

# Why strategic communications matters and how to study it

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**This autumn the LSE's Department of Media and Communications is launching a new course in Strategic Communications. Course leader Dr Lee Edwards explains why she thinks this is such an important subject in today's 'post-truth' world and the special approach the course will take.**

It seems that today, communication doesn't mean what it's supposed to mean, fact is undermined by fiction, and audiences are refusing to listen to institutional elites who (used to) hold the reins of power.

We face unprecedented levels of uncertainty, and problems that span the gamut of social, cultural and political life. The popular vote has delivered outcomes that fly in the face of conventional political and economic wisdom including Brexit in the UK, Donald Trump in the White House and the potential for increased far right influence in the Netherlands, France and Germany. Post-truth is Oxford Dictionaries 'international word of the year' for 2016, is defined as "relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief."

Organisations are trying to navigate these events, which impinge on their actions by introducing unwelcome forms of risk. Communication is a key strategic tool that can help organisations to navigate complexities, manage challenges and achieve broader goals.



Why study strategic communications at the LSE?

On consultancy websites, case studies and client testimonials are used to illustrate the success that strategic communication can deliver in any circumstance, even the most uncertain. Instead of scrutiny and challenge from disenfranchised stakeholders, strategic communication allo

ws organisations to win over sceptical audiences, pursue conversation and dialogue, and thereby better protect reputation.

## Risks and Challenges

These are big claims, of course, and while it may be true that organisations who communicate effectively with their audiences are more aware of their environment and the risks and challenges it poses, this does not mean that

strategic communication is a cure-all.

Its tools and techniques – media relations, viral marketing, branding, audience segmentation and many others – are often deployed as an attempt to control audiences and their opinions, but such efforts can never be fully successful because meaning is always co-created. Audiences always bring their own interpretations to bear on an organisation's words and deeds.

Moreover, strategic communication is often framed in terms of market-based conceptions of audiences-as-customers, and this inherently limits its effectiveness. The challenges that organisations are currently facing originate in people's desire to secure power, or feel empowered to make change. These are not necessarily commercial or market-driven motivations.

They are to do with democracy, the feeling that participation in society is worthwhile, the right to speak and be heard, and the desire to have one's own narratives of the world recognised as a valid contribution to public debate. Strategic communication by organisations of all kinds must engage with these political concerns, alongside their own commercial interests.

### **Influence and Hierarchies**

At LSE we think that strategic communication is never solely to do with organisations and their objectives. It is also about their place in society as institutions that influence the distribution of resources and the construction of social hierarchies. They help to determine who or what matters to us, and who or what does not.

In today's context, for example, discourses that are constructed and circulate through organisational communication have shaped debates about all kinds of topics: the merits of green energy; the value we place on migration; the management of creative works and copyright; the merits of different social media for connecting with friends, family and colleagues; and how we should conduct our personal and work relationships.

Such debates are always multi-faceted, with political, economic and social dimensions. Therefore, when organisations communicate – and no matter how narrow their original objective – they make symbolic and ideological contributions to wide-ranging discussions about the fabric and conduct of our lives.

Approaching strategic communication with this principle as our starting point, opens up questions about the importance of its effects on terrains beyond markets, products and customers. This is not to say that markets, products and consumers are unimportant. On the contrary, they are the basic currency of strategic communication and are therefore essential to any analysis. But they are not the complete picture.

If we can unpick the ideological assumptions and broader political, social and economic discourses that underpin strategic communication, then we are much closer to truly understanding its significance in our complex, risky, 'post-truth' world.

**Dr Lee Edwards will be leading the new MSc Strategic Communications in the Department of Media and Communications at LSE. For details, click [here](#).**

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