Guest editorial: Communication research advancing sustainable development

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This special issue addresses a topic of utmost societal relevance, namely the role of communication and communication research to meet the challenges and advance the transformation into a more sustainable society. The urgency of the need to research, understand and contribute to this transformation has been emphasized by the UN through the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and UN Environment's sixth Global Environment Outlook (GEO) as well as by researchers from diverse disciplines. Public calls from researchers to political and business leaders to act are becoming more frequent.

Ever since the Brundtland report "Our Common Future" was published in 1987, environment and social development have been a common issue, defining "sustainable development" as "Development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs." [1] However, we have a long way to go. We are already facing the severe consequences of climate change, and the recurrent reports from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) [2] stress the urgency and communicate the state of knowledge on climate change, its impacts and future risks, as well as options for reducing the rate at which climate change is taking place. Research on the planetary boundaries (Richardson *et al.*, 2023) defines the safe operating space for humanity and visualizes that in several areas, such as biodiversity, we have already transgressed the boundaries for the safe operating space.

Communication and communication research can have a crucial role in raising the urgency, conveying awareness, understanding and knowledge, creating trust and engagement and advocating and implementing solutions. However, communication can also be used to lobby for the continued use of destructive and detrimental products, services and processes, such as fossil fuels, unsustainable forest management and greenwashing activities that are destroying the ecosystems on which we depend for our survival.

The idea to edit this special issue originated at the 27th annual conference of the International Sustainable Development Research Society (ISDRS) hosted by Mid Sweden University in 2021. The guest editors were responsible for including the first track on Communication for Sustainable Development within the conference. The track invited scholars from different disciplines to present and discuss research focusing on the role of communication – broadly conceived – in relation to sustainable development.

We believe communication is critical for our understanding of global challenges and the need for working with sustainable development. Communication is also a prerequisite for creating large-scale organizational and societal change. We further believe that communication scholars have an important role to play in counteracting social and

environmental crises in developing and developed countries and that it is our responsibility to create and disseminate knowledge that contributes to social transformation and sustainable development.

1. The critical importance of communication-oriented research for sustainable development and social transformation

In the communication field, we consider that communication plays a central role in forming, or constituting, our social realities (Craig, 2015). That is, communication processes including conversations, meetings, texts, messages, information, meaning and media shape the creation of organizational objectives and collective action. As such, a given organization's business as usual provides constant opportunities for creating meaningful sustainable development or maintaining the status quo (Aguilera *et al.*, 2021; Eweje, 2011; Thaker, 2020).

Communication plays a constitutive role in organizational activities, which is critical for the formation of new (hybrid) organizational forms and strategic partnerships that can tackle the complex and wicked problems of our time. In particular, communication plays a central role in facilitating mature organizations' moves toward incorporating sustainability priorities within their operations and in forming new inter-organizational partnerships that work toward accomplishing SDGs, combating climate change and enhancing "green" innovations (Aguilera *et al.*, 2021; Lee, 2019; Valbuena-Hernandez and Ortiz-de-Mandojana, 2022). As Almanza-Martínez, López-Gómez and Castillo-Esparcia (this issue) advocate, "Effective action to mitigate climate change and increase resilience requires international cooperation, global engagement of all stakeholders, and mobilization of multiple areas of expertise." The success of these activities of cooperation, engagement and mobilization depends on communication between individuals, organizations and other stakeholders.

Organizational leadership is inextricably linked with communication, since leaders' communication has the potential to motivate, inspire and set an organization's agenda toward meaningful sustainability objectives (or not); see, e.g. Fairhurst and Connaughton (2014) and Johansson (2018). CEO communication is increasingly used strategically for positioning and championing societal issues (Bojanic, 2023). Leadership for sustainability requires competence and strategies to tackle "wicked" problems (Hull *et al.*, 2020). Involving stakeholders in organizational decisions through strategic problematization and recognizing the plurality of agonistic voices in stakeholder engagement processes is essential and fruitful, according to Weder (2021).

There are many examples of business leaders and organizations that are truly engaged in sustainable development and leading the transformation. Their legacy and their work with CSR, public relations and strategic communication can inspire others and drive development forward (Boeske, 2023). These corporations are working toward sustainable goals by changing their mode of operations from philanthropic activities to addressing complex, pressing global issues ranging from environmental pollution to work policies for employees. Contributing to sustainable development supports businesses in responding to sustainability concerns held by the public and stakeholders (Allen, 2016; O'Connor and Gronewold, 2013; Ott *et al.*, 2018; Pollach, 2018). By employing knowledge on how to use strategic communication to form relations with the public and stakeholders, organizations can increase awareness of social and environmental issues and develop sustainable options and influence behaviors.

Communication is key to individuals' trust in authorities and governments, their awareness and knowledge of what they can do to help and to inspire engagement and establish fruitful relations (Kumpu, 2022; Wong-Parodi and Feygina, 2021). Although governments, public authorities and private and public organizations as well as NGOs are all

important actors to enhance the transformation towards a more sustainable world, individuals also have important roles to fulfill. Even if each individual decision has a small impact, large-scale change is not possible without individuals sharing the urgency and need for change, raising awareness and adopting a more sustainable lifestyle.

Communication serves a crucial role in individual behavioral change (Arikan *et al.*, 2022; Brosch, 2021; Vulturius *et al.*, 2020). Accordingly, communication campaigns based on the latest research are crucial for informing the general public, engaging with them, raising awareness and ultimately working toward organizational and societal changes that support sustainability (Bayes *et al.*, 2023; Dash and Dash, 2021; Degeling and Koolen, 2022; Maibach *et al.*, 2023). Communication is also fundamental for increasing knowledge about new innovations, sustainable solutions and research results that can be implemented in practice. A substantial and ongoing challenge, however, is that the accumulating research on sustainability communication is dispersed across publications and databases, making it difficult for communication practitioners and sustainable development managers to locate and use.

2. Introduction of the papers in the special issue
This special issue collects nine articles that highlight different aspects of communication for sustainable development. One literature review on the current state of sustainability communication research, a conceptual paper on strategic climate communication, four organizational studies, a conceptual paper on individuals' communication and two studies on individuals' engagement and perceptions:

(1) The current state of sustainability communication research, its challenges and unresolved problems and strategies for counteracting misinformation through targeted communication;

(2) A macro-approach for strategic climate communication to avoid the blame game;

(3) Corporate strategic communication to establish organizational legitimacy in contexts of high sustainability pressure;

(4) Companies' commitments and legitimation strategies toward SDG 12: responsible production and consumption;

(5) Visual impression management techniques in corporate sustainability reporting;

(6) Visuals as catalysts for professional visions during the design process of an environmental label;

(7) Explanations for why communication fails to achieve coherence between people's wills and their actions when pursuing sustainable goals in society;

(8) Climate literacy and engagement among students and

(9) Stakeholder perceptions and trust in purpose-/profit-oriented firms.

3. "Sustainability communication: how to communicate an inconvenient truth in the era of scientific mistrust"
Sustainability communication is understood as a "process in which arguments, options for action, and/or (contrasting) positions on social development are discussed forward-looking from an economic, ecological, social, and cultural view" (Voci and Karmasin, this issue). Since perspectives are perceived and interpreted differently by individuals, it is a social

understanding process, dealing with causes and possible solutions, referring to social discourses that seem essential for legitimizing arguments related to change toward sustainable development (Newig *et al.*, 2013).

In their conceptual paper, the authors explore the current state of sustainability communication research, focusing on the challenges of communicating inconvenient truths in an era of scientific mistrust. They set out to (a) examine the existing research landscape in sustainability communication, (b) identify unresolved problems and challenges and (c) provide strategies for counteracting misinformation through targeted communication.

Sustainability communication is characterized by the tendency to communicate only the "sunshine perspective" of sustainability, focusing on positive aspects, such as technological progress, innovation, green jobs and renewable energies. However, there is also a "rainy side" to sustainability communication – the necessity for radical changes and turning away from current economic paradigms – which is often seen as an "inconvenient truth" that is difficult to communicate. When transformation requires personal sacrifices on a personal level, it is perceived as restricting our personal freedom. This "inconvenient" side of sustainability relates to the impossibility of maintaining our current capitalist and consumption-driven lifestyle while ensuring enough resources for future generations.

Simultaneously, there is a targeted disinformation campaign related to climate change taking place to undermine scientific evidence, discredit scientists and spread doubts. Misleading claims and untruths about the climate are communicated and disseminated. The strategy of manufacturing uncertainty and spreading doubts complicates the aims and goals of sustainability communication and its communicators considerably. It undermines public trust in evidence-based research findings and slows down evidence-based policy.

Given this complicated situation, the authors want to review the state of the art of sustainability communication research, explore unresolved problems and challenges and seek strategies to counteract misinformation through targeted communication. They search for, identify and analyze existing approaches dealing with the question of how to communicate sustainability and its rainy side more effectively; identify stakeholder groups; discuss the limitations of existing communication approaches and present suggested communication strategies that are appropriate to overcome sustainability communication's unresolved issues.

Findings illustrate that the literature refers to four key stakeholder groups: science deniers, adaptation skeptics, whitewashers and world saviors. The complex dynamics involved in communicating sustainability are explored, and findings highlight the need for tailored approaches to engage and address the concerns of each stakeholder group. Limitations in existing communication approaches and methods are exposed.

4. "Overcoming the 'blame game' in strategic climate communication: from decoupling accusations toward an arena-spanning agenda"

Krämer and Winkler provide a conceptual article on strategic climate communication, advocating the formation of an arena-spanning climate communication agenda based on an analysis of published articles over the past 15 years. They conclude that strategic climate communication is characterized by decoupling accusations of practices and aspired climate goals (means-ends decoupling) and inconsistencies across communication arenas, which leads to a blame game that needs to be overcome. As a solution, the authors suggest a macro-focused public arena approach, adding to and complementing previous issue- and crisis-focused arena approaches. The framework includes five climate communication arenas: the business, media, political, academic and protest arenas and examples of inconsistencies and decoupling accusations in these. The framework can guide further research.

The core challenge, according to Krämer and Winkler, is triggering behavioral and social change through strategic climate communication, where positioning as a credible and potent change agent is central. Previously, successful positioning has traditionally been equated to consistent communication characterized by transparency, authenticity and trust – as a response to avoid greenwashing. The authors, however, argue that strategic communication is inevitably contested in the context of the climate crisis. As a consequence, exchange among antagonistic and dissenting voices needs to be facilitated. In addition, they see the need to strategically deal with and work through persistent paradoxes of responsibility and sustainability communication.

The authors stress that the current climate crisis is a global crisis, in which self-declared change agents in different arenas struggle with a comparable legitimacy crisis. Thus, it is not meaningful to conceptualize strategic communication research on a single-actor level, but rather the authors advocate the necessity of arena-spanning research. They suggest further research on decoupling, which is a perceptional and often inevitable phenomenon in climate communication. Competing demands when dealing with climate-related issues imply a growing visibility of inconsistencies – either between climate talk and practices (policy-practice decoupling) or between practices and acclaimed climate goals (means-ends decoupling). Raised public awareness and scrutiny of decoupling is not limited to corporate communication but also counts for climate communication in the media, political, scientific and protest arenas. This is of critical importance and calls for a stronger exchange between different subfields of climate communication research, according to Krämer and Winkler. Moreover, the authors highlight that there is a growing institutional complexity in strategic communication research in the wake of a global all-embracing crisis.

Recommendations for practice are to shift from *avoiding* to *embracing* perceived inconsistencies in strategic climate communication. This is difficult since it contradicts traditional dominant recommendations in strategic communication research, although it is needed to overcome the current, increasingly discouraging "blame game." The authors call for "inconsistency-sensitive" strategic climate communication.

To support communication practice, they point to literature focusing on how to respond to public and internal scrutiny triggered by aspirational sustainability talk (Christensen *et al.*, 2020). Agents can learn from perceptions and accusations of inconsistencies, listen to and engage with affective opposition triggered by perceived inconsistencies and acknowledge and integrate this opposition into the concrete realization of initial aspirations.

Second – they advocate the growing literature on the communicative challenges of organizational hybrids. There are two promising ways to communicate in the face of inconsistent institutional logics: "selective coupling," identifying and mediating between opportunities that allow for situated matching of competing logics; and second, paradox reasoning, presenting different logics as mutually dependent, despite inherent competition. A vital competency for future strategic climate communication is communicative conciliation between competing institutional logics in order to overcome the current blame game and restore public legitimacy.

The authors suggest a shift from mutual blaming to mutual approval of accountable engagement with perceived inconsistencies. This is key, since the shift in strategic climate communication to focus on successful engagement with perceived inconsistencies renders one-sided blaming of the inconsistencies of other agents pointless. Rather, communication agents can be invited to scrutinize each other in the way they engage with accusations of inconsistency, instead of merely spotting inconsistencies and blaming in public climate communication.

Third, the authors propose a move from mutual confrontation to cooperation between climate communication agents. The joint communication agenda is clear: to overcome the blame game in climate communication to fight the climate crisis as a shared global threat.

5. "Strategic communication in contexts of high sustainability pressure: balancing purposefulness, transparency and participation in pursuit of organizational legitimacy"

The focus of this study is the organizational endeavor to establish organizational legitimacy through strategic communication. The authors assume strategic communication to be "a micro-level mode of communication," applied with the intention of creating transparency, making management accountable for their actions and thereby gaining trust and legitimacy among stakeholders. Based on the analysis of CEO-letters of a Danish business organization within healthcare, characterized as a context of high sustainability pressure, the authors propose a model in which strategic communication – characterized by purposefulness, transparency and participation – ensures accountability and accordingly may influence organizational legitimacy. In this particular context, purposefulness is the presence of visions, goals and strategic intent in the letters; transparency corresponds to the understanding of the former and participation is the expressions aiming for stakeholder engagement or dialog. The authors advocate that future research needs to investigate aspirational talk, such as substantive CSR communication.

6. "Symbolic and substantive legitimation: examining corporate commitments to sustainable development goal 12"

Eng, Troy and Bortree analyzed online corporate communication around SDG 12: Sustainable Production and Consumption. Companies have the opportunity to communicate their progress toward the SDGs and showcase their work to customers and the broader society.

Performing a qualitative content analysis on the websites of 13 companies that produced end-consumer products and explicitly mentioning goal number 12, the authors used legitimacy theory to search for legitimation strategies. The most common sub-target mentioned was waste reduction, SDG 12.5, followed by sustainable use of natural resources, SDG 12.2 and reporting, SDG 12.6. Some targets – chemical waste management, 12.4 and procurement, 12.7 – were infrequently mentioned. For example, Kellogg's graphically presented the amount of waste from 2016 and onward, with a reduction of organic waste by 13% by 2019.

Overall, the findings revealed opportunities for the companies to better integrate SDG 12 information into different website areas, address targets more holistically rather than selectively and demonstrate commitment to and progress toward SDG 12 to gain and maintain legitimacy. Companies tend to mention SDG 12 in only one website section, rely on photos rather than more substantive visuals such as graphs or infographics and assume that stakeholders have prior knowledge of SDG 12. The researchers recommend corporations explicitly communicate sustainability progress over time rather than providing vague statements of improvement. Transparency is key for stakeholders in achieving a clearer understanding of companies' sustainability efforts pertaining to their specific goals and how they are accomplished. In addition, two-way communication with stakeholders, for example via a chatbot or feedback channel, is recommended in order to bolster legitimacy.

7. "Sustainability data distortions: the use of visual impression management techniques in corporate sustainability reporting"

Simunovic, Murtarelli and Romenti problematize and analyze the visual communication elements of the sustainability reports of 58 Italian listed GRI-compliant companies. The purpose of this study was to determine whether Italian companies employ impression management tactics in the presentation of graphs in the reports.

Impression management techniques include selecting data that conveys the most favorable image about the company ("good" topics are reported with a positive trend line and "bad" topics with a negative trend line), selecting colors strategically to shape perceptions and invoke emotional responses and connotations to highlight strengths and bolster stories to underpin the narrative presented and ultimately influencing how the report is perceived and understood by the stakeholders. Further, companies can use measurement distortion by selecting time periods for comparison or violate principles of graph construction such as the lack of a zero origin, gridlines and the presence of highlighted columns.

Employing multimodal content analysis, the researchers found that most of the studied companies used measurement distortion techniques in graphs reporting environmental information, social information and economic information in their sustainability reports. Researchers conclude that companies manipulate the graphs and strategically highlight positives to cast a positive corporate image and favorably present their performance.

They discuss that ethical dilemmas arise when impression management strategies are used to craft a disproportionately positive or deceptive view of a company's CSR efforts. If negative activities or impacts and failures to achieve social and environmental objectives are ignored, stakeholders are being misinformed about the company's real impact and hiding areas that need attention and improvement. Further, impression management may veer into greenwashing, where companies make unfounded or deceptive claims about the ecological benefits of their products or operations. When consumers are misled in this way, the integrity of *all* CSR initiatives can be eroded and lead to a general loss of trust, which is very serious. In addition, prioritizing appearance over action deviates from the goal of CSR, which is the integration of social and environmental considerations into a company's core strategy and stakeholder engagement, according to the researchers.

The study highlights the societal impact of misleading data, and researchers advocate that companies need to refine their reporting practices for more authentic communication.

8. "Envisioning sustainability through (un)shared professional visions of the 'visual' materials of a design situation: a CCO approach"
The study of Reumont, Cooren and Déméné focuses on the design process of an environmental label, a visual configured in typography, shapes and colors that conveys information about a product or service to an intended public. The design of credible, easy-to-interpret and appealing visuals is crucial to the transformation toward sustainability. Visuals can transform people's existing knowledge and behaviors toward sustainability and help them visualize how to act to have a positive impact on the environment. The creative design process includes a cross-disciplinary team and takes place in meetings where individuals frame problems, express their points of view, decipher each other's design worlds and construct shared understanding during an iterative conversation that forward the process.

The authors study and analyze how visuals act as catalysts for the various professional visions during this cross-disciplinary design process. Findings illustrate that both the sharing and unsharing of professional visions are important to the design process.

9. "Ego-depletion is in the way: the challenges of controlled communication and the role of the regulatory focus theory in sustainable goals pursuit"
Anisimova, Billore and Kitchen use the ego-depletion phenomenon and regulatory focus theory to explain why current controlled communications are failing to achieve coherence between people's will and their actions when pursuing sustainable goals in a society.

A risk in today's communication society, characterized by excessive information, ambivalence and imminent confusion, is that the general public is becoming increasingly desensitized to the potential seriousness underlying official communications. High levels of fatigue are experienced by the public, causing a state of ego depletion (Baumeister *et al.*, 1998). Ego-depletion can lead to confusion and decision fatigue in a society and thus sabotage people's participation in sustainable behavior. Ego depletion is when the self's resources have been used up and it is temporarily operating at reduced power. This condition is triggered when people exercise self-control for a considerable period of time and on various fronts, and their ability to exhibit self-control in related or unrelated activities and the associated decision-making becomes impaired. Ego depletion is different from physical fatigue in that people may not be consciously aware that they are low on mental energy and may act impulsively instead of thinking logically about the consequences of their decisions, eventually compromising self-regulation or self-control.

The authors develop a theoretical framework and present research propositions that can advance research and discourse. In this way, the authors try to explain the mechanisms of how to enhance the effectiveness of controlled communication associated with sustainable goal pursuit.

10. "Climate change literacy and commitment in Spanish university students"
The important role of universities in students' knowledge of and commitment to climate change is explored by Almanza-Martínez, López-Gómez and Castillo-Esparcia. They conclude that students were well informed by digital media and social networks about climate change, but it was not on behalf of the universities. The article further explored the relationship between access to climate change information and student activism. Findings illustrated that activism behavior increased with the degree of information received. However, students perceived that universities generated little information and a low number of activities related to climate change. Students requested that universities implement a wide range of initiatives, such as education and workshops for all students to increase knowledge and awareness, sustainable management of the universities including the use of renewable energy and sustainable consumption and offer vegetarian food in the cafeterias of the faculties. Based on these results, the authors urge universities to act as sources of environmental education. The universities are powerful social actors that can shape public and political discourses for eco-social transition.

11. Purpose wins? A study of purpose-profit orientations, stakeholder perceptions and trust in firms
Peters investigated the relationship between stakeholder perceptions and trust in firms with purpose and profit orientations. Two experiments and an empirical study evaluated the perceptions of customers and investors in credit unions and banks including dependent variables of reliability, warmth, integrity and degree of trust. Results clearly demonstrated that purpose-oriented firms were consistently and significantly perceived more favorably than profit-oriented firms across the three studies by both consumers and investors. The effect of firm type on trust was mediated by assessments of reliability, integrity and warmth.

The outcome of the study is that "purpose wins," which supports the efforts of firms seeking to communicate their purpose-driven and sustainability initiatives with stakeholders. Peters concludes that greater awareness of purposeful and sustainability-oriented mandates and initiatives is a valuable and strategic asset to firms since it appeals to both consumers and investors.

## 12. Call for action and more research on communication for sustainable development

As we write this editorial, the 2023 UN Climate Change Conference COP 28 is convening in Dubai. The update of the planetary boundaries framework finds that six of the nine boundaries are transgressed, suggesting that Earth is now well outside of the safe operating space for humanity (Richardson *et al.*, 2023). See Figure 1, below.

The situation for the planet and the safe operating space for humanity are extremely urgent, and all actors – politicians, citizens, private/public organizations as well as NGOs – need to join forces to overcome the accelerating crisis. Communication researchers need to pick up speed on the challenge of studying how communication can contribute to saving our planet and ensuring a future for humanity.

13. A research agenda for the future

Based on the state of the art of sustainability communication as expressed in this editorial and nine articles, we propose some suggestions for a future research agenda.

First, the role of universities as transformational agents needs highlighting and exploring. Universities' education of students on sustainable development provides awareness, understanding and practical tools needed to transform our society in a more sustainable direction, and their research provides new products, services, processes and tools that can enhance development. How are universities educating and equipping the future students that are facing the complex societal sustainability challenges of our time? Are universities really taking these societal challenges seriously, and are we not educating young people for positions or professions we do not need in the future? What is the current state since Monroe *et al.* (2019) found that only one-third of effective climate change education strategies are carried out at universities; the rest take place in primary or secondary education institutions.
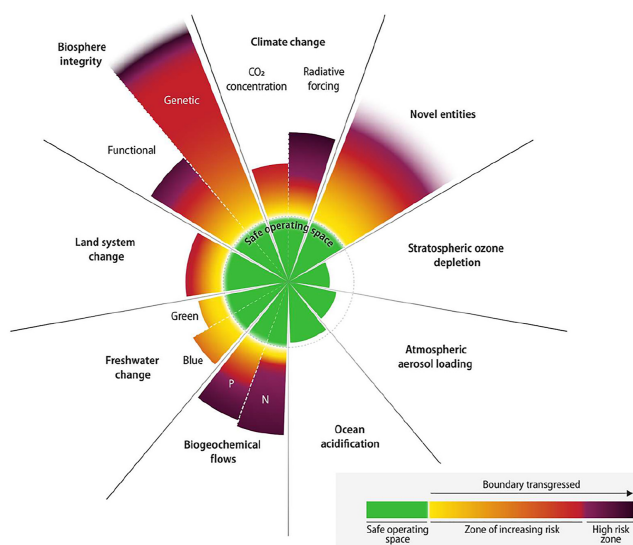
Source(s): Created by Richardson *et al.* (2023)

Figure 1.
Earth beyond six out of nine boundaries

Further, how are the universities communicating about new research findings that can make a difference? And do they live as they learn in the management of the organization itself?

We face unprecedented sustainability challenges in our global society that threaten the existence of future generations. These challenges cannot be solved within one research discipline alone. Thus, it is of critical importance that communication researchers participate in multi-disciplinary research teams contributing our communication expertise. Moreover, we need to train our students in multi- and trans-disciplinary methodologies and research. Today's sustainability challenges, some of which are very urgent, for example, the climate challenges, need to be addressed with a diversity of stakeholders and researchers jointly working on both research and practice.

When it comes to the management of climate mitigation in organizations, communication plays a constitutive role when stakeholders from diverse fields and organizations come together and issues related to sustainability are conceived, defined, discussed, planned and finally action is taken (Almanza-Martínez, López-Gómez and Castillo-Esparcia, this issue; Allen, 2016). What are the consequences of this type of communication? How can successful communication initiatives be used and transferred in diverse fields of stakeholder engagement?

The deliberate use of visual tactics in sustainability reporting, and the visual literacy of practitioners also merit more research (cf. Simunovic *et al.*, this issue). The authors advocate for more research in this field, as we need to better understand how organizations create and communicate data based on the internal interplay of interests in order to improve CSR reporting guidelines. Here, the broader field of data communication can serve as context, and the reliability of visual graphs and potential statistical fallacies can be examined and explored.

An issue not addressed in this special issue but of huge importance is the role we as communication scholars have in fighting disinformation. The vast majority of climate-denying tweets have been issued by bots. We need to train not only our students but also society to detect disinformation and challenge it. The inoculation approach, as presented by Traberg *et al.* (2022), looks promising, but the technical opportunities that recently became available through artificial intelligence make it a top of the agenda of communication scholars.

In conclusion, we acknowledge that we face unprecedented sustainability challenges ahead. However, we hope that our aim with this special issue on communication for sustainable development – to highlight the importance of communication research and practice – has been achieved. We wish for it to become a source of inspiration and increase the efforts of communication scholars to provide more research, knowledge and solutions that contribute to a more sustainable world.

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Notes

1. https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/5987our-common-future.pdf

2. https://www.ipcc.ch

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Appendix
Call for papers for the special issue

Communication is critical for our understanding of global challenges and the need for sustainable development. Communication is also a prerequisite for creating large-scale organizational and societal change.

Communication is critical for understanding the need for change, developing change initiatives and implementing change in organizations and societies. How we communicate about change is decisive for how we perceive the need for change and what actions we perform. Leadership is inextricably linked with communication, since communication enables leaders to motivate and inspire – or to rule and divide. The theory of the communicative constitution of organizing illustrates that communication processes including conversations, meetings, texts, messages, information, meaning and media shape the creation of organizational objectives and collective action. This is important because business-as-usual is inadequate for creating meaningful, sustainable development. Further, corporations are working toward sustainable goals by changing their mode of operations from philanthropic activities to addressing complex, pressing global issues ranging from environmental pollution to work policies for employees. Contributing to sustainable development helps businesses build trusting relationships with the public and stakeholders. By employing the knowledge on how to use strategic communication to form relations with publics and stakeholders, organizations can increase awareness of social and environmental issues and develop sustainable options and influence behaviors.

Communication is also fundamental for increasing knowledge about new innovations, sustainable solutions, and research results that can be implemented in practice. Communication campaigns are crucial for informing the general public, engaging with them, raising awareness, and ultimately working toward organizational and societal changes that support sustainability.

The 27th annual conference of the International Sustainable Development Research Society, ISDRS, for the first time included a track on Communication for Sustainable Development. The track invited scholars from different disciplines to present and discuss research focusing on the role of communication in relation to sustainable development.

This special issue will include high-quality research papers from the conference but is also open for scholars to address the role of communication in meeting the challenges of the transformation into a more sustainable society. Communication scholars have an important role in counteracting social and environmental crises in developing and developed countries and providing knowledge that contributes to social transformation and sustainable development.

The urgency of the need to research, understand and contribute to the transformation into a more sustainable society has been emphasized by the UN through the 17 SDGs and UN Environment's sixth GEO.

Potential topics and themes

(1) Change communication. Communication is critical for understanding the need for change, developing change initiatives and implementing change in organizations and societies. How we communicate about change is decisive for how we perceive the need for change and what actions we perform.

(2) Leadership communication. Leadership is inextricably linked with communication, since communication enables leaders to motivate and inspire – or to rule and divide.

(3) CCO theory. The theory of the communicative constitution of organizing illustrates that communication processes including conversations, meetings, texts, messages, information, meaning and media shape the creation of organizational objectives and collective action. This is important because business as usual is inadequate for creating meaningful, sustainable development. Corporations work toward sustainable goals by addressing complex and pressing global issues.

(4) Stakeholder communication. Contributing to sustainable development helps businesses build trusting relationships with the public and stakeholders. By employing knowledge on how to use strategic communication to form relations with publics and stakeholders, organizations can increase awareness of social and environmental issues and develop sustainable options and influence behaviors.

(5) Communication for innovation and transformation. Communication is fundamental for increasing knowledge about new innovations, sustainable solutions, and research results that can be applied to practice. Communication campaigns are crucial for informing the general public, engaging with them, raising awareness and ultimately working toward organizational and societal changes that support sustainability.

We favor a broad range of subjects in this special issue and welcome research from all perspectives: critical, postmodern, interpretive and post-positivist. We urge researchers studying organizational communication, strategic communication, public relations, environmental communication, health communication, media and communication and journalism, as well as other disciplines, to submit abstracts to make a difference.

About the authors

Catrin Johansson is Professor of organizational communication at Mid Sweden University, Sundvall, Sweden, and research leader at DEMICOM, Research Center for Democracy and Communication. Her published research includes communicative leadership; communication, coordination and leadership during crises; communication maturity in organizations and sustainability communication. She is currently leading a project on strategic climate communication in local municipalities.

Jody Jahn is Associate Professor at the University of Colorado, Boulder in the College of Media, Communication and Information. She uses mixed methods to study members of high reliability organizations and how they communicate in hazardous situations to negotiate action and interface with organizational safety policies and documents. Based on personal professional experience, she examines wildland firefighting workgroups. Her work appears in *Management Communication Quarterly, Communication Monographs, Journal of Applied Communication* and others.

Wim Elving is Professor in Sustainability Communication at Hanze University of Applied Sciences Groningen, The Netherlands. He is an expert in corporate communication, internal communication, change communication, csr communication, branding and related fields. At Hanze University, he is involved with the Center of Expertise Energy and works with information and communication related to the energy transition and the sustainable society.