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Authors
Knobel, Marcelo
Reisberg, Liz

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Effective Communication:
The 4th Mission of Universities—a 21st Century Challenge[*]

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Marcelo Knobel
University of Campinas (Unicamp), Campinas, SP, Brazil
Liz Reisberg
Reisberg & Associates, Boston, MA, USA

ABSTRACT
The critical role of communication is usually overlooked by higher education institutions. Here we argue that higher education institutions must consider an effective communication as one of their top priorities. This communication must go well beyond promoting the university's opportunities to potential new students, the pursuit of potential donors and outreach to policymakers: it must engage all aspects of internal academic life and seek the engagement of the larger society. Increasingly, higher education has to defend its purpose, integrity and legitimacy in a climate of growing neo-nationalist and populist movements. A comprehensive communication plan includes a deep revision of the University core values and practices, better teaching and learning strategies, as well as modern internal and external communication tools, including all sorts of social media.

Keywords: Communication; public perception; higher education; information disorders

In this paper, we claim that an effective external communication must be considered a fundamental responsibility of the University, a 4th mission to connect, to engage and actively participate in the public sphere as a reliable and unbiased source of information. Likewise, universities must improve internal communication—to engage the community with broader institutional goals and to cultivate in its members the capacity to examine information critically and actively contribute to the broader social recognition of neutral, evidence-based knowledge. Such emphasis on communication is fundamental to improve the social perception on the role of higher education institutions as key players for a democratic and sustainable future.

Current trends in a complex communication scenario
Have you heard about "*gongbang*"? The word in Korean means "study with me," and it is a rather recent trend in YouTube. Several students simply record themselves while studying, usually in silence, for hours. Some of them insert a chronometer and use different techniques of resting for few minutes after some time focused on their reading. The videos are uploaded to their respective channels, and they are watched by thousands of followers (Delgado, 2021). Apparently, many students around the world enjoy having a

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remote companion to study with, that additionally helps to control time and focus on the activity they must perform.

The isolation imposed by the pandemics probably played a role in this fashion, which seems rather incomprehensible for an older generation like us who studied in the pre-internet era. This example illustrates something about human behavior—an inherent need for companionship. It is our sense that the current generation of university faculty and administrators do not fully grasp the myriad of opportunities for social connection available nowadays or the different ways that individuals engage with others— each communication channel offers opportunity, risks and complexity.

The reach of video platforms is daunting; some figures from YouTube are notable. In December 2021, the ranking of most popular YouTube channels based on monthly views was dominated by music and content directed at children. YouTube's T-Series—featuring music and film trailers—was ranked first with roughly 3.52 billion channel views. POPS Kids was ranked second with 3.43 billion views. Indian music in Hindi was ranked first in the T-series with 191 million subscribers. The video game commentator, Felix Kjellberg, aka PewDiePie, ranked sixth with roughly 110 million subscribers. Ryan from Ryan's World began opening toys in front of a camera in 2015 and was the highest-earning YouTube channel creators as of June 2020 with 29.5 million U.S. dollars (Data retrieved from statista.com).

Similar trends occur through other social media outlets, with artists, sport celebrities and digital influencers collecting millions of followers. Most higher education institutions, even with thousands of alumni, do not come close to having a comparable digital impact. According to a recent social media engagement report, the top university in terms of social media presence in the US is the University of Iowa with around 125 thousand followers on Twitter, 200 thousand followers on Facebook and 100 thousand followers on Instagram (Rival IQ Report, 2021). In many universities there are many faculty members that have higher numbers individually but still short of the reach of popular culture channels.

So many communication channels now compete for audience attention. Social media, messaging apps, managing systems and media platforms are the most visible aspect of this revolution, but apps and platforms are continuing to emerge at frightening speed while few university administrators or professors keep pace to keep up with audiences of their own.

Yet universities have an incredibly important mission in modern, democratic societies as the source of evidence-based truths. Our concern here is how can universities compete with all the "noise" to ensure that facts are not only disseminated but that they are trusted? And this when universities are struggling to defend their value to increasingly dubious societies; they must do a better job of communicating their worth to both internal and external stakeholders.

Dealing with information disorders – "Infodemics"
We are facing an increasingly vocal revolt against science and education, a movement supported by misinterpreted and misused data along with information circulated by unverified sources. The growing acceptance of "alternative facts" is frightening. Social media ensures that bad information spreads at frightening speed. So-called "information disorders" have thrived with increased access to the internet, the lack of understanding about validated information or how scientific conclusions are reached, the diminished influence of traditional media, among other factors.

Ironically, higher education may have contributed to the confusion between science, conjecture and falsehoods with the use of "preprints," papers written in standard journal format but not yet peer reviewed. These preliminary reports can disperse new knowledge more quickly than research slowed by

the peer review process. On the other hand, preprints may lead to the spread of information that is later refuted or further qualified as in the following example.

> In April 2020, a preprint argued that the coronavirus's fatality rate was extraordinarily low. Not surprisingly, it went viral. The paper suffered from many flaws and probably would have been heavily edited after peer review, Yonatan Grad, an associate professor of infectious disease at Harvard, told two journalists. But the provocative paper spread quickly among conservative influencers, who used it to argue against Covid restrictions that states had put in place at the time (Chronicle of Higher Education, 2022).

But as The Chronicle's Trends Report goes on to point out, even peer reviewed studies can contribute to confusion as in early research on hydroxychloroquine.

> Studies of hydroxychloroquine began as peer-reviewed papers that showed its ability to keep the coronavirus from multiplying in a petri dish. Unfortunately, later studies, done in people, found that hydroxychloroquine doesn't work against Covid-19. Nevertheless, when President Donald J. Trump tweeted a link to a small, lackluster human study to tout the drug as a Covid cure, it was retweeted 300,000 times.

What these two examples demonstrate is the difficulty of interpreting scientific research, and the urgency of preparing university graduates and the whole society to consider new information and data both carefully and critically. In fact, there is also a growing number of predatory journals and conferences of questionable quality, that disguise themselves as "serious and reliable" sources of information. It is extremely hard to distinguish between good quality and bad quality sources of information, from scholarly journals to YouTube videos. This trend will be even worse with the advent of the "deep fake" technologies, which makes it possible to put words in anyone's mouth.

Coincident with the spread of fake news is the benefit that accrues to some political agendas from fueling movements such as the anti-vaxxers, climate change deniers, and even believers of a flat earth, just to mention a few examples. A frightening example is the near election of Mary Lou Bruner, an ex-teacher, to the Texas state school board. The board determines what five million children read in textbooks. Ms. Bruner expounded an extraordinary number of interesting "facts" including that the flood from the Biblical story of Noah's Ark is what killed the dinosaurs (The Guardian, 2016). This narrative has been espoused by other Christian fundamentalist, including Ken Ham's Creation Museum that has displays showing dinosaurs on Noah's Ark (Goldberg, 2014). As these wild interpretations makes their way into museums and textbooks, they gain credibility, eroding the ability of scientists to effectively refute them.

The Internet has altered society profoundly, requiring a reimagining of the ethics for the transmission of information, particularly scientific evidence and knowledge. Along with the potential for easily accessible information and fluid communication, the digital age, particularly social media, has also fragmented social cohesion. Objectivity, or even the idea that people can recognize the best available "truth", has come increasingly into question. The goal of giving balance to competing viewpoints can come at the expense of evidence, distorting the public debate. It is nearly impossible to convince some individuals that there are not two sides to every issue, dramatically illustrated with multiple examples provided in the book *How to Talk to a Science Denier* (McIntyre, 2021).

The potential to disseminate disinformation on a large-scale and undermine scientifically established facts represents an existential risk to humanity. While vigorously defending the right to freedom of expression

everywhere, higher education institutions must also develop the capacity to reach a shared, empirically backed consensus based on facts, science, and established knowledge.

Higher education institutions can offer a "reality check" to societies, curbing disinformation, and countering hate speech and online harassment. Universities need to strengthen efforts to produce and disseminate reliable and verified information but also to teach students how to distinguish fact from fiction, assumptions and beliefs. In 2017, the University of Washington introduced a class titled "Calling Bullshit: Data reasoning in a digital world" with the following learning objectives (from the course website).

- Remain vigilant for bullshit contaminating your information diet.
- Recognize said bullshit whenever and wherever you encounter it.
- Figure out for yourself precisely why a particular bit of bullshit is bullshit.
- Provide a statistician or fellow scientist with a technical explanation of why a claim is bullshit.
- Provide your crystals-and-homeopathy aunt or casually racist uncle with an accessible and persuasive explanation of why a claim is bullshit.

The professors who developed the class have published a book with the same title that could serve as a course text elsewhere (Bergstrom & West, 2021). Universities throughout the world should be considering similar classes as a graduation requirement. If universities hope to graduate "digitally literate" members of society, then the skills above should be cultivated in every student, regardless of field of study.

Strategies that promote active learning also help students develop important critical thinking skills. These skills can be the underpinnings of the ability to test facts later in life and to help to develop more rational and thoughtful members of society. With growing circulation of confusing and false "facts" facilitated by the ubiquity of technology and the digital space, it is time to manage the digital commons as a global public good. Higher education institutions (HEIs) must work to make lying wrong again.

In fact, the response from the higher education sector has been weak, leaving a space for political interests to fill. It is going to be very difficult to catch up. HEIs don't fully realize the extreme importance of competent, thoughtful communication as a vital pilar of their mission—the 4th mission of the Universities.

Internal and External Communication
Communicating internally
Not only are universities failing to reach the larger society, but their internal public as well. It is impossible to generalize, because higher education systems are extremely heterogeneous, but some trends can be identified. A particularly alarming issue is the growing evidence from US campuses of a "disengagement crisis" among students as well as increasing alienation of faculty. Confusion over institutional mission, priorities, and purpose are, in part, a reflection of poor internal cohesion and communication.

Internal institutional communication would seem simpler, but it represents a challenge, specially to medium and large universities. It is hard to find an effective way to reach the campus community. There are myriad mechanisms, ranging from signs posted on campus (that seem somehow prehistoric) and a profusion of emails to an extensive use of all available social media platforms. This communication is crucial to many important issues to keep the community informed of projects and programs under development, to discuss internal policies and practices, to develop a sense of community, among others. The pandemic has been an example of just how critical internal communication is.

For students, staff, and faculty, it is hard to keep up with the weekly surfeit of notices, events and opportunities directed at them, let alone sort through this bombardment to identify which information is most immediately relevant to them. In response there is a tendency to withdraw to a very small bubble, processing limited information from a limited number of sources leading to the risk of "confirmation bias". This constrains the university experience and exposure to ideas of all kinds. Too often important discussions involve the participation of a limited number of members of internal groups and commissions. This precludes the possibility for broader input and understanding to reach important decisions that might affect all aspects of the academic life, not to mention the possibility of building consensus. As different groups retreat to information bubbles, internal divisions and tensions tend to grow.

The extent to which internal communication reaches the appropriate stakeholders is ultimately determined by the relationships built between administration and faculty, teachers and students and within disciplinary, departmental and even social boundaries. When each party feels a commitment to the relationship, they are more likely to heed those communications. An understanding of how each sector engages with communication channels is also key. As suggested at the beginning of this article, to reach students, it is fundamental to understand the way that the generation currently in the classroom communicates and uses technology.

Communicating externally
A great number of universities need to demonstrate their social and economic value in a complex landscape. In the case of public universities, this value must be repeatedly demonstrated to the larger society their existence depends on public support—political and financial. The diminishing public faith in higher education has worrisome implications for the future.

In countries where there is culture of philanthropy, universities typically develop communication strategies directed at alumni, local companies and entrepreneurs for the purpose of fundraising, but these efforts target a specific audience for a specific purpose. The larger public is often oblivious to the contributions that universities make.

In a dramatic disavowal of the contribution that universities make to research, a recent survey of citizens in Australia, Canada, Japan, the Netherlands, the UK and the US, indicated that 20 percent of the respondents indicated that universities had been "unimportant" in the global fight against Covid while 25 percent had no idea whether universities had made any contribution to addressing the pandemic at all (Grove, 2022). Universities throughout the world have done the basic research that led to new vaccines (the collaboration of University of Oxford and AstraZeneca represents only one example) and designed new technologies to provide better and more accessible healthcare such as low-cost ventilators. Yet there is only the most limited awareness of these contributions and initiatives that helped to mediate the impact of the pandemic.

Universities frequently make important contributions to their communities, stepping up to solve social issues that were not being addressed by other entities. Service learning and outreach programs have become a key element of many undergraduate experiences, involving students in social projects in the local, sometimes global, community. Continuing education makes opportunities available to adults to develop personal interests as well as to "upskill" and make it possible for individuals to enhance their opportunities in the workforce.

A couple of examples of community impact follow. It went almost unnoticed that Yale University has undertaken multiple initiatives to transform neighborhoods in New Haven, CT, that have encouraged entrepreneurship, and provided jobs.

The university also provided faculty and staff up to $30,000 over 10 years to buy a home in the city, which has resulted in about 1,300 employees settling in New Haven since 1994. Yale also helped hundreds of city residents get jobs through the New Haven Works jobs program, made the city a center for entrepreneurship, notably in the biotech area, and partnered with several neighborhoods to improve housing, safety and literacy (Condon, 2019).

Wesleyan University restored activity to a languishing area of the city where it is located partnering . . .

. . . with the city in the early 1990s to revitalize Middletown's Main Street, at a time when some 60 percent of storefront were empty. Among other things the university was instrumental in bringing a hotel and movie theater to Main Street [. . .] Wesleyan moved its bookstore to Main Street, and [. . .] purchased a former bank building on Main Street and was moving 90 employees in its finance and alumni relations offices there (Condon, 2019).

Initiatives like these tend to be poorly communicated. There may be some coverage in local media but there is little broad awareness of universities as "a sector" making significant social and economic impact.

These examples are not unique. In many countries universities are fundamental to the region where they are located, providing essential job opportunities to a broad spectrum of the local population, from maintenance workers to senior officers. Colleges help cities while fulfilling their educational mission. They hire faculty and staff, develop new knowledge, and produce learned and capable graduates. They provide lifelong learning programs, sports and cultural events that are open to the off-campus public. HEIs spur local economies by leasing real estate to private entities, supporting research that leads to new and marketable technologies, and by investing in business incubators and start-ups. Students, staff and faculty provide critical income to local restaurants and businesses as consumers.

University hospitals and clinics are often the only health providers in an area, typically providing free or low-cost medical and dental services. A recent pre-pandemic survey in Brazil found that that only 12% of the population was able to name a single university or research institution in the country and only 10% were able to remember the name of a Brazilian scientist (CGEE 2019). Yet public university hospitals are responsible for providing healthcare to millions of Brazilians.

Most probably, in Brazil and elsewhere few people would connect a range of activities with the university responsible for them. For their own survival, universities must work more diligently on strategies to make their connections (and contributions) more evident. While most universities have a Public Relations Office, their reach and range of information that they disseminate is limited.

Swimming Against Strong Political Tides
Sadly, governments throughout the world have been able to focus generalized social dissatisfaction and frustration on specific institutions. Higher education has too often proven to be an easy target as they are often perceived as elitist and aloof from the concerns of daily living. And, as mentioned above, the contributions that HEIs make are not communicated broadly enough or in ways that are intelligible to the larger society. As a result, popular opinion become dubious of the academic enterprise. This is evident in the 2018 survey in Germany the showed a general distrust of scientists and most (60%) of those surveyed doubted that they worked in the public interest (Krull & Brunotte, 2021).

Governments as geographically distant in Hungary led by Victor Orban and Brazil led by Jair Balsonaro have cut funds for academic research and attempted to limit, and even eliminate, areas of study with the

consequence of seriously undermining academic freedom and the free circulation of ideas. These political ploys appeal to many segments of society and have damaged the belief that the university can be relied on as a source of truth.

Complicating communication further is the increasingly partisan campus community, a reflection of the larger society. Campus debates are too often hindered by ideology, leading to issues like "cancel culture" and intolerance for diverse perspectives. Ideally, the university should function as a forum for the free communication of ideas and debate. Public communication is too often reduced to competing biases. As universities consider the importance of "growth mindset" (Dweck, 2006) as a strategic goal of undergraduate education, effective communication skills must be taught throughout the curriculum.

Confronting challenges to their legitimacy and importance in a global climate of extreme polarization will not be easy. Universities have tended to focus their attention inward, allowing external actors to distort the perception of what these institutions do. HEIs must find new and more effective ways to communicate their value and contributions.

Concluding Thoughts

For both their own survival and for the survival of democratic societies. HEIs must make better communication as one of their top priorities. This communication must go well beyond marketing efforts directed at the recruitment of new students and faculty or fundraising. A comprehensive communication plan must improve the narrative about the value of universities do while also helping to create healthier societies. Evidently, this strategy must encompass the fundamental role of social media in the contemporary world, and such communication must therefore explore unconventional and bold ways to reach a broader public to show the richness of science, the current scientific view of controversial issues, and the key role of HEI for a better future for all.

Improving internal communication at multiple level must become a high priority and that includes teaching communication skills as well as improving communication channels on campus.

We hope that more and more education leaders will see their communications professionals as strategic thought partners and give them a seat at the decision-making table. When an institution can align its communications strategies with institutional resources, infrastructure, and goals, the benefits are extensive. Internal and external stakeholders benefit—staff members feel more engaged and empowered; students get a consistent message, experience a feeling of belonging, and develop critical skills necessary for sustaining healthy societies; alumni remain engaged, and society as a whole is more likely to recognize the immense value of our educational institutions. And perhaps more effective communication emanating from the higher education sector might help our societies to sort through the confusing and misleading noise that surrounds us.

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