

COMMUNICATING IN A POLARISED ENVIRONMENT

Insights and practical
strategies for philanthropy
communications professionals

Phileas

Philanthropy
Europe
Association

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Executive summary

In today's increasingly divided world, communicating effectively in philanthropy is more challenging than ever. With misinformation spreading quickly, social media driving echo chambers, and trust in democratic systems on the decline, the environment around us is shifting fast.

At the same time, foundations and funders are facing more public scrutiny about what they do and why it matters. That's why it's so important for their communications to not just get the message out but to do so in ways that are honest, inclusive and able to hold up under pressure.

These shifting dynamics call for a deeper understanding of how narratives are shaped and contested, and how communications professionals can navigate complex environments without compromising mission or integrity. Within this context, there is a growing imperative to engage diverse audiences, manage reputational risks, and foster meaningful dialogue across ideological divides.

KEY QUESTIONS ARE EMERGING

- ▶ How can philanthropy respond to divisive rhetoric without becoming part of the polarisation itself?
- ▶ What role can foundations play in rebuilding trust and fostering civic engagement, particularly among younger, digitally fragmented audiences?
- ▶ How can internal communications practices evolve to support external impact in volatile or unpredictable contexts?

What you'll find in this handbook

This handbook offers insights around communicating in a polarised environment, as well as a range of practical tips & strategies, analytical tools, case studies and reflective exercises designed to help practitioners adapt and lead in an increasingly fragmented public discourse. Whether addressing backlash, navigating crises, or simply refining your organisation's voice, the insights here aim to support thoughtful, mission-driven communication in complex times.

The handbook is based on learnings from a gathering of Philea's Communications Professionals in Philanthropy Community of Practice held in mid-March 2025 and entitled, "Communicating in a Polarised Environment".



These shifting dynamics call for a deeper understanding of how narratives are shaped and contested, and how communications professionals can navigate complex environments without compromising mission or integrity.

The publication covers the following areas:

PHILANTHROPY IN A POLARISED ENVIRONMENT

Setting the scene by exploring strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats for philanthropy in the current environment; plus findings from a recent study on communications priorities and challenges across the philanthropic sector.

UNDERSTANDING POLARISATION THROUGH THE LENS OF TRUTH DECAY

Exploring how the erosion of shared facts and trust in institutions affects public discourse.

THE ROLES OF EMOTIONS AND VALUES

Insight into the emotional drivers that underlie polarised thinking, and an exploration of the tension between holding strong organisational values and maintaining dialogue across divides.

TAILORING MESSAGES TO THE VALUES OF OUR AUDIENCE

Techniques for framing messages in a way that resonates with differing worldviews.

STRATEGIES FOR REFRAMING MESSAGES

Communication reframing strategies tailored for two specific challenges: reaching audiences whose values differ from your own, and avoiding escalation or antagonism in already heated spaces.

USING FUTURES THINKING

A brief introduction into how futures thinking can be used to activate new pathways to help people break out of rigid patterns and see new possibilities.

CASE STUDY ON DEPOLARISING COMMUNICATIONS

A closer look at successful efforts to shift tone, build trust, and foster connection in contentious environments.

CASE STUDIES ON CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS

Real-world examples of navigating backlash and reputational risks.

TEAM EXERCISES

Collective reflections on what to begin, pause, or maintain within organisational communications strategies; and crisis communications scenario planning using 4 scenarios to help teams practise decision-making under pressure.

We hope this guide will serve not only as a source of inspiration, but also as a practical toolkit to help communications professionals navigate the evolving challenges of our sector with clarity, resilience and care.



Key takeaways

What not to do: Avoid the traps of polarising communication

One of the most important tasks for communications professionals is to recognise the subtle ways in which **language and framing can escalate division**. Oversimplified, “problem–solution” narratives that blame one group and idealise another may seem efficient, but they risk reducing complex issues to adversarial binaries. Similarly, dystopian or crisis-driven messaging can create a sense of urgency that shuts down reflection rather than encouraging thoughtful engagement.

Polarisation often thrives on **emotionally charged storytelling**: messages that generate outrage, amplify fear or appeal to moral superiority may attract attention, but they rarely build bridges. Communications that lean too heavily into ideology or cultural signalling can alienate audiences who feel excluded or misrepresented. Preaching to the converted may perform well online, but it does not help build the broad coalitions required for lasting change.

In this environment, communications professionals should **take care not to confuse digital affirmation with public consensus**. Strategies that pursue virality or double down on insider language risk losing touch with the very people whose trust and participation are most vital.

What to do: Communicate to heal, connect and inspire

Instead of narrowing the conversation, communications professionals can widen it. This means **creating opportunities where listening is just as important as speaking**. Campaigns that prioritise mutual engagement through town halls, storytelling spaces, deliberative forums, or listening tours invite people in rather than pushing them away.

By leading with empathy, communicators can **amplify voices that mediate instead of dominate**. They can test messages to uncover shared values and use those as anchors for difficult conversations. Complexity should not be avoided; it should be embraced. People are capable of holding multiple truths, and narratives that allow for ambiguity often reflect reality more faithfully than those that demand a binary choice.

Storytelling remains a powerful tool, but it should humanise rather than caricature. When audiences see the full humanity of someone with opposing views, polarising assumptions begin to erode. Alongside this, exposing manipulative narratives and disinformation can help audiences develop a more critical lens and resist being swept into antagonistic thinking.

Communications professionals can **contribute to rebuilding the “public space”** – that vital, dynamic arena where diverse voices come together in disagreement, collaboration and co-creation. This involves acknowledging the emotional landscape of audiences and creating campaigns that channel anger, hope, fear and frustration into meaningful agency.

Strategic practices for long-term impact

Empathetic communication begins with listening and continues through action. Campaigns must be grounded in real evidence about public opinion, not assumptions. Language matters: Reviewing websites, social media posts, and internal documents for polarising phrasing is essential. So too is ensuring that messaging aligns with the motivations of each audience. For some, this might mean esteem-based reframing: speaking to values such as autonomy, safety or status. For others, it may involve deconstructing “us versus them” narratives and shifting the focus towards shared goals and collective agency.

To reach younger and more digitally native audiences, communications should explore new platforms, from TikTok to podcasts, and collaborate with influencers or storytellers who already have trust and reach. Entertainment can also serve as a powerful channel: Humour, drama and creative storytelling can make complex ideas more accessible and memorable.

Communications professionals can enhance their impact by strengthening peer networks, engaging in joint campaigns, and co-developing bridge-building tools. Internally, they can rehearse crisis scenarios, explore strategies for re-pluralisation, and maintain a close watch on shifting trends in public discourse.

Above all, communication should be about building – not just changing minds, but fostering a shared sense of purpose. It means developing narratives that welcome rather than exclude, engage rather than provoke, and seek to understand rather than to win.

Philanthropy has a unique strength in being able to lead by example, and communications professionals are central to that mission. With intention, humility and courage, they can help shift conversations and communities towards greater understanding and deeper connection.

Philanthropy in a polarised environment

Philanthropy is facing an increasingly polarised environment driven by misinformation, social media echo chambers and declining trust in democracy. How can philanthropy, and especially communicators in the field, navigate this new reality?

Let's first consider the characteristics of philanthropy that may support or hinder success in this environment. The philanthropic landscape is highly diverse, so not all actors will share the same characteristics, advantages and constraints. Nonetheless, the S.W.O.T. analysis (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats) below highlights common patterns. It shows that while philanthropy has significant resources to draw on, the sector must also navigate internal weaknesses and external pressures.

For communications professionals in philanthropy, this kind of analysis can inform strategies for communicating



in the increasingly divisive environment we find ourselves in.

Strengths

Philanthropic organisations benefit from several critical strengths that position them for impact. Access to information and the opportunity for peer learning enable these organisations to stay informed and continuously improve. Additionally, a strong network and the ability to collaborate widely are essential for scaling efforts and influencing systemic change. Many within the philanthropic space also recognise the privilege of their position, offering them the resources to enact meaningful change. Stories from grantees and networks provide valuable insights that can drive more effective programmes and help align with the needs of the communities served. Moreover, time and resources, though often constrained, remain important assets that allow philanthropic organisations to respond to challenges and develop effective solutions.



Weaknesses

Despite these strengths, philanthropic organisations face several internal weaknesses that can hinder progress. One of the most prominent is agility. The sector often struggles to respond quickly to rapidly changing circumstances due to bureaucratic inertia or complex decision-making processes. A broad focus, while inclusive,

can dilute impact and make it difficult to prioritise high-need areas. Additionally, vanity issues within the philanthropic community, such as a desire for recognition, can sometimes delay necessary changes or initiatives. These internal factors limit the effectiveness of philanthropic efforts, especially in an environment where adaptability and precision are crucial.

...while the current challenges may feel overwhelming, hitting a societal “bottom” could be an opportunity to reset priorities, increase impact, and drive larger, systemic changes.



Opportunities

There are numerous external opportunities for philanthropic organisations in today's polarised environment. One

of the most significant is the potential for supporting each other through hard times. In a world where division often reigns, collaborative support can help organisations remain resilient and focused. Another opportunity lies in finding common ground on values, focusing on what can unite rather than divide. By building on shared principles, philanthropies can contribute to reducing polarisation rather than exacerbating it. Moreover, communication can play a key role in bridging divides, creating a collective and positive message that emphasises collaboration and mutual understanding. Finally, while the current challenges may feel overwhelming, they also open the possibility to reimagine approaches, strengthen collaboration, and build more effective pathways toward systemic change.



Threats

However, external threats present significant challenges to philanthropy in this climate. Working in silos and thinking within isolated “bubbles” limits the scope and effectiveness of philanthropic interventions. This lack of cross-sector engagement prevents the development of holistic solutions and fosters further division. Self-censorship is also a critical threat, as the fear of speaking up or taking a stand on issues, due to political correctness or the risk of offending stakeholders, may stifle important conversations and innovative actions. This fear can make it difficult for organisations to take bold stances or advocate for what they truly believe in. As polarisation deepens, it becomes increasingly hard to maintain the courage to stick to one’s values and take the necessary risks to address urgent social challenges.

A new context for communications professionals

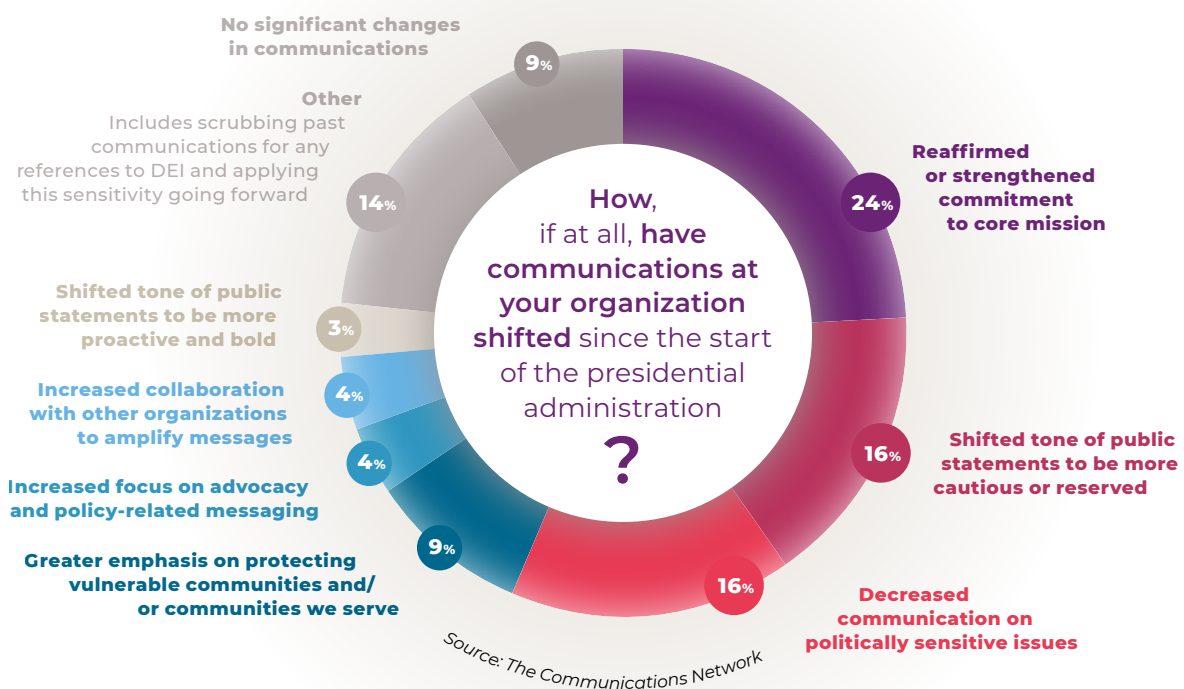
Recently, the US-based Communications Network conducted its first [2025 Pulse Survey](#) to assess how communicators in the US social good sector are adapting to the new presidential administration. The survey gathered responses from a diverse group of professionals, mostly working at non-profits and foundations, exploring shifts in communication priorities and emerging challenges.

since the new administration took office. While the study was based in the United States, its findings provide valuable insights and raise critical questions that invite reflection with communications professionals in the European philanthropic sector as well.

A major trend identified in the United States is a renewed **focus on reaffirming core organisational missions**. Communicators have adjusted their messaging to reflect a stronger commitment to their central purpose, a shift that may also be relevant for European organisations as political environments evolve.

One major shift in the US sector is a move towards **a more reserved approach** in communication. Many organisations have opted for a more cautious tone, particularly regarding sensitive issues like Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI); climate change; and gender-affirming care. This reflects a growing concern about the potential risks of being too vocal on politically sensitive topics: a challenge that may resonate with European non-profits facing similar political climates.

A particularly striking concern among US non-profits was the **fear of government retaliation** or loss of funding for speaking out on contentious issues. While this issue is more pronounced in the US context, it may have echoes in certain European countries, where shifts in government policies can also impact the funding landscape for non-profit organisations.





In response to these shifts, many organisations have **pulled back from issuing public statements** or engaging heavily with earned or social media. Instead, they have turned to owned media channels, such as websites, email newsletters, and LinkedIn to communicate their messages. This trend reflects a strategic move to maintain control over their communications while navigating a more volatile political environment.

Despite this more cautious approach, some organisations have increased their **focus on advocating for and protecting vulnerable communities**. They have heightened efforts to support the communities they serve, a key value in the philanthropic sector.

As political environments in Europe also shift, there may be increasing pressure to reconsider how organisations engage with politically sensitive topics. Whether it's shifting government policies, changing funding landscapes, or societal shifts, the need to adapt communication strategies will remain central.

The following sections look at what is driving polarisation and why it is dangerous for healthy, pluralistic societies. Each section also offers practical tips and reflective exercises designed to help you navigate these changes and proactively respond to the challenges of a polarising environment.

REFLECTION EXERCISE

AS YOU REVIEW THESE FINDINGS, CONSIDER HOW THEY MIGHT APPLY WITHIN YOUR OWN CONTEXT:

- ▶ How do you maintain a balance between standing by your core mission while adapting to shifting political or societal landscapes?
- ▶ Are your communication strategies too cautious, or are they well-aligned with the current mood of your stakeholders?
- ▶ How might fear of backlash, whether from governments or audiences, be influencing your messaging choices?
- ▶ What role do owned media channels play in your communication strategy, and are you optimising their potential?

Understanding polarisation through the lens of truth decay

What is polarisation? Is it always a bad thing? What drives it? And how is it that in an age of unprecedented access to information, people seem to agree less and distrust more?



Source: Busch, C. (2025, March 13). Policing in dark times: Truth/democratic decay, polarisation and depluralisation [Conference presentation]. Philea Communications Professionals in Philanthropy Community of Practice Spring Meeting: Communicating in Polarised Environments, Brussels.

Communications professionals are asking these questions as the communication landscape is being reshaped by rapid technological shifts, declining trust in institutions, and the breakdown of a shared factual baseline. What we're facing is not just disagreement about issues, but a struggle over reality itself.

Polarisation (issue-based) begins as difference, often necessary and even healthy for democracy. Competing narratives, when grounded in truth and mutual respect, can boost civic innovation. Civil disobedience and activism often emerge from deep moral convictions and enrich public life.

When polarisation becomes toxic (affective) it transforms pluralism into rigid binaries. The us-versus-them logic mobilises alienated communities, framing difference as danger. In this environment, feelings of economic insecurity, resentment, and cultural fear become fertile ground for conspiracy theories and radicalism. This is what psychologist Nathali Moghaddam terms [mutual](#)

[radicalisation](#): Both sides of a divide spiral into ideological extremes, each distorted by a demonised image of the other.

An excellent illustration of this is a [conspiracy chart created by Abbie Richards](#). The chart, which went viral, explains how information can ramp up from true to harmful and disconnected from reality.

Despite these challenges, communications professionals are uniquely positioned to design narratives, platforms, and dialogues that reintroduce complexity, bridge divides, and reaffirm shared values.

POLARISATION LEADING TO TRUTH DECAY

Truth decay acts as both a symptom and a catalyst. Truth decay can be defined as the disintegration of consensus around what is factual and what is not. For communications experts, this represents not just a crisis of content, but of trust and context. As shared agreement on basic facts erodes, the ground for good-faith disagreement collapses. Truth decay and polarisation can lead to the erosion of pluralism: the capacity of public discourse to accommodate multiple meanings, identities and perspectives.

THE KEY FEATURES OF TRUTH DECAY CAN BE SUMMARISED AS:

- ▶ Rising disagreement over basic facts and data
- ▶ Blurring boundaries between fact and opinion
- ▶ The dominance of emotionally charged opinion over verified information
- ▶ Diminishing trust in traditional sources of authority (media, academia, government)

These shifts are exacerbated by new information technologies. Social media platforms, algorithmic curation, and decentralised publishing have democratised expression but also eroded gate-keeping, allowing disinformation ecosystems to grow. The result is the collapse of the shared space where reality is constructed and contested through speech and visibility.

In this picture, communication is less about understanding and exchanging ideas and more about mobilisation, control and conformity in an effort to assert identity. Such processes are sustained both top-down (e.g. political messaging, partisan media) and bottom-up (e.g. algorithmic echo chambers, online subcultures). When people can't agree on what's true, they default to what feels true: emotionally charged opinions, simplified narratives, and moral panic. This fosters [affective polarisation](#), where opposing views are seen not just as wrong, but illegitimate or even dangerous.

COMMUNICATION TIPS TO ADDRESS POLARISATION

DESPITE THESE CHALLENGES, COMMUNICATIONS PROFESSIONALS ARE UNIQUELY POSITIONED TO DESIGN NARRATIVES, PLATFORMS, AND DIALOGUES THAT REINTRODUCE COMPLEXITY, BRIDGE DIVIDES, AND REAFFIRM SHARED VALUES. THERE ARE POWERFUL COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES FOR REPAIRING PUBLIC DISCOURSE AND RESTORING PLURALITY, INCLUDING THE FOLLOWING ONES:

- ▶ Promote listening campaigns and deliberative formats.
- ▶ Create spaces for mutual engagement. Not all disagreement needs resolution. Constructive tension can strengthen democratic culture.
- ▶ Promote dialogic leadership, highlight voices that mediate, not dominate, conversation.
- ▶ Use message testing to identify shared values across divides, identify points of common concern across divides to reframe conversations constructively.
- ▶ Avoid moral superiority framings, instead of blaming or shaming, centre shared stakes and vulnerabilities.
- ▶ Partner with credible messengers from across polarised groups. Trust is relational, who speaks, often matters more, than what is said.
- ▶ Reintroduce complexity and resisting binary framings, embrace ambiguity and the possibility of “both/and” rather than “either/or”.
- ▶ Humanise the “other” through storytelling, showing the full humanity of those with opposing views; break the cycle of caricature.
- ▶ Expose crisis narratives and disinformation, help audiences recognise manipulative patterns and ask critical questions.

COMMUNICATIONS PROFESSIONALS, KNOWINGLY OR NOT, CAN CONTRIBUTE TO POLARISATION THROUGH:

- ▶ Simplified problem-solution narratives (e.g. “X group is the problem; removing them is the solution”).
- ▶ Dystopian or apocalyptic framing that generates urgency and shuts down deliberation.
- ▶ Promotion of singular, ideologically closed narratives, which redefine core values like freedom or justice in exclusionary terms.
- ▶ Crisis narratives that frame opponents as existential threats.
- ▶ Moral and cultural panic communicated through simplified and symbolic language.
- ▶ Amplification of outrage through affective messaging and virality.

Our ethical responsibilities

In Hanna Arendt’s words, “power is only realised where word and deed are not separated.” Communication, when it conceals rather than reveals, or manipulates rather than connects, contributes directly to the conditions of authoritarianism.

COMMUNICATIONS PROFESSIONALS SHOULD ASK:

- ▶ Are we encouraging dialogue or antagonism?
- ▶ Are we promoting understanding or mobilising fear?
- ▶ Are we reflecting reality or constructing ideological distortions?

Think about this photograph from Nazi Germany: A crowd stands unified in gesture, arms outstretched in the infamous salute. All but one man. He stands there, arms crossed, not defiant, not afraid, simply... refusing. The image is a snapshot of moral clarity amid mass complicity. The man in the crowd who refused to salute reminds us that sometimes refusing the dominant script is the most powerful act of communication.

Polarisation is not inevitable, it is an outcome of communicative choices, both individual and institutional. Communications professionals can help rebuild the “public space” – the shared, contested, dynamic space where democracy lives. In the face of fragmentation, we are not powerless. But we are responsible.



August Landmesser refuses to salute, Hamburg, Germany, 1936.

The roles of emotions and values

How emotions complicate and enrich our understanding of polarisation

Polarisation is often framed as a clash of ideologies or a contest between reasoned arguments on opposing sides. But as new research and cultural analysis show, the dynamics of polarisation are far more emotional, more human and more complex than the standard narrative suggests. It's not just that people disagree. It's that they dislike, distrust and even dehumanise those who see the world differently.

...communication must engage with the emotional context of rational choices: Why people believe what they do, and what personal or communal narratives those beliefs are attached to.

Communications professionals are dealing with audiences that are not merely divided but emotionally entrenched. This is an environment in which facts alone won't heal divides and might even inflame them.

Hence the dichotomy between emotion and reason does not make sense anymore. Political scientist [Michael Bruter](#) and philosopher [Lisa Bortolotti](#) argue that rationality is always emotionally embedded. Emotions, far from being irrational noise, often reflect deep-seated values, fears and moral intuitions.

For communicators, this is a paradigm shift. It means messages shouldn't simply toggle between emotional appeals and logical arguments. Rather, communication must engage with the emotional context of rational choices: Why people believe what they do, and what personal or communal narratives those beliefs are attached to.

HOW TO MOVE BEYOND PERSUASION

SO, WHAT SHOULD COMMUNICATORS DO DIFFERENTLY? THE SHIFTING EMOTIONAL-POLITICAL CONTEXT SUGGESTS THAT COMMUNICATORS NEED TO MOVE BEYOND PERSUASION TOWARD RESTORATION. HERE'S HOW:

- ▶ Rather than suppressing emotional content, good communication must respect and channel emotional insight into shared understanding.
- ▶ Restoring faith in leadership, journalism and institutions requires more than transparency. It demands authenticity, humility and participation.
- ▶ Campaigns that connect with people's sense of self (culturally, morally and emotionally) are far more effective than purely transactional appeals.
- ▶ Whether through participatory civic design, accessible dialogue forums, or community storytelling, communicators must offer constructive ways for people to express anger, hope and agency.

When values lead, but connection lags

As communications professionals working within philanthropy, we often see ourselves as agents of positive change, championing inclusion, equity and truth. But a recent [More in Common study](#) offers a humbling reminder: Even the most well-intentioned actors can find themselves out of sync with the public they aim to serve.

The report focuses on a segment of the UK population known as “Progressive Activists”, a highly engaged, deeply values-driven group that represents around 8–10% of the UK public. The study finds Progressive Activists are heavily overrepresented in public sector bodies, non-profits, and particularly in policy and communications roles. If you haven’t already done so, you can [take the More in Common test](#) to see if you also belong to this group.

Progressive Activists are driven by a moral imperative to correct injustice and uplift marginalised voices. These are core motivations in philanthropy and social impact communications. This passion often exists in tension with the broader public’s values and beliefs.

On issues like immigration, national identity, “woke culture”, and free speech, Progressive Activists consistently diverge from the mainstream. They often hold more radical or urgent views and, more worryingly for communicators, they tend to overestimate how widely those views are shared.

The result? A communications landscape where some messages may preach to the converted while alienating those who are less ideologically aligned or slower to embrace change. This misalignment risks feeding a cycle of mutual incomprehension: One side sees the public as misinformed or regressive, while the public perceives the sector as out-of-touch or elitist.

The digital sphere intensifies these dynamics. The study notes that Progressive Activists are particularly active online, where progressive voices often dominate. This creates a feedback loop: High engagement from like-minded peers can reinforce the perception that their views are more mainstream than they are.

For communicators, this creates a risk of overconfidence, mistaking online affirmation for public consensus. This can lead to strategies that focus on mobilising the base rather than building broader coalitions. It can also foster a

dismissive stance toward public opinion, especially when change feels urgent and justice long overdue. When we don’t meet people where they are, or worse, assume they are where we are, our messages can fail to connect, or even deepen divides.

Philanthropy is often a moral project. But moral certainty can harden into dogma, especially when disagreement is interpreted as harm. According to the study, many

Progressive Activists shield marginalised groups from offensive speech, even if it means limiting open debate; an instinct not widely shared by the broader public.

For communicators, this raises tough questions: **How do we champion inclusion without alienating those still on the journey toward it? And how do we preserve democratic dialogue**

while protecting vulnerable communities?

This is not an argument for abandoning principles, but for grounding them in empathetic communication which uses a language that listens as much as it speaks and persuades as much as it protests.

When we don't meet people where they are, or worse, assume they are where we are, our messages can fail to connect, or even deepen divides.

REFLECTION EXERCISE

THE FINDINGS FROM MORE IN COMMON CHALLENGE US TO REFLECT ON OUR OWN ROLE IN PUBLIC DISCOURSE:

- ▶ Are our campaigns informed by assumptions or evidence about public opinion?
- ▶ Are we creating welcoming narratives, or unintentionally excluding those who don't already agree?
- ▶ Have we confused moral clarity with emotional distance from the people we seek to influence?
- ▶ Are we building coalitions, or doubling down on identity-based messaging that only resonates within our circles?
- ▶ And most importantly, in our efforts to reduce polarisation, could we be contributing to it ourselves?

Tailoring messages to the values of our audiences

In today's fragmented environment, values can both connect and divide. To communicate effectively, especially across ideological or cultural lines, we need to understand what people value, and how and why those values differ.

Values are deep, enduring beliefs that guide our judgments, behaviours and sense of identity. Social psychologist Shalom Schwartz developed the [Basic Human Values Theory](#), which identifies ten universal values shared by people across cultures.

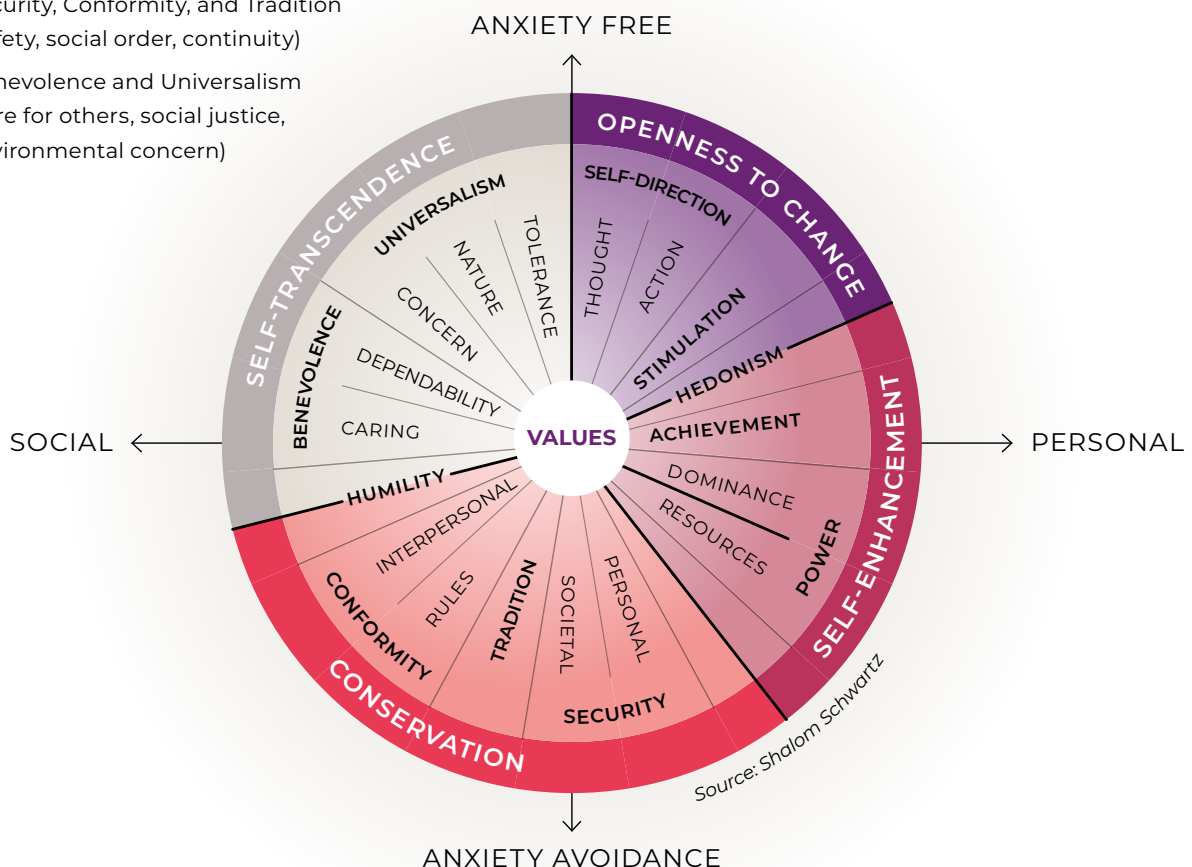
UNIVERSAL VALUES:

- ▶ Self-direction (creativity, freedom, independent thought)
- ▶ Stimulation and Hedonism (pleasure, excitement)
- ▶ Achievement and Power (success, dominance, control)
- ▶ Security, Conformity, and Tradition (safety, social order, continuity)
- ▶ Benevolence and Universalism (care for others, social justice, environmental concern)

THESE VALUES ARE GROUPED INTO BROADER ORIENTATIONS

- ▶ Openness to Change vs. Conservation
- ▶ Self-Enhancement vs. Self-Transcendence

While most people hold all these values to some degree, we prioritise them differently based on our personalities, life experiences and social environments. One person may prioritise security and tradition, while another emphasises freedom and fairness. These priorities influence everything from voting behaviour to media consumption to how receptive someone is to a new idea.



According to [Values and Identities - A Policymaker's Guide](#) published by the European Commission, even values that seem universally “good”, like fairness or compassion, can become sources of conflict when different groups interpret them through different lenses. For example:

- ▶ One group may define fairness as equal outcomes; another as equal opportunity.
- ▶ Emphasising universalism (care for all people) may feel noble to some but threatening to those who see it as undermining national identity or group loyalty.
- ▶ Free speech and protection from harm are both values, yet they often collide in debates over hate speech and inclusion.

In polarised contexts, asserting values can unintentionally entrench division. Audiences may perceive value-based messaging as moralising or dismissive, especially if it seems to imply, “We’re right and you’re wrong.” When values become bound up with identity, disagreements can feel like personal attacks, making people dig in rather than open up.

Values in transition

Ronald F. Inglehart’s [Cultural Evolution Theory](#) explains how societal shifts influence collective value priorities. His research, spanning over 100 countries, shows a broad transition over time from “survival values” – emphasising conformity, authority and safety – to “self-expression values” which prioritise autonomy, diversity and participation.

This shift tends to occur as societies become more economically secure and physically safe. Inglehart calls this process evolutionary modernisation. In places where basic needs are met, people become more open to new ideas, human rights and environmental issues. But when security is threatened through inequality, migration, or cultural disruption, there can be a backlash. Some people revert to traditionalist values and seek strong leaders or clear boundaries.

For communicators, this means that context matters enormously. Messages that emphasise change, inclusion and openness may land well in cities with high existential security but may alienate communities feeling economically or culturally precarious. Understanding this dynamic helps us craft messages that meet people where they are.

Segmenting by motivation

To tailor messages more precisely, we can refer to the [Values-Based Segmentation \(VBS\)](#) model, which identifies three broad motivational groups:



SETTLERS

Settlers are motivated by the need for security, tradition and familiarity. They value loyalty and predictability. They’re often cautious about change, especially if it feels imposed or abstract. They are typically older or come from communities facing material or cultural uncertainty.

HOW TO ENGAGE THEM

- ▶ Use reassuring, respectful language as well as familiar symbols and rituals.
- ▶ Emphasise continuity, heritage and protection.

WHAT TO AVOID

- ▶ Radical change, ambiguity or abstract ideals.
- ▶ Anything that feels chaotic, experimental or elitist.

EXAMPLE

If you’re promoting a local sustainability initiative, stress how it protects local jobs, supports traditional ways of life, and ensures long-term stability for future generations.



PROSPECTORS

Prospectors are motivated by success, social approval and personal achievement. They’re often trend-driven, ambitious and responsive to messages that reflect modernity or prestige.

HOW TO ENGAGE THEM

- ▶ Highlight benefits, rewards and lifestyle enhancements.
- ▶ Use polished visuals, stylish presentation and dynamic language.
- ▶ Use social proof (e.g. endorsements by “winners” or admired figures).

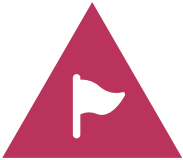
WHAT TO AVOID

- ▶ Guilt, moralising or doom-heavy framing. They respond better to optimism.
- ▶ Dry or overly intellectual messaging.

EXAMPLE

Promoting public transport? Frame it as smart, sleek and a choice successful people make, especially if it’s high-tech or high-status.





PIONEERS

Pioneers are driven by values, principles and curiosity. They are open to new ideas and are often the earliest supporters of progressive change, especially if it aligns with a bigger ethical picture. They appreciate authenticity and are comfortable with complexity.

HOW TO ENGAGE THEM

- ▶ Connect with visionary ideas, big-picture narratives and systemic thinking. You can use complex narratives that explore “why”.
- ▶ Be transparent, honest and ethical; don’t sugarcoat.
- ▶ Use authentic voices and grass-roots stories.

WHAT TO AVOID

- ▶ Glossy spin, superficiality or status-chasing.
- ▶ Appeals to tradition for its own sake.

EXAMPLE

Launching a climate justice campaign? Emphasise global interconnection, social equity and systems change. Invite collaboration, not just endorsement. Use stories of lived experience and emphasise shared responsibility.

Universalism Caring
Loyalty Self-direction
Benevolence Justice
Nature Ethics, ideas
Openness Self-choice

KEY LESSONS FOR VALUES-LED COMMUNICATION

TO BUILD BRIDGES RATHER THAN WALLS, WE NEED TO MOVE BEYOND SIMPLY BROADCASTING OUR OWN VALUES. INSTEAD, WE SHOULD:

- ▶ Understand and respect others’ value hierarchies. Don’t assume shared moral ground; map where value conflicts might arise and why.
- ▶ Practise cognitive empathy. Ask: How does this issue feel from someone else’s lived perspective? What underlying needs or fears are shaping their view?
- ▶ Beware of identity signalling. When campaigns become cultural markers of “our side”, we may inadvertently alienate those who feel on the outside.
- ▶ Match the message to the motivation; not to manipulate, but to resonate. People are more likely to engage when they feel understood, not judged.

REFLECTION EXERCISE

IF WE WANT TO CONNECT ACROSS DIFFERENCE AND NOT JUST MOBILISE THOSE WHO ALREADY AGREE, THEN WE MUST ASK OURSELVES TOUGH QUESTIONS:

- ▶ In our passion to advance universal values like fairness, compassion and justice, how might we be unintentionally contributing to the very polarisation we hope to heal?
- ▶ Are we listening for how others prioritise their values or simply speaking louder about our own?
- ▶ In a world of division, we should not only aim for changing minds but also building bridges between value systems, with one story at a time.

Strategies for reframing messages

In a polarised world, how we frame messages can either open dialogue or shut it down. Communications professionals often face the following challenges:

- ▶ Reaching audiences whose values differ from theirs
- ▶ Avoiding escalation or antagonism in already heated spaces

Each situation calls for a different approach. Below are two reframing strategies that help navigate these challenges.

Esteem-based reframing

Use this when your audience holds different values from your own, and you want to broaden resonance. This approach involves temporarily stepping out of a universalism/benevolence frame centred on fairness, justice or care and into an esteem/self-enhancement frame, which speaks to personal success, autonomy, status and security. It is especially effective with audiences motivated by achievement, reputation or control over their future. You are not compromising your values but framing benefits through their lens to foster connection and motivation.

Example: Education reform

ORIGINAL (UNIVERSALISM/ BENEVOLENCE FRAME)

"Every child deserves a quality education. It's our collective responsibility to create a fairer system for all."

REFRAMED (ESTEEM/FUTURE-FRAME)

"In tomorrow's competitive world, smart choices in education give your child the edge. A strong system helps your family thrive – today and in the future."

REFRAMING EXERCISE 1

Speak to self-enhancement values

Choose a recent topic you've communicated on climate, immigration, education, mental health, etc. and rework the message using the following steps:

- ▶ Are you appealing to justice, fairness, or care for others?
- ▶ Are you focusing on collective responsibility or systemic change?

NOW REFRAME FOR AN ESTEEM-DRIVEN AUDIENCE

- ▶ Focus on personal benefit, security, or future-proofing.
- ▶ Avoid moralising. Use aspirational or empowering language.
- ▶ Make it future-facing: "In a fast-changing world..." / "Looking ahead..."



Antagonism-reduction reframing

Use this to avoid deepening polarisation or triggering defensiveness, especially in already tense public debates. The goal here is to deconstruct “us vs. them” narratives, which cast villains and victims in rigid roles. By removing or softening the antagonist, and focusing on shared goals, agency and positive outcomes, you help reopen space for dialogue. This does not mean avoiding hard truths, it means inviting others in rather than calling them out.

Example: Climate change

ORIGINAL (ANTAGONISTIC FRAME)

“Big corporations are destroying the planet, and the government’s doing nothing.”

REFRAMED (TRUST-BUILDING FRAME)

“We’re facing a global challenge, but with innovation and shared action, we can build systems that protect both jobs and the planet for future generations.”

REFRAMING EXERCISE 2 Shift out of the “us vs. them” trap

Choose a polarised issue (e.g. climate, migration, digital rights). Identify the dominant antagonistic narrative using this structure:

(Antagonist) uses (issue) to control (protagonist)
e.g. “The elite uses climate regulation to control ordinary people.”

DECONSTRUCT IT

- ▶ Who is the villain?

- ▶ What emotion is being leveraged (fear, loss, betrayal)?

- ▶ Who is being portrayed as powerless or under threat?

NOW REFRAME IT

- ▶ Remove or soften the villain.

- ▶ Shift focus to shared values or goals.

- ▶ Use curiosity or forward-looking language.

- ▶ Highlight agency, hope and mutual benefit.

Practical resources for reframing

To learn more about these reframing techniques you can check out [*The Depolarisation Manual: Navigating the Debate on New Genomic Techniques*](#), published by Re-Imagine Europa. This manual introduces the **R.E.F.R.A.M.E. methodology**, a seven-step process that helps communicators shift polarised conversations toward constructive dialogue. This includes recognising differing values, framing messages around shared goals, actively listening, and crafting empathetic, evidence-based responses. While it focuses specifically on New Genomic Techniques (NGTs) in agriculture, the strategies it outlines are broadly applicable to any contentious topic where public opinion is divided.

Using futures-thinking and imagination

In deeply polarised societies, traditional reliance on facts alone often falls short, as facts can be dismissed or ignored when they conflict with an individual's identity or beliefs.

To bridge these divides, communicators can draw on the [power of futures-thinking and imagination](#), using these approaches to open new pathways for dialogue and shared understanding. [Research](#) in neuroscience shows that imagining possible futures activates multiple brain regions, strengthening neural pathways that support flexible thinking, empathy and openness to new ideas. [By engaging people in envisioning different futures](#), communicators help create new mental connections that can shift perspectives and open pathways for dialogue and shared understanding.

EXPANDING PERSPECTIVES

Futures-thinking enables communicators to help audiences better understand the present context by situating current issues within a broader continuum, connecting past experiences with possible futures. For example, a foundation communicating about climate resilience might produce a multimedia campaign that traces the history of local industries alongside emerging green technologies, inviting audiences to envision how their communities could thrive in future economic landscapes. This temporal perspective helps break immediate emotional entrenchment and invites people to see beyond the here and now. You can share such forward-looking narratives through accessible media (videos, podcasts or social media storytelling) to foster a sense of shared purpose despite differing values.

STIMULATING IMAGINATION TO OVERCOME COGNITIVE BARRIERS

One key challenge in polarised communication is that groups often become trapped within narrow mental models shaped by existing beliefs and social narratives. Communications teams can stimulate imagination by commissioning or amplifying creative content such as short films, virtual reality experiences, or illustrated stories that portray hopeful futures in ways that resonate across divides. For example, you can share narratives highlighting community-led innovations that challenge stereotypes and open new ways of thinking about

inclusion and opportunity. These imaginative tools invite audiences to consider new possibilities and pathways they might never have previously contemplated, broadening horizons without directly confronting entrenched positions.

CREATING SHARED VISIONS AMID DIVERSITY

While groups may differ greatly in values, futures-thinking facilitates identifying overlapping hopes by encouraging reflection on desirable outcomes. Communications professionals can craft messaging that focuses on shared aspirations such as safety, dignity, or economic security rather than polarising facts or past grievances. For instance, a foundation working on public health may highlight stories where diverse communities have collaboratively improved well-being, framing the narrative around common human values. This emphasis on hopeful, inclusive futures shifts attention from conflict to collaboration and softens polarisation, even when communications are distributed broadly rather than through face-to-face dialogue.

FACILITATING PATHWAYS FOR TRANSFORMATION

Futures-thinking supports co-creating new pathways by inviting audiences to imagine transformative possibilities. Communications professionals can highlight visionary projects and policy ideas that embody radical yet hopeful futures, using storytelling and digital platforms to inspire action. For example, by showcasing innovative urban regeneration efforts that combine ecological sustainability with job creation, a foundation's communications can empower communities to envision and demand systemic change, turning audiences into active contributors rather than passive recipients.

INCORPORATING DIVERSE VOICES AND VALUES

Futures-thinking techniques prioritise inclusivity by embracing diverse cultural perspectives and ways of knowing. Philanthropic communicators can partner with storytellers from Indigenous communities,

feminist movements, or minority groups to amplify authentic voices that enrich the narrative landscape. For instance, commissioning podcasts or video series featuring Indigenous leaders discussing their visions for land stewardship fosters legitimacy and respect across audiences. By respectfully representing difference through media channels, communications professionals help reduce polarisation and build trust.

LINKING FUTURES-THINKING WITH DECISION-MAKING

Effective communication does not end with envisioning futures; it connects those visions to practical decision-making and governance. Philanthropy communicators can influence policymaking by strategically sharing evidence-based futures scenarios, highlighting the societal benefits of proposed interventions aligned with diverse community values. For example, publishing accessible policy briefs or interactive web tools that visualise future scenarios allows policy-makers and the public to explore trade-offs and opportunities, grounding imaginative thinking in practical choices.

IMAGINING IN A POLARISED ENVIRONMENT REFLECTION EXERCISE

THIS REFLECTIVE EXERCISE IS DESIGNED TO HELP YOU THINK ABOUT HOW YOU CAN USE FUTURES-THINKING AND IMAGINATION TO OPEN UP DIVERSE POSSIBLE FUTURES, EXPAND PERSPECTIVES, AND INVITE DIALOGUE IN YOUR COMMUNICATIONS PRACTICE.

1 PAUSE AND REFLECT

THINK OF AN ISSUE YOUR ORGANISATION IS COMMUNICATING ABOUT NOW – FOR EXAMPLE, CLIMATE RESILIENCE, INCLUSIVE ECONOMIES, OR COMMUNITY WELL-BEING:

- ▶ What is the dominant story you are telling?
- ▶ Does it invite people to imagine multiple possible futures, or does it lean towards presenting one preferred solution?
- ▶ Who might feel left out or resistant to the current narrative and why?

2 EXPAND THE TIMELINE

- ▶ How could you situate this issue within a broader continuum, connecting past experiences, present challenges, and multiple future scenarios?
- ▶ What histories and local stories might help your audience feel rooted in a longer journey of change?
- ▶ What range of futures could people realistically or aspirationally imagine, not just one “ideal” outcome?

3 STIMULATE IMAGINATION

CONSIDER YOUR CURRENT OR PLANNED CAMPAIGNS:

- ▶ How might creative formats (films, VR, podcasts, illustrated stories) help audiences explore different futures rather than settle on just one?
- ▶ Are there community-led or unexpected stories that open up alternative ways of seeing what’s possible?
- ▶ Who else (artists, young people, local leaders) could help shape these plural narratives?

4 SURFACE OVERLAPPING HOPES

REFLECT ON THE PEOPLE YOU WANT TO REACH:

- ▶ Despite differences, what hopes might they share, i.e. security, well-being, dignity, opportunity?
- ▶ How can your communications hold space for diverse interpretations of these aspirations?
- ▶ Can you show multiple pathways to achieve these shared hopes, rather than implying only one route forward?

5 ENABLE CO-CREATION

THINK ABOUT YOUR ROLE AS A FACILITATOR OF FUTURES-THINKING:

- ▶ How might you invite your audiences to imagine and discuss alternative futures, rather than simply receive pre-determined messages?
- ▶ Are there real projects or scenarios you could highlight that illustrate a range of possibilities, from radical ideas to practical steps?
- ▶ How could you show that futures are not fixed, but co-created through dialogue and action?

FINAL STEP

WRITE DOWN ONE WAY YOU COULD OPEN UP SPACE FOR IMAGINING PLURAL FUTURES IN AN UPCOMING PIECE OF COMMUNICATION:

- ▶ What’s one first step you can take and who could you involve to broaden the perspectives you include?
- ▶ Return to this reflection whenever your work risks becoming too linear or prescriptive. Futures-thinking works best when it invites people to see that many futures are possible and they can help shape them.

Case study on depolarising communications

In a polarised environment, the role of communications professionals extends beyond simply avoiding the reinforcement of division – they also have a crucial responsibility to find ways to engage constructively with diverse audiences.

This often means adapting messages, tools and platforms to resonate with groups who may hold differing values or worldviews. In this section, we present an example of a foundation that has successfully navigated this challenge, demonstrating how strategic and inclusive communication can foster dialogue across divides.

The DFL Foundation's TikTok Campaign on Democracy

With its rapid rise among Gen Z, TikTok has become not just a hub for entertainment but also a space for political discourse. The DFL Foundation (Deutsche Fußball Liga Foundation), leveraging this trend, launched a campaign on the platform to promote democracy, healthy communication and social cohesion through football.

Campaign overview: #DEMOKRATEAM – Everything Else Is Offside

The DFL Foundation's TikTok campaign, titled [#DEMOKRATEAM – Alles andere ist Abseits \(Everything Else Is Offside\)](#), sought to use the cultural power of football to communicate democratic values, fostering a healthy discourse culture among young people. The campaign specifically aimed to reach the crucial age group of 14 to 29-year-olds, a demographic highly active on TikTok and critical to shaping the future of democratic societies.

The campaign drew parallels between football and democracy, emphasising the importance of clear rules, teamwork and fairness, principles that are foundational to both sports and democratic societies. The foundation's TikTok channel, called "The Beautiful Game", used football as a metaphor to showcase unity, equality and the shared values needed to preserve democracy in modern society.

Through collaborations with prominent footballers and popular content creators, the campaign sought to reach millions of young followers, creating content that was both engaging and educational. By using familiar personalities from sports and entertainment, the DFL Foundation was able to capture the attention of TikTok users in an entertaining yet informative manner, making the message stick.

WHY TIKTOK? THE PLATFORM'S RELEVANCE

TikTok has exploded in popularity, particularly among Gen Z. In 2021, the app boasted 1 billion monthly active users globally, with the United States as its largest market. The platform's success lies in its ability to personalise content using sophisticated algorithms that deliver a curated feed to users, encouraging continuous engagement. For younger users, TikTok has become not just a source of entertainment, but also a place where political content and social issues are discussed.

For the DFL Foundation, TikTok was the ideal platform to engage the younger demographic on a topic as vital as democracy. The platform's viral nature, paired with its predominantly young user base, offered an unprecedented opportunity to influence public discourse at a crucial juncture.

Furthermore, TikTok's video format provided an engaging and creative outlet for delivering complex messages in simple, memorable ways. Through concise, visually compelling videos, the foundation could convey the importance of democracy, social cohesion and healthy discourse in a way that resonated with young people.

THE CAMPAIGN EXECUTION

The #DEMOKRATEAM campaign was designed to be both entertaining and thought-provoking. Key elements of the campaign included:

CELEBRITY ENDORSEMENTS

By partnering with high-profile footballers and popular influencers, the DFL Foundation was able to amplify its message. These personalities, trusted by young audiences, helped give credibility to the campaign and ensured its wide reach.

FOOTBALL ANALOGIES

The campaign creatively drew comparisons between football and democratic principles. Just as football relies on teamwork, rules and fair play, so too does society. This approach helped simplify the concept of democracy and made it relatable to young people who might otherwise be disengaged from political discourse.

LOW-THRESHOLD, HIGH-IMPACT CONTENT

The campaign developed short, engaging and digestible content. Whether it was a quick, impactful message or a football-related parallel to societal issues, the content was designed to resonate with TikTok users and prompt them to reflect on democratic values.

HASHTAGS AND CHALLENGES

Leveraging the power of viral hashtags like #DEMOKRATEAM, the foundation encouraged users to engage with the content, participate in challenges, and spread the message organically through the platform's unique algorithm.

CHALLENGES AND REFLECTIONS

While the campaign's success was evident, there were several challenges and lessons learned throughout the process:

PLATFORM DYNAMICS

TikTok's algorithm is designed to prioritise content that keeps users engaged. While this is beneficial for visibility, it also means that content must be quick, catchy and visually appealing. Striking the right balance between delivering serious content and maintaining user engagement was a key challenge.

MISINFORMATION AND CONTENT MODERATION

As with any social media platform, misinformation can spread easily on TikTok. The DFL Foundation had to be mindful of the platform's vulnerabilities and ensure that its content did not inadvertently contribute to any disinformation. This challenge also highlighted the importance of the foundation's role in offering clear, fact-checked and balanced information, particularly in a political context.

CULTURAL SENSITIVITY

The campaign was designed to appeal to young people in Germany, but TikTok's global nature meant the content could easily reach users outside this demographic. This raised the importance of ensuring the campaign resonated with diverse audiences while staying true to its core message.

LEARNINGS FOR COMMUNICATIONS PROFESSIONALS IN PHILANTHROPY

The DFL Foundation's campaign provides several valuable lessons for communications professionals working in philanthropy:

EMBRACE NEW PLATFORMS

As digital media continues to evolve, it's crucial for foundations and non-profits to stay ahead of the curve by adopting new platforms, especially those that resonate with younger audiences. TikTok, with its unique reach and ability to engage Gen Z, proved to be an essential tool in promoting democratic values.

ENGAGEMENT THROUGH ENTERTAINMENT

While philanthropy often focuses on serious issues, it's essential to meet audiences where they are – and for today's youth, this means entertainment. The DFL Foundation demonstrated that philanthropy doesn't have to be dry or overly serious. Creative, entertaining content can be both informative and persuasive.

PARTNERSHIPS WITH INFLUENCERS

Collaborating with influencers and public figures from relevant fields (in this case, football) can amplify a campaign's reach and impact. By partnering with trusted personalities, the DFL Foundation effectively bridged the gap between its mission and the target audience.

CLEAR MESSAGING

It's crucial to simplify complex issues and communicate them in a manner that's relatable and easy to understand. The DFL Foundation's use of football analogies made democratic principles accessible to young people.

ADAPTABILITY AND MONITORING

Social media campaigns require constant monitoring and adaptation. The DFL Foundation had to stay attuned to the ever-changing nature of TikTok trends, user behaviour and content preferences to keep the campaign relevant and engaging.



REFLECTION QUESTIONS FOR COMMUNICATIONS PROFESSIONALS

- ▶ Is my organisation using social media platforms that are popular with younger audiences? How can we adapt our messaging for these platforms?
- ▶ Are we using creative and engaging formats to convey important messages, or do we tend to stick to traditional forms of communication?
- ▶ How can we address the challenges of misinformation in our campaigns, especially when working with social media platforms known for algorithmic content curation?
- ▶ What role can partnerships with influencers or public figures play in amplifying our message?
- ▶ How do we ensure that our messaging is culturally sensitive and resonates with diverse audiences while staying true to our core mission?
- ▶ How can we continuously adapt our content to remain relevant in fast-changing digital environments?

Case studies on crisis communications

In a polarised environment, the likelihood of communication crises increases, as messages can be more easily misinterpreted or provoke strong reactions. It is therefore essential for communications professionals to be well-prepared for such scenarios.

In this section, we share two examples where potentially contentious situations were handled with care and sensitivity, while the organisation remained firmly committed to its mission. These cases offer valuable insights and practical lessons for navigating similar challenges.

CASE STUDY 1 Finnish Cultural Foundation: When a book sparks a backlash

Between 2017 and 2020, the Finnish Cultural Foundation supported The Reading Clan, a national literacy programme in Finland. The initiative's mission was to strengthen literary education; boost reading motivation among children and youth; and in particular address the gender gap in reading habits.

By 2019, the programme had delivered book packages to every middle school in the country, including curated selections aimed specifically at teenage boys, one of the hardest groups to reach through traditional school reading lists. Alongside the books came teacher guides designed to support classroom discussion and help young readers engage with sometimes challenging or sensitive topics.

One of the books included in the optional donation was "Respect". Its aim is to provide boys with honest, non-judgmental information about relationships, sexuality, identity and consent.

In the autumn of 2024, a Finnish parent posted photos of the book on X (formerly Twitter), describing it as "sick" and claiming it gave "sucking tips" to 14-year-olds. The post rapidly gained traction. Soon, it wasn't just a social media skirmish, it was a full-blown political controversy.

Leaders of the Christian Democrats and the far-right True Finns party quickly joined the chorus of outrage. National newspapers and tabloids picked up the story.

Finland's Minister of Education was called upon to respond. The Ombudsman for Children weighed in. And all of it revolved around short, decontextualised excerpts from a book that most critics admitted they hadn't read.

Though the book had never been part of the school curriculum and was in fact donated to libraries, not classrooms, this nuance was lost in the noise. For many, the controversy wasn't really about the book at all. It became a proxy battle over sex education, liberal values, and the role of schools in shaping social norms.

THE FOUNDATION'S DILEMMA: SPEAK UP OR STAY QUIET?

The Finnish Cultural Foundation watched the events unfold with growing concern. Should it defend the book? Clarify the facts? Issue a statement?

It chose a strategy of careful observation and minimal engagement. Recognising that the backlash was aimed less at the foundation and more at broader cultural anxieties, it coordinated with the project's implementing partner and prepared internal guidance for staff and trustees, including media response templates.

Importantly, the foundation did not issue a proactive public comment. It also refrained from joining the fray on social media. This approach proved pragmatic: Only a handful of messages directed criticism at the foundation itself. Most public anger was focused on schools, education officials, and the content of the book.

Still, internally, the episode sparked important questions. Should the foundation have responded more quickly to clarify misinformation? How should it have handled conflicting views within its own stakeholder base? And what lessons could be learned for the future?

The foundation emerged from the controversy largely unscathed but also more aware. The experience highlighted the need for scenario planning, media preparedness, and internal communications strategies that keep pace with fast-moving public debates.

LESSONS FOR FUNDERS NAVIGATING POLARISED DEBATES

WHAT STARTED AS A RELATIVELY MINOR TWEET TURNED INTO A FULL-SCALE MEDIA MOMENT. AND YET, THE BOOK HADN'T CHANGED. AS THE SWEDISH WRITER AND SEX EDUCATOR INTI CHAVEZ PEREZ LATER REMARKED IN A HELSINGIN SANOMAT INTERVIEW, "THE BOOK IS THE SAME, BUT THE TIMES HAVE CHANGED."

HERE ARE SOME OF THE KEY INSIGHTS THE FOUNDATION TOOK AWAY:

1 CONTROVERSIES CAN ERUPT LONG AFTER A PROJECT ENDS

The Reading Clan initiative wrapped up in 2020. The backlash happened in 2024. Funders must be prepared for long-tail visibility – and vulnerability – of the work they support.

2 FACTS GET LOST IN THE FOG OF OUTRAGE

The distinction between curriculum materials and library donations was repeatedly ignored. When misinformation spreads, funders may need to proactively clarify the truth, even if they aren't the primary target.

3 NOT EVERY FIGHT IS YOURS TO ENTER

In highly polarised debates, funders must weigh when engagement is constructive and when it may inflame tensions. Offering quiet support and backing your grantees even when staying out of the public spotlight may be a more sensible course.

4 INTERNAL ALIGNMENT MATTERS – FAST

Slow internal communications and conflicting views among trustees and stakeholders made early decision-making harder. Establishing a shared understanding of the issue is essential before engaging publicly.

5 CULTURAL SHIFTS CAN REFRAME THE MEANING OF A PROJECT

The same book that was welcomed in 2019 sparked outrage in 2024. As political climates shift, even well-intentioned cultural work can be recast as controversial.



CASE STUDY 2

Kone Foundation's backing of Extinction Rebellion Finland sparks a debate on civic space and philanthropy's role

For years, Finland's Kone Foundation has supported academic research, the arts and initiatives advancing ecological awareness. Through its "Metsän Puolella" ("On the Side of the Forest") programme, it broadened its grantmaking to include forest-related activism, recognising the urgent need to defend Finland's natural environments and expand public dialogue on climate and biodiversity.

In 2023, the foundation decided to fund a project by Extinction Rebellion Finland (Elokapina), a group known for its bold and highly visible climate protests. The group's plan included public events, educational campaigns, and participation in Extinction Rebellion's broader Storm Warning campaign, which focuses on climate justice, harmful corporate subsidies, and the protection of carbon sinks such as forests. The decision raised important questions in the Finnish media and philanthropic circles about the role of foundations in funding activism, the boundaries of "public benefit", and how to safeguard the right to protest in increasingly polarised societies.

In September 2024, environmental activists affiliated with Extinction Rebellion Finland and Återställ Våtmarker (Restore Wetlands Sweden) spray-painted the entrance pillars of the Finnish Parliament. The action was a protest against the peat mining operations of Neova, a Finnish state-owned company operating in Sweden. Activists cited the climate crisis and carbon emissions from peat extraction as the reason for the protest.

This action drew swift and wide condemnation from Finnish MPs across party lines, who labelled it not a protest, but a symbolic attack on democracy and the integrity of Parliament.

While the paint stunt was unrelated to Kone's grant, the connection to the grantee caused reputational concerns and prompted a swift response. The foundation immediately published a statement and emphasised that:

- ▶ The funded project was selected through its regular application process and was deemed well-structured and legitimate.
- ▶ The funding was earmarked for specific activities outlined in the project plan, such as speaker fees, event coordination and communications, not for protests or civil disobedience itself.
- ▶ Funding cannot be used for illegal activities or to pay fines. All grantees are required to report on how funds are used and on project outcomes.
- ▶ If there were credible concerns about illegal activity, they would be addressed through the appropriate legal channels.
- ▶ Recent tax and legal interpretations in Finland had affirmed that foundations can support activist groups.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- ▶ What is our responsibility when grantees engage in controversial or borderline illegal activities even if not funded by us?
- ▶ Are we equipped to handle sudden media attention or reputational challenges?
- ▶ Will we find ourselves in a state of "permanent crisis communication"? If so, how can we build resilience into our communication strategy?
- ▶ Are we adapting fast enough to the shifting dynamics of civic space and public discourse?

Team exercises

These broad-based exercises will help your team process and integrate the learnings and tips provided in this handbook.

1. Which actions to start-stop-continue

This start-stop-continue exercise identifies a set of key actions designed to help communications professionals prepare for potential threats, address existing weaknesses, seize emerging opportunities, and strengthen what is already working well.

Read through the following actions, then carry out the team exercise:

Start

- ▶ Embracing radical collaboration and collective impact

- ▶ Listening to understand different audiences and tailoring messaging accordingly

- ▶ Exploring re-pluralisation narratives to reflect diverse perspectives

- ▶ Bringing in outside views through social listening

- ▶ Reviewing existing language on websites and in documents to identify and remove polarising phrasing

- ▶ Using online platforms to create concrete opportunities for social mixing and bridge-building

- ▶ Finding fresh communications terminology to describe democracy



Stop

- ▶ Using polarising or divisive language

- ▶ Falling into preaching and narrative traps

- ▶ Contributing to anxiety or fear about the future

- ▶ Excluding or dismissing different opinions

Continue

- ▶ Championing hope-based communications

- ▶ Using less overtly political language

- ▶ Encouraging active participation from all stakeholders

- ▶ Ensuring narratives consistently build bridges, not barriers

- ▶ Strengthening networks with other foundations and relevant actors

- ▶ Preparing for and practising crisis-communication scenarios



Team exercise: Stop-start-continue

- ▶ Gather your team in a bright, uncluttered meeting room and begin with a quick round-robin: Ask each person to say one word that springs to mind when they think of “polarisation”. Then remind everyone of the start–stop–continue outcomes, grounding the group in the ideas of radical collaboration, hope-based messaging and the avoidance of divisive language.
-
- ▶ In pairs, participants spend five minutes reflecting on which “Start” action feels most urgent for your organisation. Perhaps it’s scheduling monthly social-listening debriefs, or re-examining your website copy for unintended polarising phrases.
-
- ▶ With fresh insights from the pair exercise, everyone moves into a silent brainstorming session:
 - Armed with green sticky notes, each team member jots down specific actions to start; for example, “invite external voices into our content planning”.
 - Next, on red notes, they name what to stop, such as “using jargon that alienates key audiences”.
 - Finally, on blue notes, they celebrate strengths to continue, like “sharing hope-based stories in our newsletters”.
 - Within 15 minutes, your walls will be dotted with colourful prompts that capture both ambition and restraint.
-
- ▶ Then guide the group through clustering similar ideas. As sticky-note themes coalesce – perhaps several notes urging more “bridge-building” language – the team votes. Each person places three dot stickers against the clusters they believe will have the greatest impact. When the votes are tallied, three priority clusters emerge in each category, providing a clear focus for the next stage.
-
- ▶ Turning reflection into action, the group tackles each priority in turn. For every start, stop and continue theme, the team asks three questions:
 1. What precisely are we going to do (or cease doing)?
 2. Who is responsible?
 3. When will it happen?

These details are captured on a flipchart under three headings, transforming abstract ideas into concrete commitments, whether that’s drafting a new crisis-communications playbook by the end of the month or phasing out polarising terms from all donor-facing materials.
-
- ▶ To close:
 - Invite each person to share one personal commitment they will honour this week (“I’ll review our homepage copy for polarising phrases by Friday,” for example).
 - Agree a brief follow-up check-in in two weeks’ time to celebrate progress and course correct if needed.
 - Before everyone disperses, take a quick photo of the flipcharts or upload the notes to your project-management tool, ensuring that these crucial commitments remain front of mind long after the workshop ends.

2. Crisis communications scenario planning

This exercise helps you to work with your team to respond to a crisis scenario related to polarisation that your philanthropic foundations may face. Your goal could be to develop a simple communication strategy to manage the situation.

Read through the scenarios below together. For each scenario, make sure everyone understands it, then discuss and write your responses, keeping in mind the following questions:

- ▶ What is the key challenge?
(What's at stake? Who is affected?)

-
- ▶ What should the foundation say?
(Key messages, tone and approach)

-
- ▶ How should the foundation communicate?
(Which audiences? What channels?)

THINGS TO KEEP IN MIND:

- ▶ Be clear and concise – focus on the most important messages.
-
- ▶ Think about different audiences (media, donors, partners, critics, the public).
-
- ▶ Consider risks: What could go wrong with your response?
-
- ▶ There's no single "right" answer – this is about strategy, not perfection!

SCENARIO 1

Grantee works in a controversial area

Your foundation funds a human rights organisation that provides legal support for LGBTQ+ asylum seekers. A major media outlet publishes an exposé accusing the grantee of "undermining traditional values" and "promoting illegal migration". The story gains traction, with politicians and social media influencers calling for an end to the foundation's support. Some corporate partners express concern, fearing reputational damage, while LGBTQ+ advocates demand the foundation take a stronger stand.

SCENARIO 2

Philanthropy under fire after a far-right election win

One of the countries where your foundation operates has just elected a far-right government that opposes many of the causes you support, such as climate action, gender equality and refugee rights. Shortly after the election, a government official publicly calls out your foundation, accusing it of "foreign interference" and "undermining national interests". Local partners are worried about losing funding, while donors and board members fear political retaliation or even legal restrictions on philanthropic work.

SCENARIO 3

Backlash against a climate initiative

Your foundation has been supporting the transition to electric vehicles through funding research and advocacy campaigns. However, a growing movement argues that electric cars are an elitist solution that harms working-class communities due to high costs and job losses in traditional car industries. A protest group disrupts a foundation-sponsored event, claiming the foundation is "pushing a green agenda at the expense of ordinary people". The backlash is amplified by populist politicians and media figures, causing tensions with some donors and community partners.

SCENARIO 4

Gender equality programme sparks controversy

Your foundation funds a programme supporting women and non-binary leaders in social impact sectors. While the initiative has been widely praised, a backlash emerges, with politicians and media figures accusing the foundation of "pushing gender ideology" and "excluding men". The controversy leads to online harassment campaigns, misinformation about the programme's goals, and concerns from some board members about reputational risks. Staff members report feeling unsafe, and some corporate partners hesitate to be publicly associated with the initiative.

About Philea

Philanthropy Europe Association

Our vision is for philanthropy to use its full potential to co-shape and support a pluralistic, just and resilient society that centres people and planet. To achieve this, our mission is to enable, encourage and empower the philanthropic community to build a better today and tomorrow.

We nurture a diverse and inclusive ecosystem of foundations, philanthropic organisations and networks in over 30 countries that work for the common good. With individual and national-level infrastructure organisations as members, we unite almost 9,000 public-benefit foundations that seek to improve life for people and communities in Europe and around the world.

We galvanise collective action and amplify the voice of European philanthropy. Together we:

- Co-create knowledge and learn from effective practices
- Collaborate around current and emerging issues
- Promote enabling environments for doing good

In all we do, we are committed to enhancing trust, collaboration, transparency, innovation, inclusion and diversity.

www.philea.eu

PHILEA'S COMMUNICATIONS PROFESSIONALS IN PHILANTHROPY COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

This network offers a trusted, collaborative space for communications professionals from Philea members to connect, exchange ideas, and co-develop solutions on shared challenges. It fosters strong relationships among peers while providing opportunities to share knowledge, refine best practices and enhance the impact of communications in philanthropy.

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COMMUNICATING IN A POLARISED ENVIRONMENT

Insights and practical
strategies for philanthropy
communications professionals



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