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automotive industry:
Results of an expert study and introduction of
the Content Flow Model

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Assessing the PESO model in the German automotive industry: Results of an expert study and introduction of the Content Flow Model

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Abstract

This chapter investigates the paradigm shift in corporate communications strategy in the German automotive industry and proposes a new model, the Content Flow Model. To do so structured interviews with 13 selected corporate communication experts were conducted. The study is based on the PESO model, which is commonly used by communication researchers and practitioners to define media strategies and classify the content corporate communication departments produce. With the rise of digital and social technologies over the past decades, the shared and owned categories grew significantly in importance, overtaking the paid and earned categories, leading to a conversion of the PESO model to the SOEP model.

The evaluation of the interviews shows that all channels of the SOEP model remain relevant, yet their relevance differs according to the context in which they are applied. In the eyes of the experts, the different components complement but do not replace each other. Based on these considerations, a Content Flow Model is proposed. The Content Flow Model extends the traditional PESO model in that it goes beyond a mere classification and takes into account the goals of an organization, its target group(s), the choice and weighting of different media channels, allocation of resources, as well as an analysis of goal achievement, allowing for more sophisticated research and implementation efforts.

Keywords

Content Flow Model – corporate communications – communications strategy – PESO model – SOEP model

Introduction

Communication work is undergoing a fundamental change. In the 20th century, the media and journalists still functioned as central gatekeepers. Companies fought for their attention and a place in the news coverage (Müller, 2021a; Zerfass, Stieglitz, et al., 2021). Since the beginning of the 21st century, corporate communications have experienced an unexpected loss of control. Digitization, globalization, and medialization are giving many previously unknown voices great weight in shaping opinions in the market and in society (Viertmann et al., 2020). Opinion-forming no longer solely takes place in the media and on platforms used by communications departments, but everywhere where people interact with employees and company representatives. Furthermore, companies now reach their stakeholders directly through their own (social) channels without relying on journalistic gatekeepers which gives them the independence to tell their stories themselves (Müller, 2021b). This paradigm shift is mainly taking place due to technological change which has given rise to multiple communication channels (Oltarzhevsky, 2019). This trend is also noticeable in the German automotive industry (Thoms, 2020; Reidel & Amirkhizi, 2021), where companies aim to expand digital communication activities and become publishers via their own channels (Reidel & Amirkhizi, 2021; Thoms, 2020). A new era is dawning for corporate communications, offering immense new opportunities.

Even though in practice many companies are already in the process of restructuring their communication departments into a holistic, integrated communication hub, studies mainly focus on one communication medium or the comparison between two media based on the PESO model, but not the interaction between all four (Xie et al., 2018). According to Zhu (2019) and Zerfass (2022), this focus is no longer sufficient regarding the current media usage behavior of companies and stakeholders. Additionally, the boundaries of channels are blurring, therefore it does not fully capture the complexity of communication processes. According to the European Communication Monitor (2021), a sophisticated set-up includes the right choice of communicators and multipliers, the right choice of communication channels, and a cross-media as well as cross-divisional, integrated communication (Zerfass, Buhmann, et al., 2021).

This chapter is intended to provide insight into how the paradigm shift in corporate communications impacts the German automotive industry. Based on a study with corporate communications experts, a modification of the PESO model to a Content Flow Model is proposed.

The PESO model

One of the most established and comprehensive models to assess communication channels is the PESO model. It classifies the content distribution channels into four different pillars: paid, earned, shared, and owned media (Auler & Huberty, 2019; Bruhn, 2016a; Macnamara et al., 2016; Mast, 2020; Xie et al., 2018). The media types listed are characterized by different properties to address the company's target groups. Therefore, the appropriate transport channel for the intended message must be selected to achieve defined communication objectives (Bruhn, 2016b).

Paid media traditionally includes external mass media which has various advertising formats (TV, radio, print), trade fairs and exhibitions, and online communication bought by the company (Bruhn, 2016b). Precisely defined target groups can be addressed with strategically developed content. Media costs can be adjusted according to the budget. Results can be measured immediately, and conclusions can be drawn (Macnamara et al., 2016). In contrast, they have comparatively low credibility (Macnamara et al., 2016; Xie et al., 2018).

Earned media is all content that is voluntarily written and published by reference groups without the company having to provide anything in return. Traditionally mainly mass media, like newspapers, journals, or TV channels, are associated with earned media. Today, online formats like articles in topic portals, blogs, or online newspapers exist (Bruhn, 2016b; Macnamara et al., 2016; Mast, 2020; Xie et al., 2018). Earned media significantly contributes to sustainably increasing a brand's reach and awareness. They are perceived as very trustworthy by target groups because gatekeepers independently and objectively verify the content (O'Neil & Eisenmann, 2017), which is implying that the content cannot be controlled by the company. The reach is high, but with a certain scattering loss (Wolf & Godulla, 2020a).

Shared media includes content from others about the company that is disseminated and shared via social media, typically by non-professionals. They are characterized by the fact that users can comment, discuss, and interact (Xie et al., 2018). A wide range of visibility among different people can be achieved (Kent & Li, 2020) and credibility is high because "a person like you" shares the content without being controlled by the company (Arjona-Martín et al., 2020).

Owned media is all content that is created and published by the company itself, also known as corporate publishing. This includes e.g. websites, blogs, magazines, and social media channels (Macnamara et al., 2016). The company can decide the channel, timing, and user comments. It

is cost-efficient and long-lasting and the exact reach can be analyzed and controlled very precisely. As it is company owned, its credibility is perceived as low.

Change in the communication channels – From PESO to SOEP

Whereas in the past, companies mainly relied on paid and earned channels, market changes and the media led to a complete reorientation in corporate communications. Instead of wanting to be informed via push media, users mainly use pull media, e.g., social media or the company's website. Interactive channels come to the forefront. Social media, as well as company-owned media, are becoming more important (Mast, 2020). Pull communication through digital and social media requires shorter response times when answering media inquiries (Müller, 2021b). To adapt to changing media usage behavior, companies must adjust their communication strategies and processes (Oltarzhevskiy, 2019). Therefore, many companies are organizing themselves into corporate newsrooms which has enabled stakeholder-centric, integrated topic management. Media relations are developing into corporate publishing houses, that offer both multipliers and end customers the opportunity to inform themselves proactively (Macnamara, 2021). In addition, social media channels are used to distribute information and news (Müller, 2021a). These changes are also reflected in the PESO model. The usage and weighting of the different PESO channels, as well as the available distribution formats within the four channels, are changing.

According to Macnamara (2016) and Xie et al. (2018), **paid media** is becoming less important and is integrated with less conspicuous forms of advertising and in other media formats, including social media advertising, email advertising, and influencer marketing supplements.

In addition to traditional journalists, bloggers and influencers are representing **earned media** (i.a. Hudders et al., 2020). This offers the opportunity to address a highly targeted audience (Wolf & Godulla, 2020). Internal stakeholders, such as employees and managers, become important multipliers for external communication (Ebner & Eck, 2022; Heavy et al., 2020; Neil & Eisenmann, 2017). On the other hand, traditional mass channels lose share to social media in the distribution of corporate information (Oltarzhevskiy, 2019). Boundaries between paid and earned content are blurring. Sponsored and editorial content can no longer be distinguished by the reader, whereby earned content is losing credibility (Xie et al., 2018).

Due to the shift in credibility from traditional media to “a person like yourself” (Ries et al., 2021) and the possibility of two-way-communication, the relevance of **shared media** in the

company's communication mix continues to increase (Macnamara, 2018). Not only is communication about the company deemed as paramount but also the communication of companies on social media is gaining importance (Wolf & Archer, 2018).

Corporate communications are increasingly forming and using their **own media** repertoire. In terms of content, they no longer just convey product and corporate messages. A journalistic media concept that consistently oriented to the needs of stakeholders is applied (Macnamara et al., 2016). The company's own channels are supplemented by numerous, primarily, digital options such as news sections on the website, the company's own blogs, video channels, apps, and its own activities on social media (Clauss et al, 2019; Mast, 2020).

In summary, as shown in Figure 1, the PESO model of media use, which has traditionally been dominated by paid media, followed by earned media, is shifting to a SOEP model. In the past, paid and earned channels had the highest relevance and all channels were viewed as individual pillars. Nowadays, the boundaries blur and shared media, followed by owned media, are most important (Macnamara, 2021). Corporate communications can only be successful if the channels are not viewed as individual silos, but as convergent media, with planning and implementation being stakeholder-centric (Mast, 2020; Seiffert-Brockmann & Einwiller, 2020).

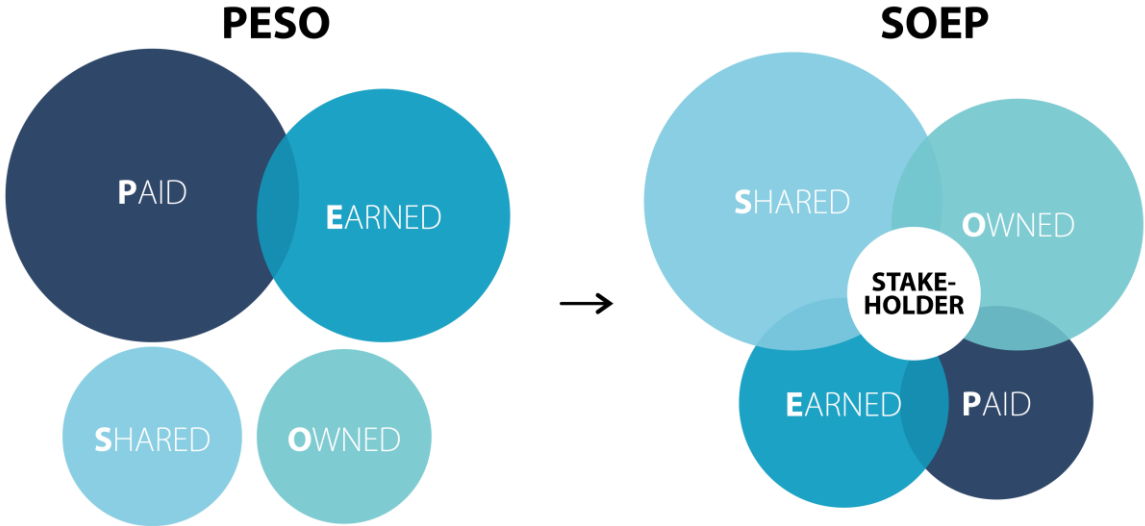


Fig. 1: Modification of the PESO model to the SOEP model. The size of the circles displays the relevance of the channels (own drawing, based on i.a. Macnamara et al., 2016).

Assessing the PESO model in the German automotive industry: Study Methods

Given the exploratory nature of the study, and as no previous insights or data on the topic were available, a qualitative study, employing a semi-structured interview was chosen (Aguinis & Solarino, 2019). The interview guide was structured into three parts: 1) a short introduction to the topic and the interview's goals, 2) introductory questions regarding the responsibility of the interviewee and the company's communication department structure, and 3) problem-centered questions to discuss the specific research leading questions in detail. To test the effectiveness of the interview guide, a pilot interview was conducted with the former CMO of a German as well as an American OEM (Mayring, 2015). Afterwards, interviews with 12 selected corporate communication experts were conducted. To cover the industry as comprehensively as possible, all five German OEMs in the industry were consulted. In addition, five of the most important German Tier 1 suppliers were interviewed. Interviewees were selected based on their years of experience (15+), their high professional status and expertise, as well as their active role in external corporate communications in one of the selected companies. Table 3 shows an overview of the participating experts in light of the selection criteria.

Interviewee (I) & Company (C)	Position	Short Job Description	Work experience (yrs)
I1, C1	Head of Content Flow & Digital Channels	Digital communication and orchestration content flow management	> 20
I2, C2	Spokesperson Business and Financial Communications; Special Topics	Spokesperson corporate communications, former head of media house	> 20
I3, C3	Head of Communication Intelligence	Global media monitoring; development communication strategy	> 15

Interviewee (I) & Company (C)	Position	Short Job Description	Work experience (yrs)
I4, C2	Head of Digital Marketing	Orchestration of digital marketing channels including strategy planning and implementation	> 20
I5, C4	Head of Corporate Communications	Responsible for communications and marketing; including all stakeholder groups	> 20
I6, C5	Head of Corporate Communications	Responsible for coordination of internal and external communication	> 15
I7, C6	Communications Corporate Content House & Honorary Professor for Reputation Management	Communications strategy; strategic planning multimedia content house	> 20
I8, C7	Head of Communications	Responsibility external, internal, marketing communication and governmental affairs	> 15
I9, C8	Senior Communications Manager	External communication and change communication	> 30

Interviewee (I) & Company (C)	Position	Short Job Description	Work experience (yrs)
I10, C9	Director and Communications	Brand Responsibility for brand strategy, communication strategy and implementation	> 15
I11, C10	Project Manager Communication Strategy	Strategic planning communication; analysis	< 5
I12, C10	Spokesperson Marketing & Sales	Responsibility executive board marketing and sales, proactive content planning	>10

Tab. 1: Interviewees in the context of the selection criteria for the empirical research.

The data of the 12 interviews, and in addition, the results of the pilot interview, was evaluated based on the structuring content analysis, according to Mayring (2015). Codes and sub-codes were formed deductively based on the literature review. The extraction of information from the 12 interviews under consideration was conducted with help of tables, using MAXQDA2022, a software for qualitative data analysis (Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2019).

Assessing the PESO model in the German automotive industry: Findings

The interviewees agree that **paid media** formats remain important. “It's not true that classic advertising no longer exists and is substituted by influencers. One complements the other and ideally, they reinforce each other” (PI). Precise targeting is possible, and the scattering loss of the message is very low. Traditional measures can also be used to reach new target groups that would otherwise not be interested in or aware of the product. Paid media is especially relevant to luxury brands as they create desirability outside of the actual target group, which increases brand value. Furthermore, in times of information overload on social media, paid posts are

extremely relevant as a complementary tool compared to organic posts "to obtain visibility and real reactions" (I3).

According to the experts, due to new media formats and the resulting fragmentation of target groups, the reach of **earned media** is declining. Journalists are under increasing pressure. Since negative messages often lead to more attention, "(...) journalists are sometimes tempted to publish more negative news" (I1). Nevertheless, a clear chance of earned media channels is that journalistic texts make it possible to convey longer, more in-depth information. This is extremely important for the purchase decision, especially with expensive, safety-related, or knowledge-intensive products. Therefore, earned media is still the leading media to promote trust, image, and reputation. In addition, new target groups can be reached. The interviewees agree that it is not possible to work without classic press relations. Even though "there is a way to communicate more digitally via own channels, this does not mean that the beautiful group of journalists will be neglected as a result. Absolutely not." (I3).

In terms of **shared media**, it is essential for companies to participate in all relevant communities. This results in the limitation that they need to be part of a multitude of communities, leading to capacity challenges. Communication professionals need to be available to monitor issues, respond and communicate in real-time around the clock. Due to the incredible number of topics and dynamics, companies must filter and prioritize important information in an information overflow and find ways to still stand out. One major difficulty is that "you have to be careful in real-time communication not to be driven, but to remain the driver" (I3). Since anyone can share the content, there is also a risk that the quality of the posts will be low, the desired message is altered content-wise, and the monitoring and analyzing of content is considered very challenging. Despite the limitations, all interviewees agree, that it is out of question to neglect shared media. "If our customers are using the channels, and they do, then we as a brand have to be present as well" (I6). They also agree that shared content offers many chances in corporate communications. Companies get insights into customer conversations that happen anyways but have not been visible to the company in the past, which creates a great learning opportunity. Stakeholder engagement as well as monitoring and analyzing the social environment creates the opportunity to identify problems in an early stage and to perceive possible trends and stakeholders' interests. If the topics are perceived as interesting by stakeholders, there is a high possibility that they will be picked up by other multipliers, e.g. by journalists.

According to the experts, one limitation of **owned media** is, that many different channels must be used, and content must be prepared individually for each. “Formerly the message was only generated for and communicated to journalists. Now it must be prepared for all possible target groups, in the right format and in the right length” (I2). This results in higher costs for the company. In addition, real-time communication also poses challenges for companies. Since everything is immediately online, error correction is not possible. “On social media, you communicate in real-time (...) you cannot delete a post and hope that it will be gone. Someone has always taken a screenshot. (...) The acceleration of a crisis is enormous” (I6). The interviewees agree on the chance that companies can place messages unfiltered without the need for third parties. Through accurate analysis options, companies can also determine relatively accurately whom they reach. In addition, companies consider it a great opportunity to enter into a direct exchange with their stakeholders. This allows the companies to quickly readjust if necessary.

Overall, the experts agree, that the single channels cannot be handled separately, but a symbiosis across all channels in form of multi-channel communication is mandatory to generate the best possible output for the company. Communication must also be coherent across all channels, as stakeholders' media use is. Furthermore, it is no longer possible to draw clear boundaries between the individual channels. The fact that there are "(...) influencers who are paid and others who are not" (I3) is an example of the blurring of boundaries. A combination of classic press relations, digitally owned media, bloggers, and influencers is required. “If I want to communicate a brand holistically, then I need to use all the relevant channels, and these are not just the owned channels” (I6).

As a basis, uniform content planning and preparation is necessary, which is then adapted to the specific channels. This should be performed not only in the communications department, but in close exchange across departments such as communications-related marketing, but also technical departments such as research and development. Step one of this content flow is deciding which topic is to be distributed. Step two, which target group is to be reached with the topic. Then, the channels are selected and it has to be decided if they should be activated at the same time or in a specific order. Finally, various analysis methods are used to check whether the objectives and target groups have been reached. The content is issued to the multipliers in different variants, but the message remains the same. This ensures that the message remains credible. “That everyone speaks in the same voice, in the narrow sense, that everyone says exactly the same thing, is long outdated. But letting different people speak and tell different

stories in different ways, but conveying the same three, four, five messages, that works” (I7). Therefore, most automotive companies organize their public relations department in a newsroom system where all channels are located. As the boundaries between individual channels are blurring, it is important to “(...) no longer think in silos, e.g. print, online, TV, Twitter, Instagram, but laterally. Who is the person, and which channels is the person using?” (I3). Integrated communication is especially important in terms of the reputation and credibility of the channel. The focus is on the person who is receiving the content, and via which channels this person can be reached.

In summary, all experts agree that all channels remain relevant. According to the pilot interviewee “(...) none of these pillars will disappear. They will all complement and ideally reinforce each other”. It is not possible to give a general answer about which PESO channels are particularly relevant or irrelevant. It rather depends on the company's objectives and target groups.

Nevertheless, a paradigm shift in corporate communications in the automotive industry is found in the empirical study. According to the experts, it is mainly characterized by the following six principles:

- (1) *Agility*: Companies need to be more agile in their actions mainly due to real-time communication in digital media.
- (2) *The public as a gatekeeper*: Due to the multitude of ways in which people communicate and the fact that anyone can be a communicator and has access to online information, the public increasingly defines the topics of communication and therefore acts as a gatekeeper for relevant topics.
- (3) *Cross-media and cross-departmental communication*: Stakeholder media consumption is linked. Individual stakeholders can no longer be addressed via individual channels. The media behavior of companies must therefore also be linked.
- (4) *Many voices – one message*: Communications work is changing from a task for a few to a joint task for many, which can only be successful if relevant and comprehensible content is communicated as coherently as possible, via various channels, to as many people as possible, based on a strategic guideline.
- (5) *Topic-oriented communication*: Topics and target groups are the starting point for a consistent communication strategy. Content planning for the channels is derived from the superior communication topic.

- (6) *Data Analysis*: Because everyone can be a multiplier and communicate about the company, media monitoring, and action analysis must be essential to corporate communications.

The Content Flow Model

The empirical findings imply that all channels remain relevant. Nevertheless, the paradigm shift identified in the study, shows that the PESO model itself is no longer comprehensive enough (Zhu, 2019; Zerfass, 2022). More variables than only the channels need to be considered. Based on these considerations, the PESO model should be expanded to a Content Flow Model as shown in Figure 2.

The new process can be divided into the following four steps:

- (1) *Topic*: The first step in a company's communication process is to determine which topic should be communicated. The interests and goals of the company as well as those of the stakeholders and the public need to be considered.
- (2) *Target Group*: The second step is to define for which target groups the topic is relevant.
- (3) *Choice and weighting of channels*: The third step is determining which channels will deliver the content to the defined target group(s). It is not only important to determine which channels will be used and in what range, but also in which order the content will be published. It is important to bear in mind that companies usually have limited resources for corporate communications. This is considered in the model by defining that the sum of the filling percentages x_i of the channels equals 100 percent. Therefore, the channels are depicted as "communicating tubes", to which, based on data-driven target group analyses, the existing corporate resources are distributed.
- (4) *Analysis*: The final step is to analyze whether the communication goals have been achieved through the selected process. For this purpose, qualitative measures such as corporate listening as well as quantitative measures such as PR-value or precise sentiment analysis can be used.

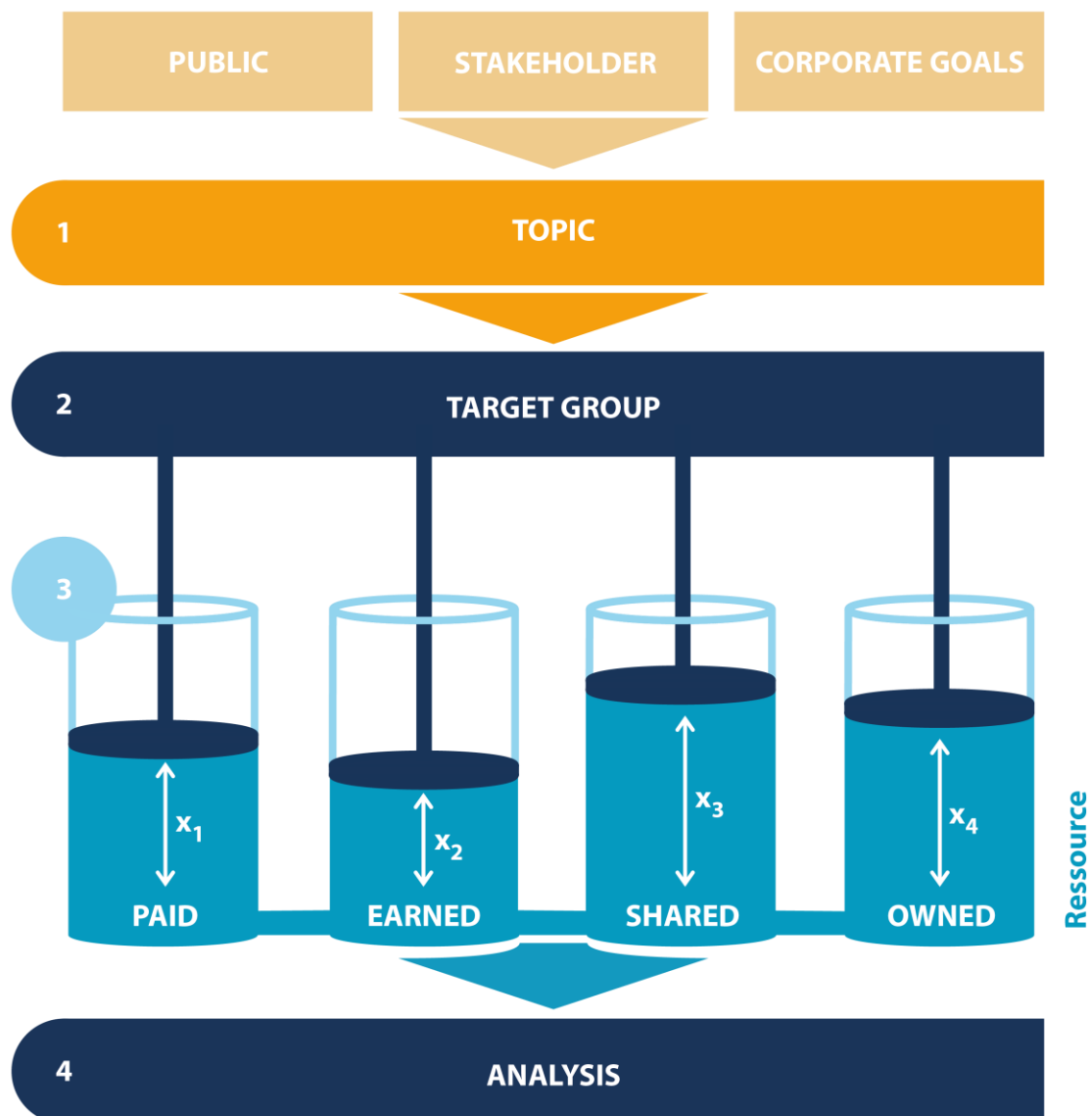


Fig. 2: The newly proposed Content Flow Model.

Examples

If a company wants to introduce a new car seat for children, the model would be adjusted as follows: The target group is young parents, averaging around age 30. Due to the subject and the fact that it concerns the safety of children, objective validation is extremely relevant, i.e., external test results. Based on the topic and target group, the communication experts would therefore allocate a majority of resources (65%) to earned media. In addition, people tend to inform themselves through material published by the company. Owned channels would be

weighted with 20%. Recommendations of friends play a role. Therefore, shared content would be allocated 10%. Paid content only plays little to no role, maybe if the product was seen through advertisements, and would only get 5%.

Looking at the example of introducing a new trendy car model in the sports sector, the main target group is young adults between 20-30 years. In this case, the channels need to be used differently. Shared media play a much larger role because opinion leaders' and friends' views are mainly considered in the decision process. 40 % of the resources would be invested in them. As people inform themselves through company-owned channels or configure the car via the website, owned channels would be allocated 25%. As it is a high-investment product, objective validation is important. Earned channels would be weighted with 20%. To increase desirability, paid formats remain important, and advertisements etc. would be financed with 15% of the company's communication mix resources.

Conclusion

The current situation in corporate communications is that all channels of the PESO and the SOEP model remain relevant, but the separation of the channels is no longer valid. The channels complement but do not replace each other. Shared and owned media are gaining importance. Even if companies can reach a large mass of stakeholders and possibly new customers via their own digital and social channels, traditional media are still essential. Especially the gatekeeping function in earned media is still seen as very important.

The proposed Content Flow Model describes a holistic, agile, multi-channel communications approach. It takes the goals of an organization, its target group(s), the choice and weighting of different media channels, the allocation of resources, as well as an analysis of goal achievement into account. It extends the PESO/SOEP model since it builds a more comprehensive, actionable framework around the model's core components, by allowing not just classification and selection of appropriate channels but tying them directly to strategic communication goals and outcomes.

The study included only representatives of the German automotive industry and is therefore not representative for corporate communications in general. To verify the results of the present qualitative study, a quantitative study with more subjects should be performed and an extension, including the expertise of all other relevant partners in the communication process, would be meaningful. It would be interesting to find out if there are differences between OEMs (B2C),

Tier 1s (mainly B2C), and further suppliers of lower Tier levels (mainly B2B). Similar studies in other industry sectors and global regions should be performed to generalize the results.

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