

TAKING A STANCE IN CORPORATE COMMUNICATION

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Taking a stance on controversial or polarizing sociopolitical topics has become an increasingly difficult aspect of corporate communication. Stakeholders expect companies to position themselves, yet they are increasingly taking different, sometimes polarized stances themselves. Practitioners are grappling with the question of whether, when, and how to communicate a stance. However, what constitutes as “taking a stance” remains unclear in both research and practice. Terms such as corporate advocacy and activism are often used interchangeably, and the boundaries to fields like communicating corporate identity or values are blurred. This article seeks to clarify the phenomenon of taking a stance in corporate communication and highlight what it means for communication practice.

CORPORATE STANCE COMMUNICATION: KEY CONCEPTS AND CHARACTERISTICS

The phenomenon of a company communicating its stance concerns the question of whether, how, and to what extent corporate communication addresses controversial or polarizing sociopolitical topics, and communicates a stance towards them (e.g., Dhanesh, 2025).

> **Corporate communication** is understood as goal-oriented and systematically planned, implemented, and controlled communications that are often institutionalized, for example, in the form of a working group or department.

> **Controversial or polarizing sociopolitical topics** are defined as those that currently elicit diverse viewpoints and intense, sometimes polarized public debate within society. Present-day examples of such topics include diversity and LGBTQIA+ issues, environmental issues, and topics related to political elections (e.g., Denner et al., 2025).

Corporate stance communication is used here in a broad sense to grasp the phenomenon as comprehensively as possible and encompass related concepts.

It refers to the part of corporate communication that addresses controversial or polarizing sociopolitical topics and develops and communicates a stance on them.

A stance can be understood as an internal viewpoint on a particular topic that is based on (corporate) values, involves an evaluation and self-positioning (e.g. against or in favour of the object of stance), and can be communicated externally (e.g., Du Bois, 2007).

RESEARCHING STANCE COMMUNICATION

To understand and distinguish stance communication, and to identify and characterize the similarities and differences of the concepts used to capture it, a systematic literature review in the form of a scoping review was conducted. The literature search spanned four databases – Communication & Mass Media Complete, OLC Medien- und Kommunikationswissenschaften [media and communication studies], Springer Link, and Web of Science – using search strings related to corporate advocacy and activism and their manifestations such as CEO and brand activism, as well as stance communication in German, with title, abstract, and keyword fields searched where applicable. After applying formal and content-related selection criteria and conducting additional snowball sampling, 73 publications were analyzed thematically.

In public relations research and practice, the question of whether, how, and to what extent a corporation communicates a stance on controversial or polarizing sociopolitical topics is discussed under several concepts. The two most prominent are corporate activism and advocacy, often further specified for the corporate context (e.g., corporate social/political advocacy, CEO activism, brand activism). While these concepts share a common focus on the phenomenon named, they also have differences. To thoroughly analyze these differences and, consequently, the underlying phenomenon, the following dimensions can be used (see also Bojanic, 2023; McKeever et al., 2023; Weber et al., 2023).

- > **Goal orientation:** What goals are being pursued? Are they exclusively organization-centered (e.g., reputation,

image) or also externally orientated? If externally orientated, do they tend to support or challenge the existing societal system (e.g., economic or political)?

- > **Degree of activity:** Is the communication more active or passive?
- > **Tone of voice:** Is the communication more positive or negative (e.g., adversarial or confrontational)?
- > **Attributed risk:** Are the risks to the company considered to be high or low?

Dimensions of corporate stance communication

Goal orientation	Degree of activity	Tone of voice	Attributed risk
also externally oriented ↗ challenging system ↘ support system	active	negative	high
organization-centered	passive	positive	low

Source: Helena Stehle & Julia Lührmann

Corporate activism

Corporate activism can be understood as “a company’s willingness to take a stand on social, political, economic, and environmental issues to create societal change by influencing the attitudes and behaviors of actors in its institutional environment” (Eilert & Nappier Cherup, 2020, p. 461).

The concept is often further specified for individuals (e.g., CEO activism), brands (e.g., brand activism), and specific topics (e.g., corporate sociopolitical activism). In terms of goal orientation, corporate activism, as described for example by McKeever et al. (2023), focuses on externally oriented goals that complement organization-centered ones. The emphasis is on achieving broader, longer-lasting change of an existing societal system. This includes, for example, questioning prevailing beliefs and ideas.

According to this concept, an activist actor operates from outside the system in order to exert influence on it.

In terms of the degree of activity, activism is characterized by direct, often energetic communicative actions. These extend beyond traditional, established practices, such as those stemming from lobbying and public affairs, and can include civic engagement, for example, participating in or organizing demonstrations. Regarding the tone of voice, activism can be adversarial and confrontational, and thus negative in expression. A positive tone of voice is also possible when companies, for instance, emphasize their own ideas and present them in a positive light compared to the prevailing ones that are being challenged.

Given these characteristics, corporate activism is typically associated with higher risks for the organization, including time and financial costs and potential erosion of relationship capital with representatives of the existing system.

Corporate advocacy

Corporate advocacy can be defined as “voicing or showing explicit and public support for certain individuals, groups, or ideals and values with the aim of convincing and persuading others to do the same” (Wettstein & Baur, 2016, p. 200).

It can also be further specified, particularly by topic (e.g., corporate political advocacy). As described by, for example, Zhao et al. (2024) and McKeever et al. (2023), corporate advocacy also focuses on externally oriented goals. It aims to maintain existing systems rather than challenge them. It is oriented towards amplification and backing up prevailing ideas. Advocacy does not involve exerting influence on a system from outside. Rather, it operates within an existing system. This may be the case when a corporation aligns with or supports others that seek to advance a specific cause or community (e.g., organizations, policies, or individual actors).

The degree of activity in communication is described as more subtle and less active in corporate advocacy. Regarding the tone of voice, advocacy is not automatically associated with positive tonality, despite its system-supportive nature. The tone of voice can be both positive and negative. However, communication is described as more nuanced and softer than in activism.

Correspondingly, corporate advocacy is generally attributed with fewer costs and risks for the organization than activism.

Corporate stance communication

The analytical focus of the concepts above is primarily on externally oriented goals. However, if one assumes that communicating a stance on controversial or polarizing sociopolitical topics should primarily serve corporate goals, as is generally assumed in corporate communication, a third concept emerges: corporate stance communication in the narrow sense, or strategic corporate stance communication.

Reflecting Acharya et al. (2019), corporate stance communication can be defined as the part of corporate communication that addresses controversial or polarizing sociopolitical topics and develops and communicates a stance on them based on the company’s beliefs and values to contribute to its goals (e.g., increasing intangible assets like reputation or image). Corporate stance communication in the narrow sense is characterized by striving for a direct contribution to corporate value creation. Regarding the degree of activity, this communication can be either active or passive, but is generally considered more passive. It is assumed that companies are more reserved when drawn into discussions on controversial or polarized sociopolitical topics, for example, to protect reputation. The tone of voice can also be positive or negative. However, a positive tone is more typical as such communication aims, for instance, to maintain or build reputation.

Given, in particular, the lower level of activity and strong internal focus, the risks attributed to companies from stance communication are significantly lower than those associated with corporate advocacy and, especially, corporate activism.

Overall, the designation of the phenomenon in question remains unclear, and terms and concepts are sometimes used interchangeably (see, e.g., Zhao et al., 2024). This highlights the importance of focusing on the characteristics used to describe it, and of considering where a company situates itself in relation to the four dimensions above. Taken together, the three concepts discussed can be mapped onto a spectrum consisting of the four dimensions.

At the one end of the spectrum, corporate stance communication (in the narrow sense) has a more organization-centered goal orientation, is generally passive in nature, and is considered to pose a lower risk for the company. At the other end of the spectrum is corporate activism, which has a stronger external orientation, challenges an existing

Concepts of corporate stance communication

Goal orientation		Degree of activity	Tone of voice	Attributed risk
Corporate activism	also externally oriented ↗ challenging system ↘ support system ↑ organization-centered	more active	more negative	higher
Corporate advocacy				
Corporate stance communication (in the narrow sense)		more passive	more positive	lower

Source: Helena Stehle & Julia Lührmann

system and status quo, and has a higher degree of activity, with an energetic, direct, execution-oriented character. This approach is considered to pose the highest risk. All three concepts can be expressed with either a negative or positive tone of voice.

IMPLICATIONS FOR CORPORATE COMMUNICATION

The phenomenon of a company communicating its stance can be defined and described more clearly using the dimensions and concepts outlined above. While this is an analytical, ideal-typical perspective and real-world cases will show shades of grey, the approach provides a useful framework for understanding and characterizing the phenomenon further.

1. Reflecting and adjusting stance communication

In corporate communication practice the framework can first be used to reflect on existing stance communication (in the broad sense) and, if necessary, adjust it accordingly. When considering whether to communicate on controversial or polarizing sociopolitical topics, companies can use the dimensions above to inform their decision and determine the approach. The question of the objectives,

i.e., what a company wants to achieve, is particularly crucial in this context.

2. Differentiating stance communication from other related concepts and fields

Second, using the definitions and characterization above, the phenomenon can be distinguished from others and their associated fields of research and practice, and their differences and links can be highlighted.

For example, **corporate value communication** is a related field. Values are often considered the core of corporate culture and can be defined as “the weight which corporate decision makers attach to alternative goals when making their decisions” (Thomsen, 2004, p. 32). The focus is on the organization’s fundamental value system, which is developed through communication and then communicated using techniques such as storytelling (Ellerup Nielsen, 2016). Corporate value communication is distinguished by being fundamental and ideally continuous, whereas stance communication is situational and addresses a specific sociopolitical topic in the present. Ideally, stance communication builds on value communication.

Corporate identity, defined as “the profile and values communicated by an organization” (Cornelissen, 2023, p. 7), and its communication and management are also closely related. Similar to value communication, identity

communication and management are often considered fundamental and independent of specific topics.

Further connections and distinctions can be drawn to specific, thematically defined fields of corporate communication, such as sustainability or DEI (diversity, equity, and inclusion) communication. These fields focus on topics that are not necessarily being discussed in a controversial or polarized manner at present. Therefore, they may focus less on communicating a specific stance and more on communicating activities in the field or fundamental corporate values.

CONCLUSION AND OUTLOOK

The article responds to the need of communication managers to reflect on stance communication more deeply. The analytical, ideal-typical distinctions described above can support them to further develop and reflect on their own corporate communication when an internal or external need or desire arises to take a stance on controversial or polarizing sociopolitical topics. The characterization dimensions (goal orientation, degree of activity, tone of voice, and

attributed risk to the organization) can facilitate this process. Distinguishing between similar phenomena and fields helps clarify the focus in a given situation (e.g., whether the task concerns the company's fundamental values or taking a stance on a controversial topic).

There is still much for research to explore in this area. Most existing studies have focused either on the effects of stance communication in a broad sense or on content and discourse analyses (e.g., Sauter & Jungblut, 2024; Ciszek & Logan, 2018). Future work could, for example, ask communication managers about their motives and objectives and address how they approach stance communication strategically and operationally. One may also ask how these motives and objectives align with stakeholder expectations, what the consequences are of meeting or violating those expectations, and how this influences risk attribution. This is particularly important when assuming that the heterogeneity of stakeholder expectations will continue to increase.

Finally, examining other fields of research can help further analyze corporate stance communication. For example, insights from linguistics or rhetorics could help clarify how stance is expressed in practice (e.g., Fuoli, 2018).

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MORE INFORMATION

The systematic literature review presented in this article is part of an ongoing research project that also includes an interview and Q-sort study with communication managers on the relevance, design, and challenges of corporate stance communication. The project is expected to be finalized by the end of 2025. Further information can be found at <https://bit.ly/sc-study-muenster> and <https://bit.ly/sc-study-aguk>.