic Communication Coordination Department of the State Chancellery, published a comment in the news portal delfi.lv with a symbolic title "Broomsticks also shoot and pagers explode", where, among other highlighted aspects, he referred to the evaluation of public administration communication by researchers from the University of Latvia and Vidzeme University College. "It must be said honestly that some of the conclusions of the evaluation are unflattering and can only be resolved through change management, which affects systemic and structural changes. For example, the implementation of strategic communication in practice is hindered by the support function assigned to communicators, the incapacity to use their potential, and the incapacity to involve them in the management processes of institutions, strategic planning, and decision-making. The attitude towards communication professionals is often like towards broomsticks. Let them be located in the same place in the institution's structure as the administration department and let them "sweep up" and "clean up" erroneous decisions or sloppy expressions by officials," writes Bambals (2024).

Within the evaluation mentioned by Bambals, the research group developed an approach based on the concept of maturity (and primary – institutionalization concept) as one of the important maturity criteria for the assessment of the communication function in institutions. The concept was grounded in the theoretical approach that communication maturity refers to the degree to which an organization or individual has developed its communication capabilities and effectiveness. It encompasses several key dimensions both from internal and external institutionalization perspective of the communication function. Furthermore, we decided to test in practice whether and how the concept of communication maturity can be used to increase the value of the communication function in the institution.

In order to evaluate the relationship between the potential and practice of the communication function, there is growing interest in theoretical literature on maturity models, or how and according to what principles to assess, document and compare the communication function in an organization in relation to communication excellence, or a mature, full-fledged and professional communication function. However, despite the research conducted over the last 10 years, including explicitly practical ones, there is "no consistent definition of the concept of communication maturity; the academic debate is not linked to the professional discourse" (Siegl, Zerfass 2024).

This publication summarizes maturity models described in academic literature and applied research as well as briefly outlines a communication maturity model for assessing the maturity of the communication function of public administration, developed by a research group from the University of Latvia and Vidzeme University College.

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Results

Communication practitioners have already started to develop and promote as practical communication evaluation tools the maturity models for strategic communication, for example, focusing on content management (Contently 2018), internal communications and employee engagement (Staffbase 2021a, United Nations Economic Commission for Europe 2021), or communication measurement and evaluation – a survey-based diagnostic tool designed to help professionals at any level of sophistication, and from any type of organisation, better plan their measurement and evaluation journey by clearly benchmarking where they are starting from in the process (AMEC 2018). The UK government has assessed the maturity of its communications function by prototyping a maturity model based on the 5 OECD Principles of Good Communication Practice (OECD 2023).

Why the concept of the communication maturity? The concept of communication maturity is related to communication excellence and, in a way, it could serve as a communication management measurement and evaluation tool. European Communication Monitor (ECM) has covered communication excellence from different aspects in several ECM surveys. Excellent communication departments have been defined by setting two basic criterions: 1) performance, by that meaning the external results of the communication department's activities and its basic qualifications; 2) influence, by that meaning the internal standing of the communication department within the organization (Zerfass *et al.* 2021).

Both researchers and practitioners emphasize the importance and potential of using communication maturity models to assess and compare communication. At the same time, the communication maturity model also plays an equally important role in improving communication practice, striving for communication excellence. Therefore, in general, maturity models focus more on the assessing communication function in relation to communication excellence or the ideal communication function and its use in practice than on the assessment of everyday practice. The models described in the current literature are more suitable for the assessment of communication management practice than for the assessment of individual communication activities. In addition, the authors of the model concepts emphasize that the suitability of any model for assessment should be carefully considered and applied, taking into account the goals, values, and other factors of the organization, adapting the model to specific needs.

As mentioned above, several approaches to the concepts of communication maturity models and/or indices are currently described in the literature. At the International Conference on Public Relations Research, taking into account the increased interest and research related to the concept of maturity models, a review of conceptual approaches to maturity models was presented for the first time. The publication reviews three different, yet interrelated, approaches to communication assessment (see Table 1).

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Table 1. Comparing communication evaluation, excellence, and maturity
(Siegel, Zerfass 2024, 2)

Concept	Dimension(s) of analysis	Associated Models	Auxiliary	Application in Practice	Result
Communication evaluation	Communication activities and Communication management	Communication evaluation models/ frameworks, e.g., *PR Effectiveness Yardstick* (Lindenmann, 1997) *Integrated Framework for Evaluation&Measurement* (Buhman, 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 Assessment (Staffbase, 2021a)	Measurement	Assessment tools and methods (e.g., questionnaires, checklists) Maturity model tools for evaluation, improvement, and/or benchmarking	Descriptive, prescriptive and/or comparative evaluation

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In this summary, communication maturity as a concept is compared with the concept of communication assessment and the concept of communication excellence. If in the first concept, the dimensions of analysis are communication activities and communication management, then in the second – only communication management, which, as can be seen, is associated with communication excellence models and frameworks. In the third – communication maturity concept – the dimension of analysis is communication management and currently there are three maturity models that assess communication management with different approaches:

- Within the concept of **Communication Maturity Index (CMI)**, maturity is defined as the development level of organizational leaders', communication professionals' and members' common perceptions and practices of communication in organizations. [...] A maturity index indicates degree of progress made by an organization with respect to the issue that the index is designed to address. [...] The approach is grounded in the concept of Communicative Constitution of Organizations (CCO) that is based on the idea that organization emerges in and is sustained and transformed by communication and the communication value is co-created by all organizational members and is highly dependent on individual experiences and perspectives (Johansson *et al.* 2019). The authors' research method is a qualitative comparative case study with 85 key stakeholders from eleven organizations of different size. The communication maturity index is determined by analysing 6 main theoretical and practical aspects of strategic communication:

  Communication understanding,
  Communication function,
  Communication organization,
  Communication prerequisites,
  Communication competence,
  Communication practices and assessments.

The six dimensions describing communication maturity were categorized into 4 maturity levels – immature, emerging, established and mature. The authors also point out the need for further testing of the CMI prototype to avoid possible overly broad interpretation of the category ratings at each level (Johansson *et al.* 2019).

- AMEC[1] **Measurement Maturity Mapper (M3)** is a tool which enables PR professionals benchmark their communications measurement and

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1   AMEC is International Association for Measurement and Evaluation of Communication. It is the world's largest media intelligence and insights professional body, representing organizations and practitioners who provide media evaluation and communication research, analysis, evaluation and insights. For more information, see www.amecorg.com

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makes recommendations for areas of improvement based on the Integrated Evaluation Framework and Barcelona Principles[2]. The method used by M3 is Background info captured to classify data and five point scale questions using frequency. The M3 covers three areas of evaluation:

> *Reporting: to what degree does the organisation measure communication outputs, out-takes, and outcomes. This is assessed both in terms of channels, metrics, and frequency;*

> *Planning: how does the organisation approach communications planning, starting with setting objectives and KPIs, conducting research to inform strategy and tactics, and integrating with other marketing disciplines;*

> *Demonstrating impact: to what degree does the organisation's measurement and evaluation go beyond channel metrics, and what methods do they utilise to make relative and causal links between communications and desire organisational results.*

The result is a relative benchmark – by market, sector, organisation type or size – on where users are in their measurement and evaluation journey, both overall and for each of component. The three dimensions of communication maturity were categorized into 4 maturity levels – basic, standard, advanced and fully integrated (AMEC 2018).

- **The Staffbase internal communication maturity score** is calculated using the Staffbase Internal Communications Strategy Model. This model was created from deep insights into the communication success factors of more than 1000 companies of all different industries and sizes. The model has been validated by industry research and data, including the Gatehouse State of the Sector IC Survey. The method is – 28 statements are showed to the respondents who have to choose how much each statement applies to their communication team (Staffbase 2021b). The author of this article completed a test for research purposes about the institution she currently works for and indeed, within 10 minutes, she received a rating of "Your IC maturity score" on a 10-point scale, indicating that this is a concrete benchmark for how well the internal communications team of the institution is supporting and contributing to the company's strategic direction.

In addition to these briefly outlined communication maturity models, the following are certainly worth considering:

- **The communication maturity model developed and used by the British Government Communication Service.** The model is based on the OECD's 5 Principles for Effective Public Administration Communication (OECD 2021). The British government's communication maturity model, for

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2   See Barcelona Principles 3.0 at https://amecorg.com/2020/07/barcelona-principles-3-0/

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example, unlike the Swedish researchers' approach, includes an assessment of digital communication and a separate assessment category for the assessment of fake information and disinformation, which is currently so relevant. The index categorizes 4 levels of maturity in communication assessment, which are assessed by analysing 5 maturity-characterizing criteria:

Enabling the communication function;

Institutionalization and professionalism of communication departments;

Fact-based and verified information in communication;

The potential of digital technologies and its use;

Fake information and disinformation, dealing with it.

- **OECD Report on Public Communication.** In the assessment report, the authors emphasize that the role of public communication has been more evident than ever in recent years. Changes in the information ecosystem have occurred in parallel with a series of international crises, directly affecting trust in the state's ability to protect society and ensure its well-being. In the sense of the OECD study (OECD 2021), public communication is understood as any communication activity or initiative led by public authorities for the benefit of society. It is different from political communication, which is related to political debates, elections or individual political individuals and parties. The conceptual basis of this assessment also forms the scope of the assessment of communication effectiveness, which is associated with the institutionalization and management (mandate) of communication, as well as the emphasis on the role of strategic communication.
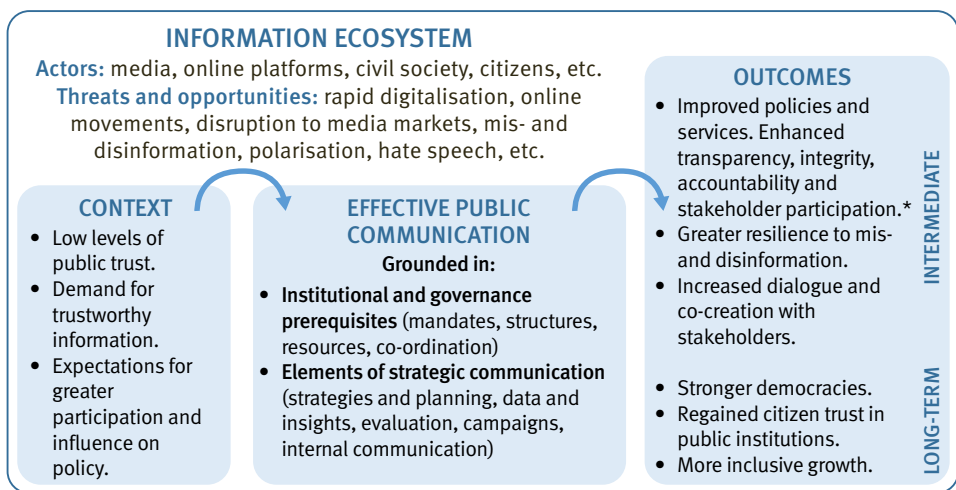
INFORMATION ECOSYSTEM

Actors: media, online platforms, civil society, citizens, etc.

Threats and opportunities: rapid digitalisation, online movements, disruption to media markets, mis- and disinformation, polarisation, hate speech, etc.

CONTEXT
- Low levels of public trust.
- Demand for trustworthy information.
- Expectations for greater participation and influence on policy.

EFFECTIVE PUBLIC COMMUNICATION
Grounded in:
- **Institutional and governance prerequisites** (mandates, structures, resources, co-ordination)
- **Elements of strategic communication** (strategies and planning, data and insights, evaluation, campaigns, internal communication)

OUTCOMES
- Improved policies and services. Enhanced transparency, integrity, accountability and stakeholder participation.*
- Greater resilience to mis- and disinformation.
- Increased dialogue and co-creation with stakeholders.

INTERMEDIATE

- Stronger democracies.
- Regained citizen trust in public institutions.
- More inclusive growth.

LONG-TERM

*Principles that also inform effective communication

Figure 1. OECD analytical framework for public communication (OECD 2021, 23)

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For the purpose of the surveys, public communication is understood as any communication activity or initiative led by public institutions for the public good. It is different from political communication, which is linked to the political debate, elections, or individual political figures and parties. They focused on the following 10 thematic areas:

> *Strategy and planning;*
> *Audience and channels;*
> *Campaigns;*
> *Media engagement;*
> *Digital communication;*
> *Internal communication;*
> *Crisis communication;*
> *Evaluation;*
> *Disinformation and media ecosystems;*
> *Cross-cutting questions.*

Communication maturity model adapted for public administration assessment in Latvia. Public administration communication assessment

Research group, having evaluated various communication maturity assessment models, has adapted several elements from individual maturity models in accordance with the Latvian cultural environment and local communication practice – while maintaining the basic theoretical and practical framework, the assessed statements have been adapted to the Latvian situation. The adapted communication maturity model is based on internal and external institutionalization criteria (Sandhu 2009).

In everyday usage, institutionalization describes the permanent establishment of a certain norm or social fact that is not constantly questioned. But institutionalization involves a dichotomy, as it can be analysed both as a process and as an outcome. As a process, it denotes the implementation and achievement of norms and routines within an organization or across institutions. Institutionalization as a process manifests itself in various formats, most often involving the institutionalization of practices, ideas and routines, making them unquestionable and self-evident values in an organization. Sandhu points to the external and internal factors of institutionalization that determine the level of institutionalization of the strategic communication function (Sandhu 2009, 81–82). The main factors of external institutionalization of the communication function are: (1) laws and regulations; (2) public demand and pressure; (3) the impact and diffusion of new practices. The internal institutionalization of communication, and especially strategic communication, is determined by

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the following aspects: (1) power – participation of communication specialists in decision-making processes; access to resources that help implement communication strategically; (2) independence/autonomy of the function – the location of the communication function in the structure compared to other functions, its level of independence, based on the idea that the more permanent the communication unit, the higher the institutionalization; (3) specialization and routinization, which is related to the general or specialized nature of the function's organization and the practices that are implemented and implemented (Sandhu 2009, 85).

The communication maturity model of state direct administration institutions is a prototype that has been repeatedly tested and improved. The approach of the institutionalization concept (Sandhu 2009) has been used to assess the communication function within the framework of the assessment. Considering that the aspects of external institutionalization are equivalent for all institutions under the study, the assessment was carried out in four aspects of internal institutionalization – the type of internal institutionalization of the communication function, the strategic communication mandate and communication tasks, available resources (human resources, financial, technological, etc. provision), strategic communication management and communication evaluation practice. Empirical data were collected by analysing institutional documents, interviewing as well as surveying specialists. The model determines four levels of communication maturity.

The model is not statistically validated or completed, therefore can't be used as an independent scientifically based method. Instead, it should be seen as a method in the development stage, which helps to reflect the level of development of the communication function compared to an excellent communication function. It is important to consider in the future this method would be better named the Communication Maturity Index, based on the self-assessment of the institution, rather than being used as an auditing method. However, within the context of the assessment mentioned earlier, the maturity assessment has allowed for a systematic evaluation of the communication function.

The assessment was systemic – it encompassed evaluation of the presence of systemic elements in communication or institutionalization, rather than the quality of their implementation, the quality of communication content and the professional quality of ensuring the communication function. The maturity level indicates how well the communication function in the institution is systemically institutionalized, enabled and empowered.

Conclusions

Maturity defines the state of an organization or function in relation to "a desired or normally occurring end stage" (Mettler 2011, 83, cited in Siegel, Zerfass 2024), maturity models delineate patterns in the development of organizational

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capabilities based on successive stages that map a desired development path from a baseline state to a target maturity level (Fraser *et al.* 2002, cited in Siegel, Zerfass 2024).

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, cited in Siegel, Zerfass 2024). 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 (Siegel, Zerfass 2024).

In most cases, qualitative research methods, such as interviews and document analysis, are used to obtain the necessary empirical data for the maturity level/index. As an added value of interviews, for example, checking the desired answers in the questionnaire, is mentioned. Also, interviews enable a better understanding of communication practices.

Maturity is essential in facilitating a way forward to improve organizations' communication evaluation and measurement practices, as well as empowering the communication function. Any implemented maturity model should serve as a tool for institutions to enhance the institutionalization of the communication function, strengthen its mandate, enable effective communication, increase the value attributed to the communication function and allow public administration fully and professionally utilize its potential. A fully and professionally institutionalized and enabled communication function is a systemic requirement for communication specialists to work professionally and effectively.

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