

## **Risk communication and risks of communication: Ethics and strategic approaches to communicative complexity**

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In recent years, growing scholarly interest has surrounded the notion of risk (Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1999), which has gradually expanded across multiple fields, including communication, journalism and media studies (Covello *et al.*, 1986; Heath, 2025; Heath & O’Hair, 2010; Sellnow & Sellnow, 2024). This evolution not only underscores the increasing centrality of the concept within scholarly debate, but also reflects a broader transformation in how societies identify, interpret, and categorize risks, involving an expanding range of actors within the public sphere, from organizations to citizens and media systems (Schwarz, Seeger & Kim, 2025). Most contemporary risks are now deeply shaped by media dynamics, as digital platforms and online environments amplify their visibility and impact. Within this complex communicative landscape, institutions play a pivotal role in both prevention and management of crisis, working to inform and guide citizens amid an overload of messages often blurred by disinformation (Lovari & Bowen, 2020; OECD, 2021).

In this context, the special issue “Risk (of) Communication: Ethics, Futures, and Strategic Complexity” investigates how communication of risk can itself become a source of risk, ethical tension, and strategic uncertainty for institutions, media, and citizens. The title “Risk (of) Communication” reflects the dual analytical perspective that has guided the development of this special issue. On the one hand, it critically addresses the significant expansion of risk communication in contemporary scenarios marked by climate and environmental changes, socio-political turbulence, and the pervasive impact of digital platforms and generative artificial intelligence (La Rocca & Lovari, 2024). Risk communication today involves both public institutions and private organizations and increasingly intersects with crisis, disaster and emergency communication, revealing the fluidity and hybridization of these strategic communication flows. For a long time, such domains have remained marginal in Italy and often confined within rigid disciplinary

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boundaries, not only in Italian academia but also at the international level (Diers-Lawson et al., 2024).

On the other hand, this special issue focuses on the risk of communication itself, that is, the risks arising when communication is not strategically planned and managed by organizations in a best-practice approach of ethically managing issues (Bowen *et al.*, 2024). In contemporary communicative ecologies profoundly shaped by social media and digital platforms, such communication practices may have negative impacts on stakeholders, be hijacked by digital publics (Hautala *et al.*, 2025) undermining organizational reputation and triggering crisis scenarios. These challenges call for new competencies, a renewed sense of responsibility and ethical awareness among communication professionals (Bowen & Erzikova, 2025).

By foregrounding this dual perspective, the special issue invites reflections on communication not only as a response to risk or a strategic leverage for communicators, but also as a potential source of risk that must be carefully managed in increasingly complex and hybrid media environments. In particular, the special issue addresses the dual nature of risk (of) communication, ethical implications in crisis contexts, speculative and future-oriented perspectives on natural disasters, and the profound impact of disinformation and artificial intelligence on strategic and organizational communication.

This special issue emerged within the activities of the PRIN 2022 PNRR INSULANDER<sup>1</sup>, a national research project - involving the University of Cagliari and University of Enna "Kore" - that investigates the strategic role of risk and crisis communication in insular and structurally vulnerable contexts, like Sardinia and Sicily (Italy). The idea was initiated by Alessandro Lovari (University of Cagliari) and Gevisa La Rocca (University of Enna "Kore"), with the aim of fostering a critical body of research around the transformations of risk and crisis communication models and practices at the international level. Building on this initial insight, the editorial project was further developed by Alessandro Lovari through an enriching collaboration with the Global Strategic Communication Consortium<sup>2</sup> and it was linked to the 2025 edition of the CONCLAVE, a conference which brought together leading experts and international scholars in the field of strategic communication in Cagliari and Carloforte (Sardinia, Italy). The CONCLAVE, entitled "Risk (of) Communication", provided a valuable forum for examining the multifaceted dimensions of risk communication within the broader field of strategic communication. It contributed to shaping key research questions related to cascading environmental crises, evolving media ecologies, and the governance of risk communication across different organizational contexts, with particular attention to the emergence of new forms of vulnerability created by insularity, environmental risks, digital and data use hazards, or risks even instigated by the strategy of organizations themselves.

Starting from this dialogue between empirical research and theoretical reflections - and connecting with the main objectives of the INSULANDER project - the articles of this special issue aim at advancing international debate on the challenges and responsibilities of strategic communication in contemporary risk societies<sup>3</sup>. The 13 manuscripts, authored by 27 scholars working in 16 universities across Europe, Asia, and the United States, collectively rethink risk and crisis communication across environmental disasters, AI-driven infrastructures, geopolitical conflicts, organizational practices, and normative ethics.

The first set of papers proposes new theoretical lenses and models for understanding risk communication under conditions of cascading crises and mega-crises. Brett Robertson introduces the concept of “speculative risk communication” arguing for an interdisciplinary, future-oriented agenda, that treats communication as a core infrastructure capable of anticipating breakdowns across interdependent systems. This contribution highlights not only the anticipatory power of communication but also its ethical and political stakes, calling for the dismantling of disciplinary silos to build coherent and responsible communication futures.

Marta Lukacovic and Deborah Sellnow-Richmond propose the concept of “strategic communication literacy” (SCL), designed to empower diverse and marginalized stakeholders to participate in mitigating risks that escalate into AI-exacerbated mega-crises. Positioned at the intersection of media literacy, AI literacy, and culture-centred approaches, SCL is proposed as both an educational and structural agenda aimed at strengthening voice infrastructures and countering global challenges, while emphasizing the necessity of broad, interdisciplinary coalitions to achieve systemic change.

Bianca Persici Toniolo and Gisela Gonçalves contribute with a systemic and integrative Loop Model for risk and crisis communication in wildfire disasters, developed through an extensive literature review and applied to the Portuguese context. Their framework, complemented by an Informational Quality Indicator (IQI), offers both theoretical refinement and practical tools for assessing whether public organizations prioritize public protection over political reputation. The model is also adaptable to a broader range of climate and weather-related emergencies.

Within the field of environmental risk, another article focuses on the relational dynamics among different actors involved in communicating natural disasters, particularly in insular contexts. Alessandro Lovari and Daniela Pisu analyse the complex relationship between journalists and public communicators in the coverage of risks and natural disasters in Sardinia and Sicily, revealing a hybrid model in which formal procedures intersect with informal practices. Their qualitative study shows that while collaboration is perceived as necessary by both professional groups, it is constrained by bureaucratic regulations, journalistic routines, algorithmic pressures, logics of visibility and sensationalism. Thus, journalists and public communicators emerge as “imperfect allies,” jointly responsible for providing timely and reliable information, yet simultaneously exposed to ethical risks and disinformation that may further endanger vulnerable territories.

Taken together, this first set of papers shows that environmental risks and disasters are not only material events, but also communicative constructions shaped by infrastructures, professional relationships, and normative expectations. These contributions foreground both innovative conceptual tools and concrete models aimed at making risk communication more anticipatory, inclusive, and accountable in the face of escalating environmental and climate crises.

The second cluster of contributions explicitly addresses artificial intelligence, datafied infrastructures, and digital platforms as both mediators and generators of risk for organizations, publics, and democratic systems. Kulsawasd Jitkajornwanich and Kerk Kee develop a framework for “smart alerts” explaining how AI and social media analytics are

reshaping crisis communication by accelerating detection and personalization, while simultaneously generating secondary technological risks such as bias, false positives, privacy violations, and deepfakes. Their speculative design approach and technical case study of Twitter(X)-based flood detection in Thailand identify distinct models of human-AI collaboration and propose governance mechanisms including graduated confidence communication, multi-source verification, and adaptive oversight architectures. These mechanisms seek to rebalance the speed-accuracy dilemma, reframe temporality in predictive messaging, and sustain public trust in AI-enabled warning systems, thereby articulating the dual risk posed by both hazards and their mediated communication.

Qi Chen and Yicheng Zhu analyse how AI-based fact-checking interfaces influence the processing of fabricated foreign-risk misinformation, focusing on the interplay between verification source (human vs AI), blind nationalism, conspiratorial orientation, and third-person perception. Their experimental study shows that blind nationalism, rather than conspiratorial orientation, predicts perceived social norms surrounding foreign-risk misinformation, which in turn shape third-person perception and information-seeking intentions, with interface design moderating these psychological pathways.

Anli Xiao and Yang Cheng examine how international companies should respond to misinformation para-crises on social media amid geopolitical conflict, considering contextual priming (positive vs negative portrayals of the country of origin), crisis narrative type, and communication strategy. Their findings suggest that narrative responses and accommodative strategies may be more effective than defensive, informative responses, particularly when geopolitical tensions and media representations influence public judgments. The study thus underscores the strategic risks inherent in communicative choices during politically charged crises.

Several contributions explicitly connect the risk (of) communication to broader social problems such as gender inequality, institutional abuse, and cyber harms. Elina Erzikova, Shannon Bowen, Lana Ivanitskaya, Kerk Kee, and Mary Beth West reconceptualize gaslighting as an organizational and strategic communication risk, moving beyond interpersonal abuse to examine how institutions obscure truth, discredit critics, and normalize doubt to preserve power. Their bibliometric analysis of 235 publications maps a fragmented yet expanding field of gaslighting research and identifies four thematic clusters encompassing structural inequities, identity and power, emotional harm, and control and help-seeking. Building on this mapping, the authors propose the Organizational Gaslighting as a Strategic Communication Risk (OGSCR) framework, highlighting how organizations generate risks not only by communicating about issues, but through opaque and manipulative communication practices themselves.

Katerina Tsetsura, HM Murtuza, Mark Raymond, and Typhaine Joffe focus on deepfake-related initiatives in G7 countries, the United Nations, and the European Union, applying the Social Amplification of Risk Framework to assess how regulatory efforts address AI-generated misleading content in crises such as natural disasters. Their comparative analysis shows that while existing and proposed regulations emphasize responsible innovation and transparency, they largely fail to provide concrete strategies for managing the harms of

deepfakes in crisis scenarios or for mitigating their potential to escalate conflicts and distort public perception.

Gea Ducci, Lucia D’Ambrosi, Paola De Rosa, Camilla Folena, and Marica Spalletta examine the risks associated with gender-sensitive communication strategies in the European public sector, situating their analysis within a broader understanding of public communication as a strategic tool for democracy, trust, and inclusion. Analysing four EU campaigns conducted between 2020 and 2024, they identify structural, socio-cultural, and political risks that constrain the transformative potential of these initiatives, highlighting tensions between ambitious gender equality policies and polarized media environments in which gender issues are heavily contested.

The final set of papers moves into explicitly political and ethical terrain, where risk communication intersects with war, peace, and the moral language of transparency. Juyan Zhang analyses the Biden administration’s rhetoric on China policy through the Mixed-Motive Model of Public Relations, identifying a shift from a purely advocacy-oriented “decoupling” stance toward a more nuanced combination of competition and cooperation. Using Burkean rhetorical criticism, the study demonstrates how cooperative rhetoric functions as a form of risk communication aimed at preventing US-China competition from escalating into armed conflict, articulating “God” and “Devil” terms that anchor a complex strategic narrative. The paper illustrates how foreign policy discourse manages risk not only through policy decisions, but also through carefully constructed communicative frameworks that align liberal, realist, and constructivist worldviews.

Gregg Simons offers a critical analysis of Western war-justifying discourse, starting from the George Orwell’s reflections on doublespeak and deceptive political language. Focusing on the Global War on Terrorism, the Arab Spring and the Ukraine conflict, the article shows how emotional appeals, selective values, and vague notions such as “humanitarian war” operate as ritualistic and symbolic mechanisms for engineering consent to military actions that may ultimately undermine public security.

Shannon Bowen’s contribution closes the issue critically by interrogating the concept of transparency, a topic widely invoked in media ethics and strategic communication but often weakly theorized and, in some cases, ethically problematic. Drawing on an interdisciplinary literature review and moral philosophy, the study highlights persistent scholarly concerns from moral philosophy regarding the uncritical use of transparency as an ethical principle. Rather than constituting an autonomous moral construct, transparency emerges as an amoral practice whose ethical value depends on the intentions that guide its use. As such, relying on transparency alone may represent a risk of communication, particularly in organizational and institutional contexts, where ethical responsibility is at stake. The article argues that transparency can equally serve ethical or unethical ends and should therefore be conceptually subordinated to stronger moral foundations, such as good intention, duty, dignity, and respect.

Across these thirteen contributions, the special issue highlights that the risk (of) communication is not a marginal concern but a defining feature of contemporary societies, in which environmental disasters, AI-driven tools, geopolitical conflicts, and organizational practices are mediated through digital platforms. The papers collectively show how

communication can anticipate, create, resolve, or amplify crises, empower or marginalize publics, legitimize or contest power, and clarify or obscure ethical obligations thus situating risk communication at the core of strategic and societal futures. Together, these contributions invite scholars and practitioners to rethink risk communication as a deeply ethical, future-oriented, and strategically complex practice that requires interdisciplinary collaboration and renewed attention to power, justice, duties, and responsibility.

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### Biographical note

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## Notes

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<sup>2</sup> The mission of the Global Strategic Communication Consortium is to move strategic communication forward by focusing research and collaborations on future challenges, technological innovations, crises, and ethics in the field. Members are leading scholars from five continents who attend the annual Conclave as a venue for intense discussion about research, as well as collaborative thought leadership to drive the field forward. More information can be found at [https://sc.edu/study/colleges\\_schools/cic/journalism\\_and\\_mass\\_communications/conference\\_symposium/gsc/](https://sc.edu/study/colleges_schools/cic/journalism_and_mass_communications/conference_symposium/gsc/)

<sup>3</sup> Several participants of the 2025 CONCLAVE, and authors of this special issue, contributed in Carloforte to a specific Delphi-like session related to the Working Package 7 of the PRIN PNRR INSULANDER (Discussion of communities’ guidelines for disaster risk communication with international experts in order to extend their possible impact and application to other Mediterranean islands).