

# COMMUNICATION & LANGUAGE at work

Editorial: special issue on sustainable communication  
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## Introduction

This special issue has taken its point of departure in a panel organised by the special issue editors for the 9<sup>th</sup> European Communication Conference hosted by The European Communication Research and Education Association in Aarhus (Denmark) in October 2022. The panel was entitled “Impacting society through sustainable communication: Ethics, critique and new directions” and brought together contributions which examined sustainable communication through diverse disciplinary lenses including brand communication, corporate social responsibility communication, human resource communication, financial communication and risk communication. After the panel presentations, we sought to bring together some of the presenters in order to further explore and develop sustainable communication as a central, overarching concept and principle within communication research.

The interest in sustainable communication as a central, overarching concept and principle has been born out of the changing role of communication in society and in organisations which has been tentatively addressed within communication scholarship (e.g. Gulbrandsen & Just, 2020). The changing role of communication reflects an altered view on the organisation-society interface in which organisations are increasingly assigned political and citizenship roles and responsibilities (e.g. Matten & Crane, 2005; Moon et al., 2005; Scherer, 2018; Scherer & Palazzo, 2007). One implication of such an altered view is the heightened interest in communicating about the social and environmental impact of an organisation’s activities which is the focal point for corporate social responsibility communication and sustainability communication (e.g. Godemann & Michelsen, 2011; Weder et al., 2021). As such, communication has been recognised as having a boundary-spanning function between organisation and society (e.g. Gulbrandsen & Just, 2020; Hallahan et al., 2007) also when it comes to negotiating organisational responsibility and sustainability. However, the altered perception of the role of organisations in society has led to a call for a responsabilisation of the communication function in its own right (Gulbrandsen & Just, 2020; 2016). Given that communication is the nexus for negotiating the societal role of the organisation, it is important that communication is sustainable.

As the responsabilisation of communication is an overarching principle it has the potential to permeate the boundaries of established communication disciplines, e.g. organisational communication, corporate communication, public relations and strategic communication. As such, sustainable communication is not another communication discipline, but a principle for communication which may hold implications for other disciplines.

## Aim of the special issue

In light of the call for making communication responsible and sustainable, the aim of this special issue is to begin closing the gap in extant scholarship by laying some initial steppingstones for developing the idea of sustainable communication. The intention is to bring together various perceptions on, and uses of, sustainable communication. Thus, each contribution to the special issue offers a lens for rethinking the field, highlighting what is currently visible in existing research and suggesting what specific areas need further development. As such, each contribution works towards establishing sustainable communication as a research concept and principle within communication in order to promote sustainable communication benefitting scholarship. In turn, the collective aim is to promote a theoretical view on communication which not only seeks to benefit organisations, but people and society as well.

## Contributions in the special issue

This special issue on sustainable communication comprises of six papers. In the first paper, *Conceptualising sustainable communication at the intersection of ethics, reflexivity and critique*, Marianne Grove Ditlevsen and Trine Susanne Johansen establish the theoretical foundation for sustainable communication as a concept by outlining its central premises, including its three mindsets, i.e. the ethical, the reflexive and the critical. Presenting the concept of sustainable communication is here seen as an extension of the call for the responsabilisation of organisations spurred on by a changing organisation-society interface where organisations are seen as political actors with citizenship obligations (cf. above). By way of conceptualisation, sustainable communication is presented as a new avenue of communication research.

Following this, the next four papers represent different views on how sustainable communication can be applied to various other fields and/or topics of research with various theoretical foci; whereas the two first papers contribute to theoretical aspects of sustainable communication, the last two contribute to empirical aspects.

The paper *Rethinking risk communication about climate change: Reflexive approaches and metamodernist public participation* is a theoretical contribution that focuses on new avenues for risk communication about climate change. In the paper, Antoinette Mary Fage-Butler calls for a reflexive approach to communicating risks connected to climate change that is seen as the wicked problem *par excellence*. It is claimed that a critical examination of underlying logics and values of risk communication about climate change is needed to create more sustainable futures. From a sustainable communication perspective, the paper relates to societal aspects, highlighting two of the central premises of sustainable communication; namely, reflexivity and critique.

The paper, *Towards issue centric stakeholder relations and sustainable in communication corporate community engagement and employee volunteering*, deals theoretically with community engagement and employee volunteering from a stakeholder relations perspective. Here, Trine Susanne Johansen and Anne Ellerup Nielsen first demonstrate the corporate centrality pertaining to both community engagement and employee volunteering literature, including challenges and dilemmas. Then, they present an alternative perspective by developing an issue-centric networked framework of community engagement and employee volunteering. Finally, they discuss the presented framework as a foundation for sustainable communication practices in which all stakeholders are recognised as active decision and meaning makers. The paper contributes to a discussion of how theoretical developments of existing research fields potentially support the development of sustainable communication practices.

The next two papers are both empirical in nature. The topic of *Corporate social responsibility or corporate social control? A critical discussion of health-related employee initiatives as part of companies' CSR communication* by Matilde Nisbeth Brøgger and Line Schmelz Dam is communication related to health promotion in the workplace from an employee perspective. Based on the data and results from a recent study, potential critical perspectives of offering health-related employee initiatives are discussed. The paper concludes with a call for a more reflexive organisational and managerial practice when it comes to health initiatives and communication hereof. From a sustainable communication perspective, the paper taps into the call for responsabilisation of communication (cf. above) and touches upon important aspects of primarily the critical mindset, but also of the reflexive and the ethical mindsets.

In the paper *Researching sustainable communication: Constructively critiquing Human Resource Management practices* by Marianne Grove Ditlevsen and Peter Kastberg, the theoretical foundation of sustainable communication suggested by Ditlevsen and Johansen (in this issue) is applied to existing studies of human resource management communication. By re-reading and discussing the data from three select, already published articles on HRM communication from within the perspective of sustainable communication, the paper illustrates what re-reading previous studies can teach us about sustainable communication. Moreover, by applying the methodological framework for doing critical research (Alvesson & Deetz, 2021), the paper also – by way of example – points to one specific way of doing sustainable communication research with a view to not only the critical mindset of sustainable communication, but also the ethical and the reflexive.

## Concluding remarks

In addition to laying steppingstones for developing sustainable communication as a central, overarching concept and principle, the collective contribution of the special issue is to initiate and invite further academic advancements. It is our hope that the contributions serve to stimulate thoughts and ideas and inspire communication scholars from within various disciplines to develop the principle of sustainable communication within their respective fields. Moreover, we hope to inspire more empirical research founded in sustainable communication in order to facilitate better understanding of communication practices as sustainable.

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