

EDITORIAL

In 1831, the Royal Swedish Navy began planting oak trees on the small island of *Visingsö* in the middle of lake *Vättern*. Already the forebears of the modern Swedes, the fearsome Vikings, knew that oak is the perfect material for shipbuilding. Not only is the wood immensely tough; the trees tend to grow very straight and tall. There's only one disadvantage: oaks grow slowly. If you want a large-scale steady supply of stately oaks, you must think ahead. Then again, Swedes have always prided themselves on prudent planning. In the end, a large number of trees were planted on *Visingsö* and left to grow. After the allocated time, the forests' caretakers duly informed the Swedish navy that the trees were ready for harvesting. That was in 1975. Needless to say, the navy's interest was limited. Although the Swedish Navy retained an oak-hulled trawler in service until 1998 – not because it's organic, but because magnetic mines don't bother about oak hulls – the timber-hulled man o' war of the 19th century was long replaced by the steel-hulled frigate of the 20th. Today, in the 21st century, the navy's most modern ships are not even steel-hulled but constructed of radar-absorbing carbon fibre and vinyl laminate.

On September 28 and 29, 2023, the University of Johannesburg's Department for Strategic Communication hosted an international conference in conjunction with its sister department at Lund University, Sweden. Under the headline *Reflect, Rethink and Reimagine: A Decade of Strategic Communication* more than 120 scholars gathered physically and virtually to look back as well as forward, to take stock of past achievements as well as think about the future. The contributions from all over the continent, and indeed the world, spanned all levels of investigation: the tricky details on micro-level, the organizational dynamics on meso-level, the convoluted and complex issues on macro-level. Eminent practitioners joined the event. Some provided inspirational and visionary highlights; others, equally important, sobering reality-checks. Last but not least, UJ's very own 'Gallery of Talent' challenged the participants with music, performances and poetry.

It was a marvellous, unforgettable event, in other words. But what did it have to do with the oaks of *Visingsö*?

The answer is multi-layered. On the first and most basic level, research is a little like oaks. It grows slowly. *Communicare*, that was clear from the beginning, would collect a selection of the contributions in a dedicated special issue. The idea was, of course, to carry the conference's momentum into the new year. But adhering to the rigorous requirements of peer-review, sometimes repeated peer-review, takes time. Thus, it took the editorial team one-and-a-half years to collate the special issue. 2023 became 2024, 2024 became 2025. As many of our colleagues and contributors have moved on to the next exciting project, the purpose of this editorial is to perhaps recapture the spirit of the event.

However, there is another, deeper layer to the story of the oaks of *Visingsö* which connects it to the theme of the 2023 conference theme *Reflect, Rethink, Reimagine*. Clearly, the governors of the Swedish navy gave the matter of long-term supply some serious thought. *Reflecting*, they foresaw, correctly, that the demand for oak timber would skyrocket in the foreseeable future, as the European powers built and rebuilt their fleets. And they had good reasons to believe that. In the first half of the 19th century, the state-of-the-art man o' war became a curious hybrid (Brown, 1990). Warships remained wooden-hulled and continued to carry a full rig of sails and shrouds. At the time, the innovation lay in the primitive auxiliary steam engine that drove a 'screw', the forebear of the modern propeller. Although the screw provided an important tactical advantage by allowing wind-independent manoeuvre, the ship-of-the line of the 1840ies was superficially indistinguishable from its forebears of the Napoleonic Wars.

What the Swedish Navy did in 1831, thus, was to *extrapolate* the current development path into the future: wooden hulls = demand of oak. What they did not do – perhaps because it was not their task to do so – was to *rethink* and *reimagine*. Yet, as the Germans say, predictions are particularly troublesome when they are concerned with the future. In 1860 – with the *Visingsö* oaks barely out of their nappies – Britain's Royal Navy commissioned *HMS Warrior*, the first seagoing warship with an iron hull. Only 17 years later, *HMS Iris* marked another first, going from iron to steel. The wooden-hulled warship did not disappear overnight, of course. Eventually, however, only the wooden-hulled minesweepers, like Sweden's *HMS Gåssten*, were left.

In Sweden, the story of the *Visingsö* oaks is well-known as a cautionary tale against simply extrapolating the present into the future. Yet it is also read as a positive tale of prudent planning. And, on yet another level, it is understood as encouragement to make the best of miscalculations. Swedes are rightfully proud that their ancestors were capable of planning ahead for 150 years, and the spirit of thoughtful long-term planning has endured in Swedish government until today. But the Swedish people also enjoy a stroll and a chuckle in the beautiful oak forest of *Visingsö* which is now administered by the National Property Board. Sparingly harvested, the timber is still used for fine boats, by the way. And *Visingsö* oak makes for great whiskey barrels as well.

This Special Issue of *Communicare* contains eight articles which, taken together, run the gamut of reflecting, rethinking, and reimagining. To begin with, **Nina Overton-de Klerk** and this author tried their hands at a metamodernist rethink of our current conception of rationality, reimagining the strategic communication-world in metamodern terms (Nothhaft & Overton-de Klerk 2025). Whether the authors correctly predict what kind of ship the future brings remains to be seen. But whiskey barrels and a stroll in the forest are not a bad thing either.

On the other end of the spectrum – reflective, yet less speculative, more empirical, closer to practice – is the contribution of **Yolanda Makhubele, Anna Oksitucz and Elizabeth Lubinga** (Makhubele et al 2025). The authors report the results of interviews with South African agency representatives. Amongst other results, it is encouraging to read, in our age of AI, that 'chemistry' between people continues to play a key role.

In a similar vein, the article by **Dalien René Benecke, Corné Meintjes, Padhma Moodley, Lida Holzhausen, Anette Degenaar and Neil Levy** (Benecke et al., 2025) reminds us of the human aspects in the ostensibly rational world of modern corporations. Their article (Benecke et al., 2025) reports a Delphi study conducted with South African public relations practitioners as part of a global research project. The results point to a strange, yet strangely familiar discrepancy. On the one hand, organizations pay lip-service to the strategic importance of communication, on the other side, actual organizational power and influence lag far behind.

Moving from practice to academia, **María Ruiz Carreras, Jörgen Eksell, Marja Åkerström and Howard Nothhaft** (Carreras et al., 2025) report interviews conducted with programme directors in strategic communication. The results suggests that there is very little agreement amongst educators on what strategic communication-programmes are supposed to achieve. Teachers and researchers seem to emancipate from their 'proper' home disciplines, gradually, but whether higher education in the field should be practical, theoretical, critical, or any combination thereof, remains an open question.

Going from the rather small world of higher education to the big world of global competition, **Caroline Azionya's** (Azionya 2025) article is situated at the sweet spot between a plausible extrapolation of the current situation on one side, and a fundamental rethink and reimagining on the other. Grounded in an extensive literature review, Azionya offers a systematic (re-)conceptualization of the currently ongoing 'AI arms race' between the 'superintermediaries', i.e. the dominant enablers of our brave new social media world.

On a similar macro-sociological level, **Keyan Tomaselli's and Addamms Mututa's** (Tomaselli & Mututa 2025) article "Strategic Communication Futures: Paradigm and Practice in a Polycrisis World" is another contribution that challenges us to rethink – big time. If you ever wondered about the connection between modern academia and Soviet-style accounting, turn to this *tour de force*. Ranging far and wide with considerable flair, the authors offer a fundamental rewrite of what is really going in academia and research, be it modern, postmodern or metamodern.

1 Interestingly, to return to shipbuilding, the best-studied arms race is the naval arms race in the early years of the 20th century that led to World War One.

Of course, as a practitioner or academic with a practical assignment on your hands, conceptual tools is what you require. The contribution by **Jacobus de Villiers, Anette Degenaar and Lynnette Fourie** (de Villiers et al. 2025) is concerned with strategic communication in the context of higher education, where students, while studying, are internal stakeholders. Yet upon graduation, they become external stakeholders, alumni, ambassadors. The contribution systematically surveys an enormous amount of literature. Not only do the authors chart a course through the bewildering terminological labyrinth created by the bandying around of key terms like 'strategy', 'identity', 'image', 'reputation' and 'brand'. They also include a call to rethink the complexities that arise when universities use students and students use universities for their own purposes, respectively.

The article by **Anette Degenaar, Lynette Fourie and Lida Holtzhausen** (Degenaar et. al 2025), finally, offers a similar conceptual clarification, giving practitioners well-developed 'mindtools' so that they can concentrate on the issues at hand. The authors investigate whether Niemann's model of strategic integrated communication transfers to the special requirements of child-protection organizations. Their article also serves as a reminder that national discourses are sometimes far ahead, and better developed, than the international discussion. For example, the question of 'strategic consistency' has been internationally on the backburner for a while, only having been revisited recently under the headline of 'alignment' (Volk & Zerfass, 2018).

What remains, then, is the hope that this Special Issue will rekindle the spirit of the 2023 in the authors, and perhaps in some readers as well. Academics are trained to always reflect on their actions, and we are normally pretty good at it. But the organizers of the conference did not choose the title *Reflect, Rethink, Reimagine* for the fine ring of its words only. Let us ask ourselves, then, how convincing higher education's track record is when it comes to rethinking and reimagining – but being right about it. Then again, history seems to show that you can't go much wrong with planting a tree (an indigenous and non-invasive one, of course).

Howard Nothhaft
Guest Editor - Special Issue

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