

INTRODUCTION

The Illusion of Control

I was still early in my career, sitting with representatives from two councils, as legal positions, operational updates, and media lines were worked through around the table during a major globally covered eviction. I was trying to listen carefully while managing the nerves that come with realising this is the biggest incident you have ever handled. I could see through the glass doors that the televisions in the adjoining press room were playing the live footage from the site itself, protesters already being interviewed, the story gathering pace and emotional force while we were still refining what we believed to be the correct position.

What stayed with me from that day was the sense that being right and being believed were never quite the same thing. Around the table, the facts were robust, the process had been followed, and the lines being developed were grounded in what the organisation could stand behind. Yet even then, as the live images continued to flicker through the doorway and the public story gathered its own momentum, it was obvious that this had already become something bigger than the people in the room. The issue was no longer simply what had happened, or even whether the councils were right in the strictest sense. It was already becoming about what the event meant to the people watching it unfold.

That feeling followed me long after the incident itself. At the time, I had been taught what many of us in communications were taught to believe, that if a situation became unstable, the job was to gather the facts, agree the line, prepare the spokesperson and move quickly enough to steady the situation before speculation filled the gap. Much of that discipline still matters, and I still believe deeply in the value of clear thinking under pressure, but over time, I found myself in more and more moments where that logic no longer seemed enough. A message could look strong on paper and still fall flat in public. A correction could be factually accurate and somehow change nothing. Sometimes refining the words helped. Sometimes it simply exposed that the real issue sat somewhere else entirely.

The more years I spent in communications, the more I realised the problem was rarely the message itself. It was everything the message landed on. The history people were already carrying, the frustrations they had stored up over time, the assumptions they had already made about whether the people speaking deserved to be believed at all. By the time a statement is drafted, so much of the outcome has already been shaped by what came before it.

I think I first understood that long before I had the language for it. At the time, it felt like a family detail rather than anything that belonged in a professional argument, one of those things you only really understand years later. My grandmother who had lived through the height of the Second World War refused to buy products from certain countries for most of her life. That decision had nothing to do with the latest advert, the wording on the packaging or whatever explanation might have been offered in the moment. Her judgement had been formed decades earlier, shaped by experience, history and what those places had come to

represent for her. Looking back now, it feels less like a family memory and more like an early lesson in how trust, once formed, shapes everything that follows.

We like to think people make decisions by moving rationally through information. We imagine that if enough evidence is presented, or enough clarity offered, understanding will follow. This is one of the most persistent myths in modern professional communication. It remains an attractive view because it suggests that with enough intelligence, care and craft, language can still do the heavy lifting.

The reality, however, is that people do not encounter messages as blank slates. They meet them with prior beliefs, loyalties, frustrations, memories, and assumptions. This trust, once formed, shapes how information is received, and personal identity shapes what feels credible.

Over the past decade, this has become increasingly hard to ignore. Brexit was one of the first moments when I really felt the old beliefs about trust in expertise begin to fall apart, when facts alone no longer seemed to carry the weight institutions still assumed they did. Then we had the Trump election and presidency, which pushed that fracture further, not just by challenging the media but by making distrust itself part of the political language. Finally, COVID brought everything into sharp focus, with governments, scientists, journalists, and the public all speaking to the same crisis, while often working from entirely different ideas of what, and who, counted as credible.

These moments raised uncomfortable questions: Why does accurate messaging sometimes fail to reassure? Why can more communication make things less stable?

These are the questions I kept finding myself coming back to, whether I was watching leadership teams make decisions under pressure, sitting inside a public issue that was starting to shift, or seeing the same old assumptions inside our profession about what better wording or more visibility was supposed to fix. The longer I worked in this space, the harder it became to ignore that trust was rarely built into the statement itself.

Communication doesn't operate in isolation, it never has. It operates within a much larger system comprising trust, authority, experience, identity, institutional behaviour, political context, and collective memory. When those systems are stable, communication can reinforce them and make sense of complexity. It can help people understand what is happening, as well as reassure and persuade.

In some cases, it does the opposite, shining a light on the weakness. It makes the gap between narrative and reality more visible, revealing how much of the message depended on pre-existing trust that is no longer there.

What runs through this book, is a fairly uncomfortable truth: communication alone cannot repair trust or credibility when the underlying foundation is weak or fractured. Throughout these chapters, I explore why communication effectiveness depends on pre-existing trust and relationships, not just on crafting the right message.

This book is not about abandoning communication principles. Of course, clarity, accuracy and transparency still matter. I don't believe we're entering an era where these things no

longer count. I would argue quite the opposite: in an unstable environment, they matter more, but not in the way we often pretend they do. They don't rebuild credibility by force of style and can't compensate for behaviour that has weakened trust long before the first statement is written.

It means that many of the crises we describe as communication failures are actually failures of behaviour, leadership, legitimacy, or institutional trust that communication has merely exposed. It means that by the time an organisation asks its communications team to rebuild confidence, the outcome may already depend less on the statement being drafted than on years of accumulated behaviour and conduct. It means that trust is not a message outcome. It's a precondition.

Throughout this book, I will examine what happens when communication enters environments where trust is fractured, authority is contested, and facts no longer suffice to settle disagreements. It examines the political and cultural shifts that have made traditional communication assumptions less reliable. I ask why institutions continue to behave as though messaging can repair legitimacy after the fact and argue that if we want to understand communication in the modern world, we need to stop treating it as an isolated discipline and start seeing it for what it really is.

A test of credibility and a mirror held up to behaviour.

It's in these moments of pressure that the illusion of control becomes hardest to sustain.