Corporate Communication in Polarized Times

Key Communication Strategies

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We have been reflecting on just how polarized our current environment has become, and what that means for corporate communications. Historically, election cycles are particularly frenetic with conflicting viewpoints. This year will be no exception. Despite the challenge of influencing behaviors amidst a sea of conflicting voices, we see it as an opportune time for companies to offer their expertise and insights to activate audiences in situations where many people feel polarized.

In this white paper, we give you the rundown of polarization's relevance to corporate communications, highlight key communicative elements to keep in mind in an ever-changing environment and share some opportunities to amplify your vision of the future.

What is Polarization?

Recent reports have highlighted in great detail what is meant by polarization. Initially, it was understood as occurring amongst political actors and based on policy differences. However, that understanding has given way to a focus on emotional dislike and disgust for those associated with opposing groups. Its evolution includes a shift from being primarily understood as a problem of elite political actors, to one that is clearly impacting wide swaths of the general public. These feelings are less directly related to policy preferences and more to the identity of those defined as the "other side." The prevalence of these feelings puts the US in uncharted territory among other similarly positioned developed economies. Researchers have pointed out this is dangerous if these feelings are associated with a willingness to resort to anti-democratic behavior or violence.

On the other hand, are we thinking about polarization in the wrong way? Looking at US political events of the last decade, it is not particularly surprising that people have strong emotions. In recent times, polarization has caught the attention of everyday Americans in civil society, education, government and business, as our country has grappled with:

- Historic and ongoing racial violence implicating law-enforcement officers that sparked the *Black Lives Matter* racial justice movement.
- Contentious removal of statues and monuments venerating the former US Confederacy.
- Unprecedented immigration of individuals seeking asylum within US borders, and an immigrant rights movement that has consistently sought to humanize these families across both the Trump and Biden administrations' policies.

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- Increasing and heightened legal attacks on transgender youth and families of transgender individuals.

- Notable rise of labor power in the US and massive wins for labor unions in areas related to AI technology, the arts, and traditional manufacturing industries.

- State-wide education systems removing Black history curriculum.

- US Supreme Court decisions removing historic civil rights protections, whether it is race-conscious affirmative action in higher education or the upending of Roe vs. Wade and the dismantling of privacy protections for personal medical choices.

- Increasing climate catastrophes and "hottest-yet" records being broken each month, indicating we have surpassed climate tipping points.

- Recent backlash against institutionalizing programs broadly understood as "DEI" which were meant to develop greater equity, inclusion and belonging among Black, brown and other historically excluded communities within businesses and institutions of higher education.

- Cross-cutting international and domestic social justice issues, such as Palestinian solidarity, that have in many ways upended long-standing relations of solidarity and status quo acceptance among actors both within the US and global social justice networks.

All of this, against the backdrop of dramatically increasing income and wealth inequality in the US since the 1980s, which is significantly higher than other economically similar countries.

It would be surprising if more people were not emotionally involved, provoked and motivated—or deflated–-by these events. Perhaps polarization is simply the outcome of our shared reality: we are confronting political, economic and social issues that are rooted in the very meaning of our collective national identity. These issues determine how we think through ongoing and increasing inequality and injustice across the nation.

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Consider the events shared above and the growing intersectionality of social issues, across demographic groups that make up your internal and external audiences. There are likely themes above that implicate your corporate work, and about which your employees and customers seek reassurance that the company is committed to working on, for a better future for all members of those audiences. Your communications can help them collectively envision the future in these terms.

Generative Tension

According to communications scholars, what we know from social movement activists and the historians who seek to understand their work is that "efforts to remedy inequality often undermine social solidarity...yet, Reconstruction-era politics, the Civil Rights Movement, and Black Lives Matter have been central to moving the United States toward becoming a multiracial democracy." Our democracy is rendered more robust through these paradigm-challenging events and movements. In many ways these dynamics connect to scholarship on the concept of *contentious politics*. *Contentious politics* is a broader category, even beyond social movements, demonstrating the ways that collective interactions among "makers of claims"—people and movements—are increasingly implicating governments or other powerful institutions in ways that could impact the interests of those involved. In the framework of contentious politics, the very nature of these dynamics is tension-producing in multiple ways, and generative of outcomes.

How we think about polarization matters because if it is solely fear-based, attention is shifted toward remedying for social cohesion in ways that could undermine racial justice and other equity-based aspirations. Similar to the problematic demands of "respectability politics", we should avoid addressing polarization in ways that actually contribute to the maintenance of the unequal and exclusionary status quo.

As leaders who want positive change for the future, we have a collective responsibility to ensure that while caring for the social fabric within our companies, we are also speaking about the kind of equitable environments we work to build for our employees. From a communications lens, this means choosing the most impactful asset-based narrative that offers a call to action to engage audiences in supporting your company's ethical way of work. This can reduce dangerous polarization and help you best navigate the contentious, but healthy kind.

In the remainder of this article, we share with you the elements we view as most important to keep in mind as you grapple with our collective polarized environment. We highlight key differentiating factors at the heart of action to reduce dangerous polarization while making space for the real tension that can, and does, emerge from challenging systems of power and deeply entrenched identity-implicating politics.

How does polarized thinking impact our communications?

From the perspective of an agency working toward systemic change through communications, polarization has caught our attention for three main reasons:

- The perceived threat to democratic practice
- Its urge toward simplification and dichotomy
- The tendency toward dehumanizing language and thinking

Much of the writing on polarization, both scholarly and from the media, assumes that it is connected to political violence. However, recent scholarship is adjusting our understanding of this relationship and points to the importance of whether individuals perceive that the other side is likely to commit anti-democratic actions.

This highlights a **key communications recommendation**: find ways to emphasize your company's value of democratic norms, and efforts to uphold them, even in the face of larger societal policy shifts you may perceive as losses. In this way, your communications are a tool to collectively affirm actions that bolster trust in adherence to the rule of law. Remember, your key audience in this context is the undecided middle and those who might consider aligning with you. Research shows that communicating adherence to democratic norms helps reduce willingness to undermine democracy.

For example, when relevant news events occur–particularly during episodes that you consider losses–you can emphasize that your organization:

- Values bi-partisan debate and conventional journalistic standards even if they include contentious topics, as long as they extend dignity to all parties.
- Rejects reductions in access to voting stations, and supports the right for all members of the community to easily access stations and experience safe voting environments.

The Either/Or

The heightened emotional provocation that many people encounter in reading the news or conversations with family, friends or colleagues, often leads to knee-jerk reactions that quickly align us into camps of "us" versus "them". This also happens when we adopt previous historical events (like WWII, the rise of totalitarian regimes, the McCarthy era black lists, etc.) as our frame of reference for moving through hard times. Hindsight is 20/20 and that simplified window onto past events can lead us to flatten the current heterogeneous, complex and nuanced context into a simplistic either/or framework that relies upon "heroes" versus "bad guys" or "good" versus "evil" thinking.

Recent research indicates that across the ideological spectrum, today, Democrats and Republicans imagine that almost twice as many people on the other side hold extreme views than those who really do. Our sense of polarization among the general population is exaggerated—although pretty accurate concerning politicians. This should inform our communications approach.

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Many more people are actually in that political middle ground than most of us tend to believe. Therefore, a second **key communications recommendation** is that information overload is real for many of those in that undecided zone–what some have called the "exhausted majority"—but this is not the moment for your company to retreat. Rather, by strengthening your narrative and focusing the attention of your audiences on the clearly defined better future you are helping to build, you can reduce the fog of ambiguity that leads to lower trust of institutions overall and opting-out amongst members of the undecided general population.

Also important to keep in mind is the fact that many organizations have attempted to address polarization by fostering spaces for individuals to engage in conversations across differences. But, this does not *in and of itself* reduce polarization. In fact, it may create greater problems when individuals rightly feel that activity is all talk, with no transformation of unjust systems or change to the status quo. Polarization research indicates the strongest approach is to build agency and connect your work explicitly to structural and systems change.

For example, you can openly address the historical and current lack of equity within your industry and the experiences of minoritized and excluded communities within it. Find ways to support your employees, partners and audiences in taking action to support a more just future. Guide these audiences toward actions they can take through your organization–to build the future you collectively want to see–and move them to exercise their rights and individual agency.

The Stories We Want to Focus our Future

Because of this pull toward dichotomous thinking, authentic stories and narratives that emphasize nuanced, intersectional identities can be compelling since they catch our attention and require us to think beyond the "good"/"bad" dichotomy. When done well, these communications can develop empathy among your audiences as they learn that the issues you are working on are not so simply between two sides. It is important to keep in mind what social scientists have shown: as polarization and threat perception increase, people whose identities do not easily match up to one side or the other are often the first ones targeted through dehumanizing language and political violence.

A final **key communications recommendation** stems from this point: tell intersectional stories and fill public media spaces with dignity-centering narratives that reflect the nuances of our identities. This is in itself a social good. Your communications can work to recognize, open spaces for and visualize the intersectional stories/identities, and multiply aligned communities that are a part of your company. As our work on Narrative Justice has shown, this means considering who is centered and how you are telling their stories.

Your organization is unlikely to produce content that is directly dehumanizing, but social media, talk shows, radio and punditry at both ends of the political spectrum are replete with it. You do not need to adopt partisan language or angles to counter dehumanizing language-–and we recommend that you do not, as it is most likely to be perceived as inauthentic or contribute to polarization. Leading with your experience in the industry and speaking directly from the knowledge gained from the lived and earned expertise within your company is a solid foundation for executing your communications strategy to counter dehumanizing language. You may already be doing this in your communications.

The three actions we urge you to keep in mind as you are engaging in justice-related communications that may bring out polarizing forces are:

"You do not need to adopt partisan language or angles to counter dehumanizing language".

- Chipping away at collective fears of breaches in the democratic process by ensuring your commitment to it.

- Recognizing and avoiding simplistic, binary thinking and fully articulating the logic and compelling framework for why and how you work to create an equitable environment for your employees.

- Rejecting dehumanizing rhetoric to make space for intersectionally conscious and affirming messaging.

Build Positive Futures

The failure to consider the complex dynamics of polarization or contend with the issues raised above will likely agitate employees and clients, resulting in the need for organizations to take a reactionary response that can undoubtedly cause reputational harm. One of the best ways to generate alignment with your work is to communicate it as a compelling vision of a better future, and show your audiences how they too can figure into that better world. Do not stray away from the reality that the contentious issues of our time do bring out real challenges, but make more clear than ever how your company chooses to function and prioritize equity, even in the face of contention.

Key communications recommendations:

1. Find ways to emphasize your organization's value of democratic norms, and efforts to uphold them even in the face of larger societal policy shifts your organization perceives as losses.

2. Information overload is real for many of those in that undecided zone but this is not the moment for your organization to retreat.

3. Tell intersectional stories and fill public media spaces with dignity-centering narratives that reflect the nuances of our identities.

The Wakeman Agency is a social change firm that deploys culturally competent, transformative communication practices to address the most pressing social issues of our time. We partner with socially responsible companies, nonprofits and foundations that aim to leverage strategic communications to advance society toward systemic equity and justice.

For more information about our approach to communications can be leveraged to benefit your organization, please contact Jennifer Lynn at jlynn@thewakemanagency.com.

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