



MAP

Polarization as Cognitive Infrastructure of Reality: Corporate Communication in the Contest over Meanings, Interpretations and Decisions

Material developed by the Center for Economic Studies and
Analyses Applied to Communication

WHAT THIS REPORT COVERS

This document traces the **historical and conceptual development of polarization**. It offers an **interdisciplinary account** of how the term moved beyond its association with political conflict to become a **key lens for understanding contemporary social life** — with direct implications for corporate communication.

CONTENTS

Why it is important to talk about polarization **4**

The word before the phenomenon **7**

Polarization and its migrations: a metaconcept **13**

- Physics **16**
- Political Science **18**
- Social Psychology **20**
- Sociology **23**
- Communication **24**
- Marketing **27**
- Organization Studies **29**
- Economics **30**
- Anthropology **32**

A possible conceptual revision: pay attention to '*moving stakeholders*' **35**

Polarization in Brazil **44**

Looking at '*moderation*': an interview with Diogo Schelp **57**

Detected shifts **66**

Paths for further exploration **79**

Critical considerations **85**

Credits **90**

About Aberje **91**

About CEAEC **92**

WHY IT IS IMPORTANT TO TALK ABOUT POLARIZATION

Polarization has become **one of the most frequently used words of the twenty-first century**. It appears daily in newspaper headlines, political leaders' speeches, market analyses, board meetings, behavioral research, trend reports, and everyday conversations.

And it is this phenomenon that this document was designed to explore, offering insights grounded in the expertise of communication and marketing professionals and drawing on **complementary and transdisciplinary sources**.

We live in an age routinely described as polarized. Companies say they operate in polarized markets. Brands hesitate to take positions on divisive issues. Digital platforms are accused of intensifying polarization. Governments promise to combat it. Researchers seek to measure it.

But **what exactly are we talking about when we talk about polarization?**

At first glance, the answer seems obvious. Polarization would be the **existence of two opposing sides** growing ever farther apart. Yet this intuitive definition proves **insufficient** when we examine the literature produced in recent decades.

In Political Science, polarization usually refers to the **widening ideological distance** between parties, voters, or representatives. In Social Psychology, it describes the process by which **interaction within a group can reinforce the positions of its members**. In Sociology, it concerns **social fragmentation and the erosion of shared spaces**. In Communication Studies, polarization is often associated with **competing narratives**, algorithmic mediation, and struggles

to define public reality. In Marketing, it is linked to **consumption-based identities**, brand activism, and the symbolic dimension of consumer choice. In Organization Studies, it appears as a growing challenge to **institutional legitimacy, trust, and the social license to operate**. In Economics, it primarily concerns the **unequal distribution of resources, opportunities, and positions** within productive systems. Anthropology, by contrast, places less emphasis on conflict, treating difference as a **fundamental condition of social life**.

We use a single word to designate different phenomena, produced by distinct mechanisms and studied by **intellectual traditions that rarely engage with one another**.

This observation is the starting point for Aberje's contribution to the subject and its implications.

THE WORD BEFORE THE PHENOMENON

The aim is to **reconstruct the conceptual development of polarization** and show that the phenomenon has no single definition, but rather a **range of approaches** that do not always speak to one another.

The hypothesis is simple: **there is no single theory of polarization**. There is a constellation of theories describing different manifestations of the same process of social differentiation. Before understanding its effects on brands, reputation, or corporate communication, we must understand the trajectory of the concept itself.

The word '*polarization*' derives from polar, whose origin goes back to the Latin *polaris*, 'relating to the pole' itself derived from the Greek *pólos*, meaning an axis, pivot, or point around which something turns.

In Antiquity, the term was associated primarily with astronomy. The celestial poles were the fixed points around which the sky appeared to move. The underlying idea was therefore not conflict, but orientation.

This etymological origin deserves attention because it reveals an aspect often forgotten in contemporary interpretations. Originally, **poles were not adversaries but reference points: extremes that organized a system**. This feature remained present in later scientific formulations.

Every theory is born from a language, and every language carries a history. Understanding that history means recognizing that polarization did

not arise to explain contemporary political conflicts. Its origin is much older and belongs to another field of knowledge.

Each discipline preserved part of the earlier meaning while adding new interpretations, objects of study, and forms of measurement.

The result is curious: the more popular the word became, the less agreement there was about what it meant.

An Archaeology of Polarization

Rather than relying on a predefined definition, we draw inspiration from an 'archeology' of the concept of polarization. The aim is to observe how a concept originally associated with the orientation of electromagnetic waves has become one of the main explanatory categories of contemporary social life. This reconstruction is not only of historical interest but also holds strategic importance.

When an organization asserts that a certain issue is polarizing, when a board of directors debates reputational risks associated with polarization, or when an organization decides to take a stance on a social conflict, it is assumed that everyone shares the same understanding of what is being

discussed. In practice, this rarely happens.

Each actor interprets polarization through a different intellectual tradition, even when unaware of that tradition. Executives often rely on implicit definitions derived from professional experience. Researchers use concepts consolidated within their disciplines. Journalists adopt interpretations shaped by public debate. Consultancies use models developed for trend analysis or consumer behavior. Everyone uses the same word without being certain that they are describing the same phenomenon.

The first level of this archaeology focuses exclusively on the word. Before examining its political, cultural, psychological, or organizational manifestations, we must answer a more elementary question: **'How did a word born to describe the behavior of light become one of the central concepts used to interpret twenty-first-century societies?'**

WHY SPEAK OF AN 'ARCHAEOLOGY OF POLARIZATION'?

The term archaeology is used here as a methodological reference inspired by Michel Foucault's work, especially *L'Archéologie du savoir*, originally published in 1969 as an essay in epistemology and historiographical method.

From a Foucauldian perspective, an archaeology of knowledge does not seek the 'true origin' of an idea. It investigates **how different discourses, at different historical moments, made it possible for a concept to arise, be transformed, and acquire new meanings.**

Rather than narrating a linear history of ideas, archaeology seeks to understand the historical, social, and institutional conditions that enabled certain modes of thought to consolidate while others disappeared or lost relevance.

This publication draws on that approach in a broader, interdisciplinary sense. It does not claim to undertake a Foucauldian archaeology in the strict sense, but uses its

mode of inquiry to reconstruct how the concept of polarization has traveled across different fields of knowledge.

Rather than assuming that polarization has always meant the same thing, we begin from the hypothesis that **its meaning has been continually broadened, reinterpreted, and adapted as it moved between disciplines.**

The polarization that now challenges companies, governments, and societies results from successive layers of interpretation accumulated over more than a century of scientific production. Understanding these layers is the first step toward understanding the contemporary phenomenon.

POLARIZATION AND ITS MIGRATIONS: A METACONCEPT

The aim here is to reconstruct the **evolution of polarization** from its origins in Physics to its incorporation into Political Science, Social Psychology, Sociology, Communication, Marketing, Economics, Anthropology, and Organization Studies, **presenting it as a metaconcept.**

Words are never merely words. They **carry histories, disciplines, disputes over meaning, and particular ways of understanding reality.** Before explaining the world, every concept must first explain itself.

This publication proposes understanding **polarization as a metaconcept**: an analytical category broad enough to bring together different specialized concepts while preserving a family resemblance among them, though not necessarily complete identity of meaning. Just as words such as risk, power, culture, or identity take on different meanings depending on the field in which they are used, polarization also changes meaning as it migrates across disciplines.

This is not a terminological error. It is a natural process of conceptual evolution. As new problems arise, existing concepts are reinterpreted to answer new questions. Polarization is a particularly revealing example: its trajectory shows less the stability of a concept than its extraordinary capacity for adaptation.

Polarization never disappears. What changes is what is being polarized. This distinction is fundamental. **No discipline is necessarily contradicting the others**; each observes a different dimension of the same social

phenomenon. The questions, research methods, scales of analysis, indicators, and practical implications also change.

Polarization should therefore be understood as a multidimensional system in which different forms coexist, interact, and often reinforce one another. A political crisis can intensify affective polarization. Affective polarization can reorganize digital communities. Digital communities can alter media narratives. Narratives can influence consumption choices. Consumption choices can affect corporate reputations. Reputations can modify organizational decisions.

Understanding the migrations

Few words have crossed as many fields of knowledge as polarization. In recent decades, it has become central to the vocabulary of politics, the press, academia, business, and civil society organizations. It is now recurrent in diagnoses of democracies, markets, digital platforms, culture, consumption, behavior, and corporate reputation. Yet the frequency of its use contrasts with the limited attention paid to its meaning.

When someone says that a society is polarized, that an organization operates in a polarized

environment, or that an issue produces polarization, they assume **a shared understanding of the phenomenon—an assumption rarely confirmed.**

The following overview provides an entry point into each of these fields.

The first migration: Physics

In Physics, between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, polarization acquired its first consistent scientific formulation. Although the idea of poles was already present in studies of magnetism and electricity, modern optics gave the term a more precise technical meaning.

Polarization came to designate **the specific orientation of electromagnetic-wave vibrations**, showing that light did not propagate in an undifferentiated way but could display **different states of organization.**

This definition establishes a principle that remains, explicitly or implicitly, in almost all subsequent migrations: **polarization does not simply mean opposition; it means organization around distinct orientations.** At its origin, polarization had no normative connotation: it was

neither a problem, a pathology, nor an anomaly.

In Physics, two poles do not necessarily represent conflict. They are **complementary properties of the same system**. A magnetic field exists because there is a relation between poles; a polarized wave remains the same wave, merely organized along a particular direction. **Polarization thus describes a way in which reality is structured.**

This distinction is often lost in contemporary public debate, where polarization has become almost synonymous with radicalization or antagonism. Its scientific origin, however, is much more neutral. **It is descriptive, not normative**. Physics assigns **no positive or negative value to polarization**; it identifies different ways of organizing a system and assumes the simultaneous existence of poles within a shared structure.

This inheritance offers a powerful metaphor for the Human Sciences. Just as light can be organized along different planes of propagation without ceasing to be light, societies can organize themselves around different poles of opinion, identity, or values without necessarily producing institutional rupture or collapse.

The second migration: Political Science

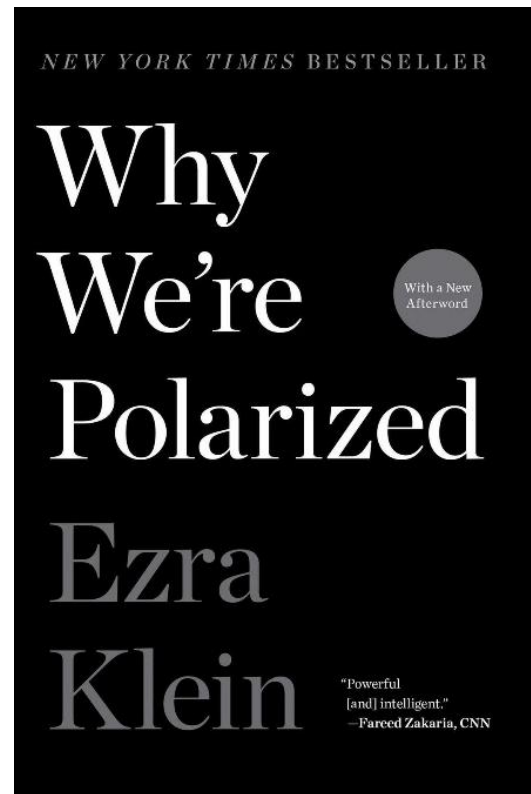
Over the twentieth century, particularly after the Second World War and during the Cold War, Political Science progressively adopted the metaphor of poles to describe the **growing distance between ideological positions**. The concept came to **measure the distribution of political preferences and the distance separating parties, representatives, and voters**. Polarization no longer described physical properties but **configurations of political space**.

The central question was no longer how a system is physically organized, but how groups distribute their preferences, values, and projects for society. Polarization came to mean an **increase in the distance between groups, accompanied by a reduction in intermediate positions capable of building consensus or compromise**.

Initially, the literature focused on ideological polarization, measured through programmatic differences among parties and positions on the economy, the role of the state, foreign policy, or civil rights. Over time, however, researchers realized that distance between political positions did not fully explain what they observed in many democracies.

They therefore distinguished two complementary dimensions. **Ideological polarization** concerns objective differences of opinion over public policy. **Affective polarization**, a more recent concept, is characterized by stronger emotional identification with one's own group and growing rejection of opposing groups. People can hold **relatively small differences on particular issues yet develop extremely high levels of distrust, hostility, or contempt toward members of the other group.**

This distinction shifts attention from the content of ideas to relationships among



ABOUT THE BOOK

Ezra Klein shows that polarization is less a dispute between opinions than a conflict among mutually reinforcing social, cultural, and political identities. When identities converge along an “us versus them” axis, disagreement becomes threat. Facts increasingly depend on recipients’ frames.

Brands function as cultural symbols and involuntary political actors. Dialogue is essential, and segmentation must not deepen divisions.

people. Conflict is no longer explained solely by programmatic disagreement but also by psychological, identity-based, and emotional mechanisms.

Political Science also contributes a crucial insight: polarization depends not only on the existence of differences, but on how parties, leaders, electoral systems, and the media institutionalize, represent, and amplify those differences.

The third migration: Social Psychology

Social Psychology began investigating a different phenomenon: **how individuals and groups construct, reinforce, and radicalize their own positions.**

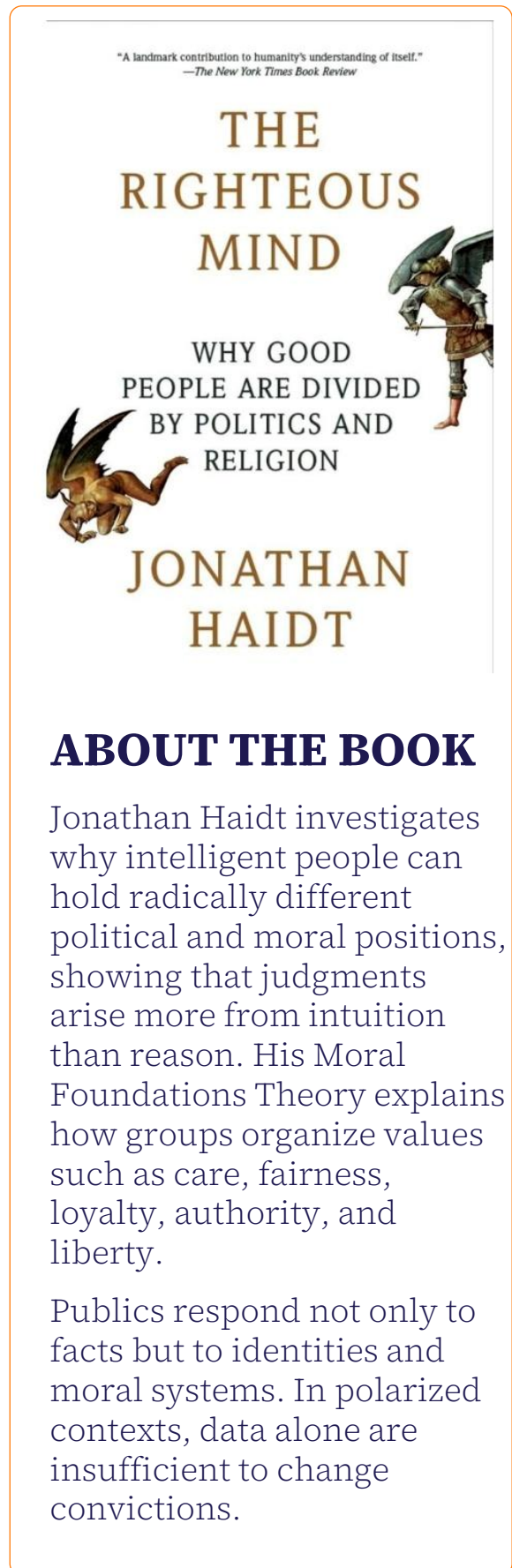
This shift was decisive. Polarization **was no longer merely a snapshot of differences within society; it came to be understood as a dynamic process through which beliefs, judgments, preferences, and collective identities shape human attitudes.** Rather than simply resulting from objective differences between people, it could emerge from group life itself.

Several research traditions contributed to this transformation. Studies of **conformity** showed

that individuals often adjust their behavior to meet group expectations. Research on **social identity** has shown that people tend to favor the groups to which they belong and to symbolically distinguish themselves from outgroups. Studies on **social influence** have revealed that discussions among individuals with similar opinions often result in positions that are even more extreme than those initially held.

Paradoxically, environments composed of relatively similar people do not tend toward balance but rather toward the reinforcement of shared convictions.

Interaction confirms beliefs, reduces doubts, and increases collective



ABOUT THE BOOK

Jonathan Haidt investigates why intelligent people can hold radically different political and moral positions, showing that judgments arise more from intuition than reason. His Moral Foundations Theory explains how groups organize values such as care, fairness, loyalty, authority, and liberty.

Publics respond not only to facts but to identities and moral systems. In polarized contexts, data alone are insufficient to change convictions.

confidence in one's own interpretation of reality.

This mechanism helps explain phenomena far beyond politics. Digital communities, professional groups, social movements, fandoms, religious communities, and investors can all develop similar patterns of identity reinforcement. Vaccination, climate change, immigration, diversity, religion, public safety, and civil rights rarely remain confined to rational argument once they become markers of collective identity.

The result may **be stronger echo chambers, selective sharing of information, the preemptive rejection of evidence, and growing difficulty in sustaining dialogue between communities that rely on different frameworks for interpreting reality.**

Social Psychology also introduced the **centrality of emotion**. Polarization is not exclusively the result of cognitive differences; it involves **belonging, self-esteem, recognition, threat, and the protection of collective identity**. Fear, indignation, resentment, pride, hope, and perceived threat play decisive roles.

The fourth migration: Sociology

Sociology asks how these processes transform the structure of collective life. Polarization is analyzed not only as individual or group behavior but as a **structural phenomenon capable of reorganizing the architecture of societies.**

The sociological perspective shifts attention from attitudes to systems of relationships. The issue is **less what each individual thinks than how networks of interaction, institutions, communities, and forms of belonging become progressively segmented.** Polarization thus approaches concepts such as social fragmentation, cultural differentiation, symbolic segregation, weakening social capital, and erosion of shared spaces.

Society is no longer seen as a relatively homogeneous group of citizens sharing similar references, but as a **mosaic of communities that develop their own cultural repertoires, languages, values, and interpretations.** Social class, religion, territory, profession, education, generation, ethnicity, gender, and culture have always produced distinctions, and historical processes such as urbanization, globalization, individualization, and digital expansion intensify

them.

The diversity of experience grows, but so does the possibility that **different groups share fewer common references**. Institutions that traditionally fostered integration—schools, unions, civic associations, political parties, mass media, local communities, and religious organizations—lose some of their capacity to produce common frames. In their place, smaller and more homogeneous communities multiply, often around specific identities.

The fifth migration: Communication

Where earlier research largely sought to explain differences among groups or social structures, Communication adds a new question: **how are these differences produced, narrated, amplified, and perceived?**

Polarization becomes a phenomenon of communication in its own right. **Attention shifts to the circulation of information, the framing of events, the formation of public agendas, and struggles over shared meaning.**

Different groups can consume profoundly different versions of the same events. Information

"A uniquely valuable and necessary book, an illuminating exploration of the digital frontier." — JIM MURPHY

The Constitution of Knowledge

A DEFENSE
OF TRUTH

Jonathan Rauch

ABOUT THE BOOK

Jonathan Rauch argues that democracies depend on an institutional architecture capable of producing, contesting, and validating reliable knowledge. Science, journalism, universities, and courts share norms sustaining this 'Constitution of Knowledge' now under pressure from social-media logic.

By privileging engagement, emotion, and identity, platforms weaken shared references to facts and increase polarization. Groups begin defending their own versions of reality.

no longer circulates predominantly in a linear model—from a few senders to many receivers— but through decentralized ecosystems in which millions of people simultaneously produce, distribute, reinterpret, and legitimize content.

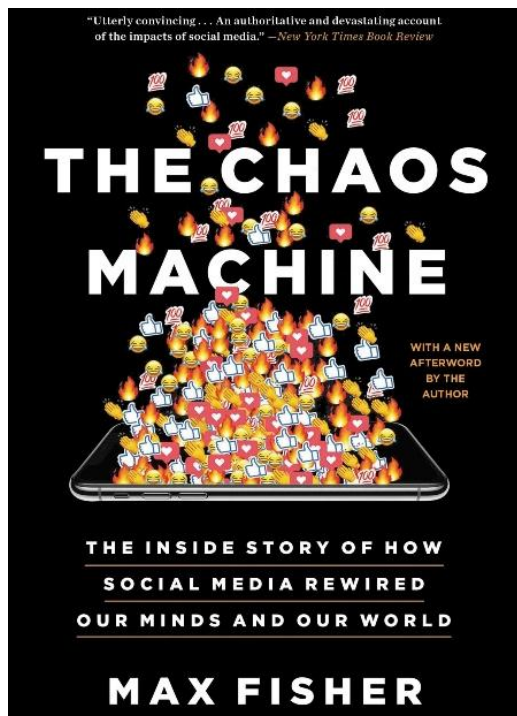
Polarization is **no longer only divergence of opinion but a permanent dispute over shared meaning.**

The facts may remain the same, but their interpretations do not. Polarization thus **depends not only on the distance between opinions, but on continuous struggles over narrative.**

Conflict increasingly concerns not the events themselves, but the meanings attached to them.

Recommendation algorithms, content personalization, influence networks, digital communities, and creator ecosystems organize information according to logics different from traditional mass media. **Communication shifts from a predominantly broadcast model to multiple simultaneous circuits of interpretation.**

It is no longer enough to understand who disagrees



ABOUT THE BOOK

Max Fisher shows how major

platforms' algorithms turned polarization into a mechanism for engagement and revenue. By privileging emotionally extreme content, networks amplify outrage, radicalization, disinformation, and political conflict regardless of ideology.

Evidence from Brazil, India, Myanmar, and the US reveals effects extending beyond the platforms: brands can become involuntary characters in culture wars, while crises spread within hours.

with whom. We must understand who produces narratives, who distributes them, who grants them legitimacy, and how different communication ecosystems construct distinct realities from the same event. Each group operates with different agendas, reference points, authorities, and criteria for deciding what is true, relevant, or legitimate. In this context, polarization entails the **fragmentation of the interpretive sphere**.

The sixth migration: Marketing

Over the last two decades, polarization has been



ABOUT THE BOOK

Havas Media Network

investigates relationships between people and brands through trust, utility, experience, and social relevance. The study shows the erosion of merely discursive purpose and growing demands for concrete, coherent action.

In polarized environments, consumers assess not only what brands say but the legitimacy of what they do.

The challenge is to build belonging without deepening divisions.

reshaped by the broader relationship between brands and society.

For much of the twentieth century, consumption was interpreted primarily as a functional or economic activity. Consumers were segmented by income, age, gender, geography, or life-cycle stage. Products were chosen for objective attributes such as price, quality, or performance. Research increasingly showed, however, that **consumption is also a form of symbolic expression**. Brands came to represent more than solutions to practical needs; they became **markers of identity, belonging, and cultural positioning**.

Polarization thereby acquired a new dimension.

Consumers choose not only products, but narratives, communities, and value systems.

Lifestyle, political positioning, corporate purpose, brand activism, diversity and sustainability agendas, social responsibility, technological innovation, and tradition all become especially relevant.

This also creates a new strategic dilemma: the more deeply a brand connects with particular audiences, the more identification it may generate—and the more rejection it may provoke among others.

Polarization becomes a structural feature of the

competitive environment, not only because it influences purchasing decisions but because it **changes expectations about organizations' social role**. Marketing expands the concept by showing that markets are also arenas of symbolic dispute, where consumer preferences often reflect cultural values, worldviews, and collective identities.

The seventh migration: Organization Studies

Organization Studies seeks to understand how organizations function, make decisions, build legitimacy, and relate to the audiences that influence their existence.

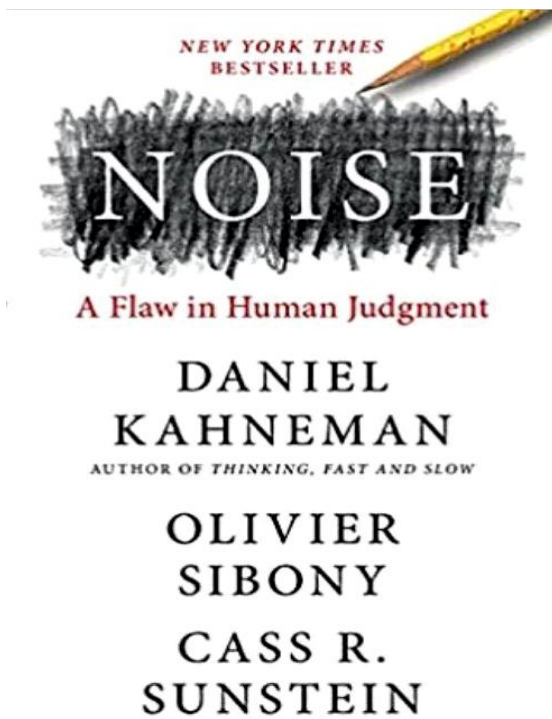
Companies, public institutions, universities, civil-society organizations, and other economic actors **now operate amid multiple, often contradictory expectations, continually reinterpreted by different audiences**. The same corporate decision may be viewed as responsible by one group, inadequate by another, and unacceptable by a third. Polarization now concerns **not only public debate but institutional governance**.

Polarization is no longer treated as an external

phenomenon belonging to politics or society; it becomes a **permanent condition of the institutional environment in which organizations operate**. It concerns the relationship between organizations and their stakeholders.

The new migrations: Economics and Anthropology

In Economics, polarization directs attention to the unequal distribution of resources, opportunities, and positions within productive systems.



ABOUT THE BOOK

Daniel Kahneman, Olivier

Sibony, and Cass Sunstein show that decisions are affected not only by bias but by 'noise': variability in judgments about similar situations. In organizations under pressure from polarization, inconsistency can produce contradictory responses, unstable criteria, and loss of trust.

Reputation depends on coherence among decisions, discourse, and behavior. Protocols, transparent criteria, and governance reduce improvisation and asymmetries in managing sensitive issues.

The object is material rather than symbolic.

Economists have historically used the term to describe increasing concentration of income, wealth, productivity, skills, or access to markets. More recently, it has explained structural changes in labor markets, especially the decline of middle-skill jobs alongside the simultaneous expansion of highly skilled and low-paid occupations—a phenomenon known as **occupational polarization**.

From this perspective, polarization is the **widening economic distance among social segments**. It may appear in income, wealth, productivity, education, technology, credit, consumption, or opportunities for social mobility. The basic economic hypothesis is straightforward: societies with highly concentrated resources tend to generate rising inequality. That inequality changes consumption patterns, expectations for the future, institutional trust, political behavior, and social relations.

This debate has gained importance with globalization, technological change, and economic digitalization. Automation, artificial intelligence, financialization, digital platforms, and the reorganization of global value chains have profoundly altered the distribution of

economic opportunity. Many authors argue that these changes intensify insecurity, perceived loss of mobility, and economic exclusion, **feeding subsequent political, cultural, and identity polarization.**

Among all the disciplines that adopted the concept, **Anthropology** may be furthest from treating conflict as its defining element. For anthropologists, societies have always produced differences. **Every culture establishes classifications, organizes symbolic boundaries, and distinguishes 'us' from 'others'.** Difference **is not an anomaly** but a fundamental condition of social life: cultures exist because they produce differences.

Polarization does not necessarily begin when groups disagree. It emerges when symbolic differences do more than classify reality and begin to structure belonging, recognition, and exclusion.

Anthropology also shows that no identity exists in isolation. **Every identity depends on constructing alterity, but this does not necessarily imply hostility.** When differences

organize moral hierarchies, struggles for recognition, or exclusion, however, symbolic boundaries become progressively more rigid. A Antropologia também demonstra que nenhuma identidade existe isoladamente.

Rituals, narratives, objects, clothing, food practices, linguistic expressions, art, and technologies act as cultural markers that enable mutual recognition within the same symbolic universe.

Summary of the conceptual migrations of 'polarization'

More than tracing the evolution of a word, this trajectory reveals the evolution of a way of interpreting reality.

Field of knowledge	Polarization as...	Predominant unit of analysis
Etymology	Orientation around poles	Language
Physics	Organization of systems around extremes	Physical phenomena
Political Science	Distance between ideological positions	Parties, voters, and institutions
Social Psychology	Intensification of attitudes and group identities	Individuals and groups
Sociology	Fragmentation of social structure	Communities and societies
Communication	Dispute over the construction of public meaning	Narratives and media ecosystems
Economics	Concentration and divergence of resources, income, and opportunities	Economic resources
Anthropology	Symbolic differentiation and production of alterity	Symbols
Marketing	Symbolic differentiation in consumption	Brands, consumers, and markets
Organization Studies	Reputational complexity and conflict of expectations	Organizations and stakeholders

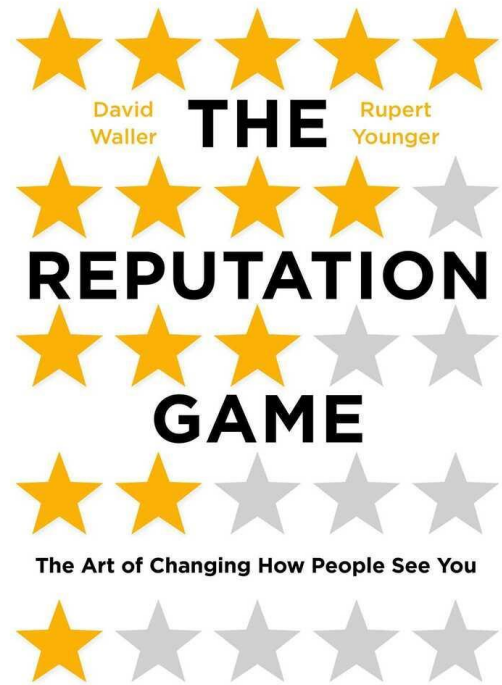
A POSSIBLE CONCEPTUAL REVISION: PAY ATTENTION TO '*MOVING* *STAKEHOLDERS*'

The classic concept of the '*stakeholder*' has become insufficient to explain contemporary flows of influence in hyperconnected and polarized societies. In its place, **the notion of '*moving stakeholders*'** emerges.

Over the last two decades, the strategic role of corporate communication has expanded significantly.

Communication is no longer simply a matter of delivering consistent messages; it also **requires organizations to interpret highly fragmented social contexts**. Practitioners must anticipate struggles over narrative, understand conflicts of values, recognize competing expectations, explain complex decisions to different audiences, and above all **build trust without assuming consensus**.

In the established literature on management, organizational communication, and strategy, the concept of



ABOUT THE BOOK

David Waller and Rupert Younger present reputation as a continuous contest for legitimacy. Organizations do not control public perception but participate in constructing it across multiple arenas.

In polarized environments, facts compete with narratives, frames, and interpretations produced by stakeholders.

Reputation is dynamic and systemic; organizations must rapidly interpret contextual change and sustain coherence.

the '*stakeholder*' became a cornerstone for understanding relationships between organizations and the groups around them. For decades, '*stakeholders*' were defined as individuals or groups able to affect or be affected by an organization's activities. Since R. Edward Freeman published '*Strategic Management: A Stakeholder Approach*' in 1984, the concept has become a central category of organizational theory.

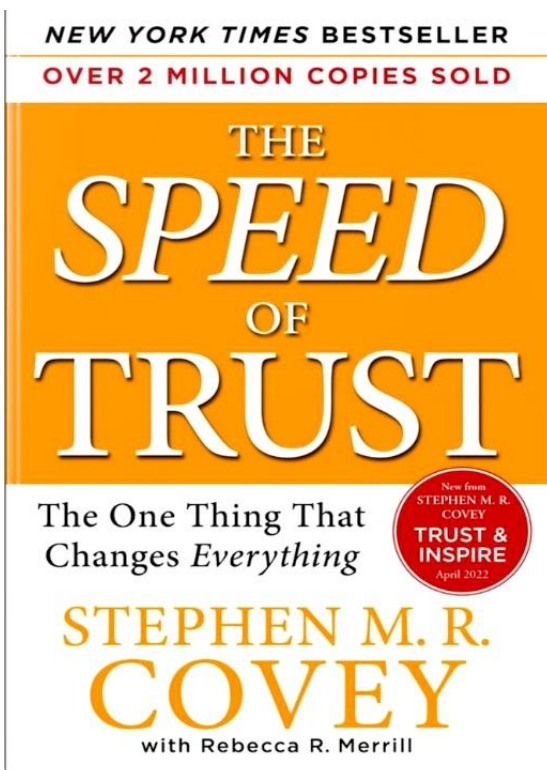
This formulation marked an important break with the traditional view of the firm as oriented exclusively toward shareholders. By recognizing that organizations are interdependent with employees, customers, suppliers, governments, communities, investors, civil-society organizations, and other relevant groups, Freeman **shifted the focus of management from economic efficiency alone to the management of relationships.**

Over the following decades, authors broadened this approach by incorporating legitimacy, rights, corporate responsibility, and shared value creation as fundamental dimensions of stakeholder management. The approach became a major reference for governance, corporate communication, and sustainability. Yet this

tradition rested on a relatively stable assumption: stakeholders could be identified as **reasonably well-defined, recognizable, and institutionally bounded categories**.

That definition remains valid but **is insufficient in the face of contemporary polarization**.

'Stakeholders' can no longer be understood only as relatively stable institutional categories. They organize through **fluid networks, coordinate temporarily, move among causes**, participate simultaneously in multiple communities, share



SOBRE O LIVRO

Stephen M. R. Covey treats

trust as an economic asset that reduces costs, accelerates decisions, and strengthens relationships. Transparency, coherence, accountability, and fulfilled commitments increase credibility and predictability.

Organizations with accumulated trust can withstand rapidly spreading controversies with less reputational damage.

Trust is not manufactured during a crisis; it is built daily.

content, produce narratives, mobilize reputations, and form ephemeral coalitions. They dissolve and reorganize while influencing one another.

The concept was developed in a historical context very different from the present one: social actors were relatively stable, their institutional positions more predictable, and flows of influence predominantly hierarchical.

The contemporary environment—marked by intense digital connectivity, social polarization, distributed activism, algorithmic networks, and fluid communities—challenges those assumptions. Categories commonly mapped as 'employees', 'suppliers', 'the press', 'activists', or 'customers' still exist, but no longer fully explain how influence operates.

Mobilization can emerge within hours from a digital community with no formal representation; a social movement can bring consumers, employees, investors, experts, journalists, and activists together around a shared narrative, dissolving traditional boundaries between stakeholder groups.

In other words, **influence is produced not only by the actor but also by the relational field in which the actor is embedded.**

Journal of
Professional Communication **jpc**

An interview with Dr. Paulo Nassar, president of the Brazilian Association of Business Communication (ABERJE)

Terence (Terry) Flynn*

McMaster University, Hamilton (Canada)

ARTICLE INFO

Article Type:

Interview

Article History:

Received: 2015-01-04

Revised: 2015-02-15

Accepted: 2015-02-28

Keywords:

Paulo Nassar

ABERJE

Brazil

Public relations

Future of public relations

ABSTRACT

In October 2014, the Journal of Professional Communication's senior associate editor, Dr. Terry Flynn, APR, FCPRS, sat down with the Dr. Paulo Nassar, the president of the Brazilian Association of Business Communication (ABERJE), professor of public relations at the University of Sao Paulo, and 2012 recipient of the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) 'Atlas Award for Lifetime Achievement in International Public Relations,' to discuss his thoughts on the current state of the profession in Brazil and his hopes for its future. Nassar discusses his background as journalist and a teacher. He discusses the importance of the publication of his first book to his professional development. Nassar also discusses how developing links between ABERJE and the academic research and teaching communities was a key factor in establishing its validity and credibility as an organization. He finishes by sharing his thoughts on the key skills for success in the rapidly developing practice of professional communication.

©Journal of Professional Communication, all rights reserved.

ABOUT THE ARTICLE

In Terry Flynn's interview, Paulo Nassar argues that digitalization gives rise to 'moveholders'—groups with shifting, fluid identities embedded in digitally mediated environments. Communication becomes fundamentally relational and multidisciplinary, requiring an understanding of different political, social, and behavioral perspectives. Communication professionals become brokers of relationships among moving stakeholders, seeking to foster and sustain dialogue in societies marked by disagreement.

This perspective connects directly with Paulo Nassar's **concept of 'moveholders'** (short for 'moving stakeholders'), discussed, for example, in an interview conducted by Terry Flynn for a 2014 issue of the *Journal of Professional Communication*. Flynn is currently an associate professor of Communications Management in the Department of Communication and Multimedia Studies at McMaster University in Canada. He was selected by ABERJE for a fellowship in 2014 to study the intersection of the Brazilian and North American markets.

For Nassar, **organizations interact not only with fixed stakeholder groups, but with individuals**

and collectives in motion, whose capacity to mobilize derives less from their institutional position than from their ability to connect causes, networks, and flows of

communication. The concept extends classical stakeholder theory by recognizing that influence is increasingly exercised by **mobile, connected actors organized around specific agendas** rather than permanent structures.

As Nassar—President of Aberje and a full professor at the University of São Paulo’s School of Communications and Arts—argues, they are not necessarily permanent or formally organized groups. They emerge around particular causes, issues, or controversies; use digital networks to shape debates and narratives; exert reputational pressure on companies and institutions; and connect political, social, technological, and behavioral dimensions.

The same individual may simultaneously be a consumer, employee, investor, environmental activist, community leader, and content producer. Behavior in each situation is shaped not only by institutional position but by the **interpretive field through which the person assigns meaning to an organization’s decisions.**

Inspired by Pierre Bourdieu’s tradition of social fields, though applied to a distinct organizational

THE INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLER

'WILL HELP YOU INSPIRE TEAMS TO
DO THE BEST WORK OF THEIR LIVES'
SHERYL SANDBERG

RADICAL CANDOR

HOW TO GET WHAT
YOU WANT BY SAYING
WHAT YOU MEAN

KIM SCOTT

ABOUT THE BOOK

Kim Scott proposes leadership combining genuine care with a willingness to address difficult conversations honestly. In polarized contexts, avoiding conflict can amplify rumors, misunderstanding, and internal distrust.

Transparency, active listening, and clear feedback reduce tension and create more consistent relationships.

External reputation also depends on the quality of internal dialogue.

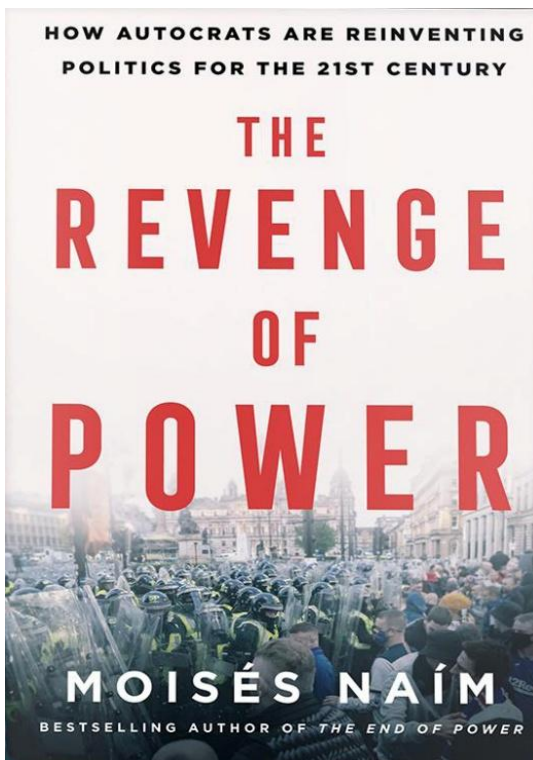
context, the notion shifts the unit of analysis from the actor to the ecosystem of relationships.

Polarization reorganizes alliances, redefines identities, and accelerates the formation of temporary coalitions. 'Stakeholders' can no longer be treated as stable categories; they form **dynamic configurations that emerge, expand, reconfigure, and disappear as events unfold and narratives compete.**

Polarization therefore **turns 'stakeholders' into 'moveholders' operating within dynamic fields of influence.** While the traditional concept

identifies who matters to an organization, the idea of moving stakeholders helps explain how value systems, narratives, interests, identities, and expectations shape the interpretation of corporate decisions across multiple, mutually influential roles.

Strategic communication therefore moves beyond managing lists of priority stakeholders. It requires continuous attention to the fields of influence in which reputations are built, contested, and renegotiated.



ABOUT THE BOOK

Moisés Naím analyzes how

institutional fragmentation and the rise of populist leaders, extremist movements, digital platforms, and new economic actors made power more distributed and unpredictable.

Small, highly mobilized groups can create disproportionate impacts and turn political disputes into reputational crises.

Reputation therefore depends on institutional resilience, scenario analysis, and adaptability amid symbolic conflict and accelerated change.

POLARIZATION IN BRAZIL

Brazilian polarization exists, is strong, and has institutional, social, and economic consequences. Yet it should not be read as though the entire country were divided into two perfectly coherent blocs.

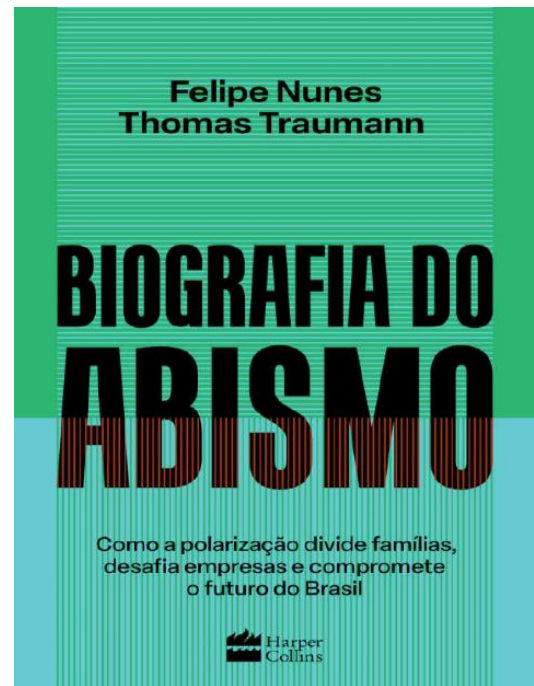
When polarization takes shape in an unequal, plural, and connected society marked by competing forms of belonging, considerable methodological care is required. Explanatory models developed for other societies may inform an analysis of Brazil, **but should not simply be imported as though polarization were uniform across countries.**

The word is the same; the historical, social, economic, cultural, and communication environments in which it operates are not. Polarization in Brazil must be understood in light of the country's social formation, inequalities, identities, institutions, political culture, and increasingly its distinctive communication ecology.

This is not to claim the existence of a uniquely Brazilian form of polarization. It is to recognize that **global phenomena—political, identity-based, moral, cultural, technological, and affective polarization—are absorbed and reshaped by Brazil's specific conditions.** The resulting configuration overlays ideological differences with historical inequalities and divisions of culture, religion, race, territory, class, gender, generation, consumption habits, and trust in institutions.

The **first distinctive feature** is precisely this overlap. In Brazil, **the political dimension is difficult to separate completely from other dimensions of social life**. A political position may simultaneously operate as a moral, religious, cultural, and identity marker. A consumer preference can likewise acquire political or cultural meaning. A product, public figure, platform, or brand may be judged not only by what it offers, but as a signal of belonging.

This is especially important for corporate communication. A brand may believe it is communicating about a product, while some



ABOUT THE BOOK

Felipe Nunes and Thomas Traumann show how electoral preferences became social and affective identities, reducing willingness to engage or revise positions. Informational bubbles feed the phenomenon as people seek content confirming their beliefs and reject dissenting information.

Politics becomes a marker of belonging. This rigidity compromises Brazil's capacity for dialogue, cooperation, and responses to economic and social problems.

groups read the same message as a statement about values, behavior, or identity. Commercial communication can be drawn into interpretive frameworks that extend far beyond its original purpose.

Fragmentation does not necessarily mean isolation. People may be intensely connected while increasingly tied to specific communities with their own lenses. Connectivity grows; convergence does not necessarily follow.

Polarization should therefore not be analyzed solely as the distance between two poles. In Brazil, it is often **better understood as an overlap of differences that may be activated at the same time.** Two people may disagree politically while sharing a profession, religion, cultural preference, region, sports team, consumer experience, or digital community. **The poles are not necessarily homogeneous** social blocs; multiple cross-cutting ties run through them.

The methodological implication is crucial: **no one should be assumed to belong wholly to a single field of polarization.** The same person may move through several fields over the course of a day—as a consumer, professional, sports fan, member of a

religious community, or participant in an online political discussion. Different identities come to the fore in different contexts.

This makes the notion of '*moving stakeholders*' particularly relevant. **In Brazil, mapping only 'stakeholders' may produce an excessively static picture.** What matters is understanding the fields through which people move, the ties they establish, the narratives they share, and the actors capable of mobilizing them.

Inequality is another defining feature of the Brazilian context. Any analysis of polarization



ABOUT THE BOOK

More in Common investigates

Brazilian polarization and identifies a weakly mobilized, nonpolarized majority—the 'Invisible'. Yet affective polarization advances as identities of left and right become more intense and exclusionary. Culture wars increase antagonism and narrow the space for consensus, while polarization relates to eroding institutional trust.

The challenge is to recognize a pragmatic, heterogeneous majority responsive to narratives centered on common problems.

must take account of income, education, access to opportunity, race, territory, and historical inequality. **The same organizational decision may be perceived in radically different ways depending on the social position from which it is viewed.** This helps explain **the emotional intensity of some debates**: public conflict is not always about abstract ideas, but often about **material experience, recognition, belonging, and perceptions of justice.**

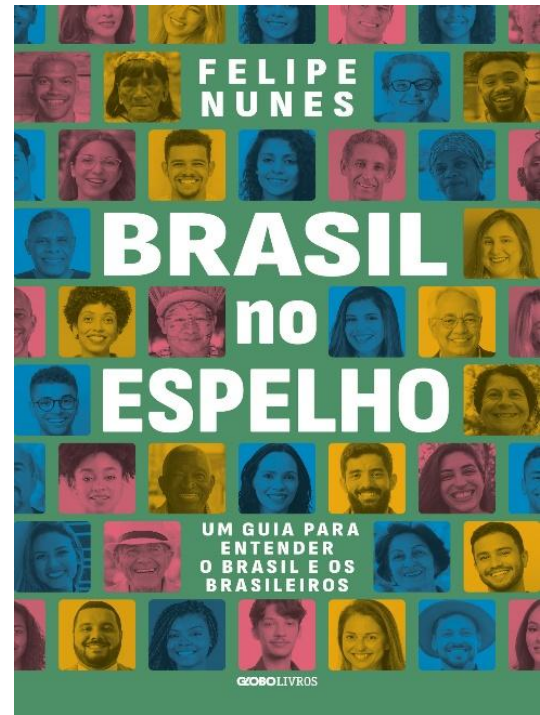
Brazil also **combines formal institutions with informal systems of trust.** For some people, a public institution, company, or news outlet is a legitimate source of information. For others, trust lies with relatives, community leaders, influencers, digital groups, experts, or proximity networks. Organizations cannot assume that institutional authority will automatically be recognized. **Reputation must travel across different systems of legitimacy.**

Brazil should not be analyzed as a polarized society in the singular, but as a **society composed of multiple overlapping polarizations.** It also has a **historical tradition of coexistence amid differences that should not be confused with the absence of conflict.**

Brazilian society has often developed informal mechanisms of negotiation, adaptation, humor, ambiguity, and everyday coexistence among different people. These may reduce some forms of overt conflict without eliminating profound differences.

Brazil therefore offers a particularly revealing **case of polarization as a relational, contextual, historical, and multidimensional phenomenon.**

Several propositions follow.



ABOUT THE BOOK

Felipe Nunes portrays Brazil through nine identity segments, revealing a society far more complex and contradictory than a binary left-right division.

Polarization nevertheless organizes perceptions and behavior, leading groups to interpret economic and social facts according to political beliefs.

Informational bubbles and social networks facilitate distorted views of reality and the circulation of false information.

1

POLITICS CEASED TO BE ONLY A CHOICE AND BECAME AN IDENTITY

Partisan polarization has hardened into something more rigid: political calcification. The central point is not merely that opposing political camps disagree, but **that political allegiance increasingly organizes belonging, trust, rejection, and social interaction**. Voters no longer compare only programs, performance, or proposals; **political choice becomes part of their social identity**. An election may end when the results are announced, but political identity continues to operate in everyday life, shaping worldviews, attitudes toward institutions, and interpersonal relationships.

2

CALCIFICATION AND ITS MECHANISMS

Calcification results from three combined processes. First, distance grows between groups while internal similarity grows within them. **Political currents organize increasingly coherent opinions** not only on the economy but on customs, institutions, media, science, the pandemic, firearms, the Supreme Court, voting machines, and education.

Second, interests give way to values and identity: **economics** does not disappear, but **becomes relatively less important** than competing worldviews.

Third, the **two camps remain electorally competitive**. Because each believes it can win the next election, there are few incentives to defect. This reinforces insularity: **each side tends to imagine that its view is predominant, legitimate, and morally superior**.

3

THE COMMUNICATION ECOSYSTEM REFLECTS AND ORGANIZES POLARIZATION

Communication provides part of the infrastructure through which polarization operates. Citizens seek **sources that confirm prior beliefs and reject dissonant information.**

The result is growing **informational insularity**: people interact almost exclusively with individuals and channels that reinforce their worldview and sustain continuous mobilization. Distrust of the media is not limited to one group. Major news outlets face significant distrust across social segments, though it is stronger among conservatives; at the same time, social media are widely seen as breeding grounds for false information. The issue is not simply that 'one side believes the media and the other believes social networks', but a **broader erosion of trust in the information environment.**

4

POLARIZATION SPILLS INTO FAMILY, WORK, SCHOOL, CONSUMPTION, AND BRANDS

Polarization extends beyond elections and begins to **shape social interaction, consumption, and reputation**. Lists of banks, retailers, gyms, restaurants, media networks, and other companies to boycott have circulated in both camps, showing that **polarization increases reputation-related transaction costs**.

Companies no longer compete only on price, quality, and distribution; they operate in a market where political signals, even indirect ones, can affect trust, preference, boycott behavior, and willingness to buy.

Political alignment may deepen engagement for niche brands, but for mass-market brands it can reduce the addressable market and increase reputational risk.

5

THE COUNTRY IS NOT SIMPLY BINARY

Brazil is **more contradictory than ideological**. It combines moral conservatism, religiosity, the centrality of family, low interpersonal trust, punitive attitudes, state support for social protection, esteem for merit, and strong national pride. The labels 'left' and 'right' have become highly salient, but do not always correspond to coherent doctrines. A citizen may be conservative on customs, statist on social protection, meritocratic in individual discourse, and pragmatic in evaluating performance. This **rejects the simplistic idea of two irreconcilable blocs**.

Recent sociopolitical studies instead suggest six groups: Militant Progressives, Traditional Left, Disengaged, Cautious, Traditional Conservatives, and Indignant Patriots. Polarization is strongest at the edges, while an 'invisible' majority is more pragmatic, less engaged, conflict-averse, and concerned with work, public services, and safety.

6

CONSENSUS IS FRAGILE WHEN GIVEN A POLITICAL IDENTITY

'Invisible Brazil' identifies shared concern about climate, national pride, a desire for cooperation across parties, and distrust of elites. It also finds basic consensus on issues such as equality between men and women, even though identity-laden terminology prompts rejection outside the left.

The problem is that **many consensuses unravel when associated with particular actors, symbols, or identities**. The environment may be consensual; 'NGOs' and 'agribusiness' may polarize. Equality may be accepted; 'feminism' may divide. Safety may unite; 'human rights' may trigger rejection.

For communication, **the substantive content of an agenda is often less divisive than the identity framing used to present it.**

LOOKING AT 'MODERATION'

The reputational challenge in polarized environments is not simply deciding whether a brand should take a position. It is **preserving conviction, dialogue, and pluralism without turning purpose into intransigence.**

Drawing on the distinction among moderation, affective polarization, and extremism, a **brief conversation with Diogo Schelp** offers parameters for thinking about authenticity, relationships with dissenting stakeholders, the limits of dialogue, and institutional responsibility.

Starting from the idea that **moderation is neither lack of conviction nor weakness but an active form of resistance to extremism**, his most recent book – '*Neither Communist nor Fascist: A Guide to Resistance for Moderates*' - distinguishes ideological from affective or tribal polarization and discusses **how aversion to others can replace debate over ideas**.

He spoke with CEAEC's team to contribute to this publication.



WHO IS DIOGO SCHELP ?

He is a journalist, author, and holds a master's degree in International Relations from the University of São Paulo. His career has focused on political and international journalism. He is editor of

VEJA NEGÓCIOS and a columnist for Estadão. He has been a columnist for UOL and Gazeta do Povo, a political commentator on Rádio Eldorado and Jovem Pan News, and executive editor of VEJA. He hosted Mundo Livre and wrote the blog A Boa e Velha Reportagem at Veja.com. His books include '*Correspondente de Guerra*' and '*No Teto do Mundo*'. In 2025, Edições 70 published '*Nem Comunista, Nem Fascista: Guia de Resistência para Moderados*'.

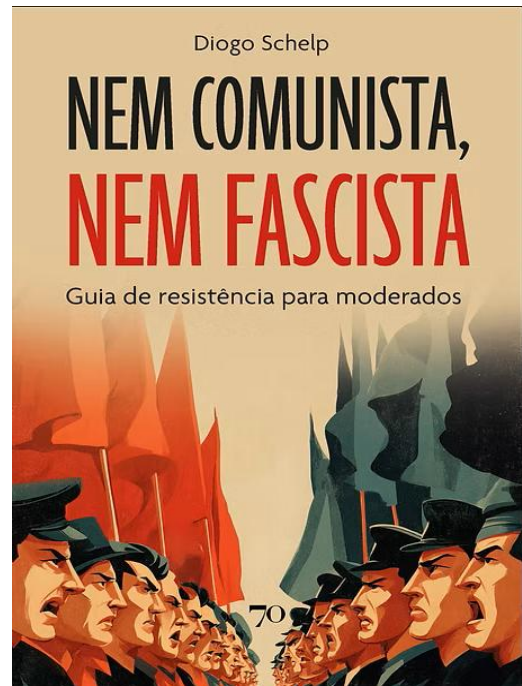
<https://www.diogoschelp.com.br>

CEAEC - Diogo, your book presents moderation not as “neutrality” or lack of opinion, but as a firm position and even a form of “resistance.” Communication professionals managing corporate reputation face growing pressure to “take sides” on social and political issues. How can your definition of moderation help an organization decide between building a narrative of authenticity that is not mistaken for omission or fence-sitting and presenting itself as an “activist brand”?

DIOGO - Moderation is not synonymous with omission. I insist on this point in the book: saying that a moderate has no position is a contradiction in terms because moderation is itself a political position—and one of the most demanding, since it requires a rational and dispassionate assessment of each issue rather than simple adherence to a package of dogmas from one side or the other. An organization can establish clear values and defend them with conviction. The problem begins when that defense restricts other people’s freedom or the free debate of ideas; at that point, conviction becomes intransigence and activism. The line between an authentic and an activist brand lies precisely there: how far can you defend what you believe without trying to silence those who think differently?

CEAEC - You distinguish “ideological polarization” (based on programs and ideas) from “affective or tribal polarization” (based on aversion to the other). In crisis management, how should communicators adapt their strategies when the public is no longer debating facts or products but reacting from a group identity that sees the company as an ideological “enemy”?

DIOGO - This question concerns the difference between ideological and affective polarization. The former is the classic division between left and right, involving programs and ideas. Affective, or tribal, polarization combines



ABOUT THE BOOK

Diogo Schelp begins with an analysis of political polarization as an environment of conflict that reduces the space for nuance, dialogue, and rational assessment, turning moderation into a political stance under pressure. The book argues that the decisive conflict should not be understood solely as one between the left and the right, but rather as one between extremism and the principles of democratic coexistence, such as pluralism, freedom, and respect for institutions.

strong identification with intense aversion toward the opposing side, seen as an enemy; discussion ceases to be programmatic and becomes identity-based. I use Brexit as an example of a country that moved from traditional partisan polarization to a tribal setting that, curiously, did not dissolve after the referendum. When a company becomes a target of this reaction, data and rational arguments achieve little because fanaticism tends to reinterpret every defense as proof that the company is 'on the wrong side'. What works is reducing dehumanization, understanding that the public is reacting through group belonging, and refusing the game of 'us versus them'.

CEAEC - One of the book's most thought-provoking passages describes how moderates make both extremes uncomfortable and are attacked as "communists" by one side and "fascists" by the other. How can a brand seeking relevance through multistakeholder listening and dialogue survive this crossfire without losing clarity about its institutional purpose?

DIOGO - This is almost a law of the physics of polarization. I write that the same moderate opinion is often called communist by some and fascist by others, even though most people using

those terms as insults do not know what they actually mean. In a polarized society, the extremes do not exist alone; they resemble concave mirrors reflecting inverted images of each other. Anything in the middle disrupts the game. A brand should not seek automatic approval from either side. The antidote is the political moderate's toolkit: willingness to engage in dialogue, humility to accept that the other group may be right on some point, and constructive skepticism toward partisan truths. It also requires clarity of institutional purpose, which cannot be negotiated merely to please whoever shouts the loudest.

CEAEC - In the book, you state that extremism is characterized by the obsessive pursuit of ideological purity and the dehumanization of opponents. From the perspective of business and organizational culture, what warning signs indicate that an “institutional narrative” is becoming radicalized or losing the ability to engage with difference, placing the social license to operate at risk?

DIOGO - I describe three traits common to extremists of every side: believing humanity can be 'corrected' and that powerful forces conspire against those who possess the truth; obsessively

seeking ideological purity; and aspiring to glory or peer recognition. I also cite political scientist James Piazza's study linking affective polarization to political violence through the demonization of opponents, moral superiority that turns everything into a zero-sum game, and easy mobilization by leaders. Within a company, the warning signs are similar: treating dissenting stakeholders as moral adversaries rather than legitimate interlocutors, rigid alignment with an agenda that leaves no room for nuance, and an internal sense of moral superiority that blocks self-criticism. These are opposing faces of intolerance: the woke culture of the left and the politically incorrect culture of the right.

CEAEC - You devote a chapter to “How to Debate Radicals” applied to stakeholder engagement, what should an institution do when the interlocutor—whether a pressure group, union, or digital movement—rejects the constitutional order and democratic dialogue in favor of accelerated and disruptive change?

DIOGO - It is worth engaging even with people at the extremes. The path is to draw them toward perspectives they can otherwise see only through the distorting lenses of their group's dogmas. But I adopt political scientist Cas Mudde's fundamental

distinction: radicals accept the procedural character of democracy and submit to elections, even when testing the system's limits; true extremists reject popular sovereignty through voting and the constitutional order itself. Negotiation with a radical—a union or digital movement with hard demands—remains possible within the rules of the game. But when an interlocutor openly rejects those rules, my position is clear: concede nothing that compromises institutional foundations. Moderation is not complacency; dialogue cannot justify complicity with violence or institutional rupture.

CEAEC - Diogo, you argue that extremism ultimately rejects democracy and its institutions. Since business stability depends on a functioning democratic environment, what proactive role should large corporations play in spreading narratives that promote moderation as an ethical value in the public interest?

DIOGO - Every form of extremism—right or left—converges in rejecting liberal democracy and its institutions. Preserving democracy, freedom, and pluralism depends on moderates resisting contemporary fanaticism. This applies to citizens and companies alike. I treat digital technologies

as a 'new political force' requiring checks and balances so they do not threaten democracy, and the same reasoning applies to any corporation large enough to influence public debate. These companies should proactively foster a culture of dialogue, intellectual humility, and constructive skepticism—not as empty neutrality, but as a real antidote to radicalism, preventing tunnel vision from dominating both the internal environment and the company's relationship with society. Business stability ultimately depends on a functioning democratic environment, which does not sustain itself: people and organizations must be willing to defend it.

DETECTED SHIFTS

Recent **trend reports** have anticipated numerous **findings directly related to social polarization**. They converge on one conclusion: contemporary polarization is not only political but a phenomenon of cognitive, emotional, and identity fragmentation.

In an environment shaped by “*Reality Shift*”, “*Truth Literacy*”, “*Brand Bastions*”, “*Brand Democracies*” and the other developments described below,

corporate communication is moving from a discipline centered on crafting narratives to one concerned with managing interpretation.

The competitive advantage of brands will lie not in persuading everyone, but in **maintaining coherence and legitimacy while engaging audiences that rely on different belief systems and cultural reference points.**

The most resilient organizations will move beyond a campaign-based approach toward **continuous reputational governance**. This means anticipating possible scenarios, mapping cultural tensions before they become crises, understanding the dynamics of digital communities, and treating trust as a measurable strategic asset.

On the following pages, take a look at some signs and what they might mean in the near future, given this baseline scenario.

***Curated Connection* - more intentional, selective, and meaningful connections in response to information overload and digital hyperconnectivity**

“Consumers are tired of algorithmic feeds and seek more intentional and human connections”.



Core insight

Closed communities are growing on WhatsApp, Discord, Telegram, Substack, Reddit, private groups, and proprietary spaces.

Communication impact

Public opinion increasingly takes shape in small, relatively closed groups rather than in a genuinely public arena.

[Little Book of Trends 2025 – Momentum Worldwide](#)

Reality Shift - each group lives in its own reality

“New realities do not function only as escapism. They help people construct a reality that makes sense amid polarization, distortion, and uncertainty. People create versions of the world that provide emotional coherence, even when not shared by everyone”.



Core insight

Society is divided not only by competing opinions, but by competing versions of reality.

Communication impact

A campaign or initiative will not be interpreted uniformly.

Communities, algorithms, influencers, the press, political groups, and fan communities will reinterpret it before the company can explain its position.

Future 100, 2025 - VML

Humble Branding – a time for restrained, listening-oriented communication

“Brands must balance resonance with restraint. In difficult times, an excessive desire to take center stage can provoke rejection”.



Core insight

The era of performative purpose is ending. The era of humility, consistency, evidence, and transparency is beginning.

Communication impact

Communication prioritizes evidence, authenticity, and dialogue over self-promotion, focusing on consistency between words and actions.

Future 100, 2025 - VML

Fandom Economy - fan communities are social behavior, not merely entertainment

“Fans do not merely consume content. They reinterpret it, recreate it, and expand its cultural relevance”.



Core insight

Political groups now operate like fan communities. Sports teams, organizations and their brands, celebrities, influencers, and movements all compete through belonging.

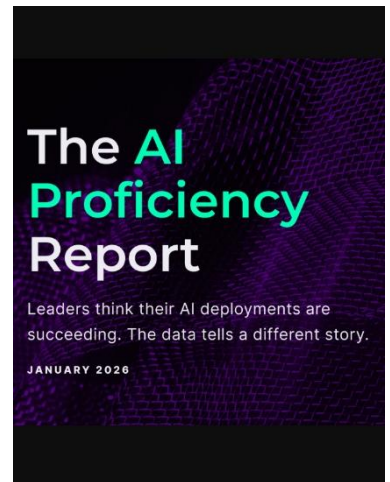
Communication impact

Communication should strengthen communities and belonging, encouraging active participation rather than reach alone.

Culture & Trends 2026 - YouTube

AI + Perception Gap - major misalignment between leaders and employees concerning AI

“A perception gap exists between leadership’s strategic vision and employees’ operational reality”.



Core insight

The same applies to reputation.
Every crisis begins inside before
reaching the outside.

Communication impact

Active listening and expectation
alignment are essential. Reputation
is strengthened when AI adoption is
communicated clearly, ethically,
and with people at the center.

AI at Work: perception gap - Section

Truth Literacy –the critical ability to read disinformation and seek truth

“In an environment where AI, algorithms, and synthetic content multiply, developing truth literacy becomes a critical social capability”.



Core insight

Corporate communication’s role shifts from “communicating” to “building trust”.

Communication impact

Reputation competes with disinformation, decontextualized excerpts, memes, generative AI, and deepfakes.

[Future 100, 2026 - VML](#)

Algospeak – adapting language to circumvent moderation and recommendation algorithms

“People adapt their language to evade algorithms, avoid punishment, reduce attacks, and circulate in digital environments”.



Core insight

Public debate is not always transparent; it is encoded. Brands must learn to listen beyond words.

Communication impact

Platform rules shape language, digital culture, and brands' reputation-building strategies.

[Future 100, 2026 - VML](#)

Brand Bastions – brands providing stability, predictability, and clear values in an unstable world

“Brands become bastions of emotional stability and trust amid cultural instability”.



Core insight

Brands once wanted admiration; now they need to be predictable, trustworthy, and coherent.

Communication impact

Communication should reinforce consistency, transparency, and continuity through verifiable values and practices over time.

[Future 100, 2026 - VML](#)

Brand Democracies - brands turn consumers into active participants, sharing power, decisions, and narrative construction



“Consumers want to participate in building brands and influencing their decisions”.

Core insight

Greater participation brings greater conflict: more voices and expectations mean more disputes.

Communication impact

Communication should adopt participation, listening, and co-creation. Reputation grows stronger when stakeholders are genuinely involved.

[Future 100, 2026 - VML](#)

Social Health - people seek relationships that protect emotional health

“The strength of our relationships and our sense of community are recognized as vital components of health”.



Core insight

People abandon companies, leaders, brands, media, and individuals that increase stress.

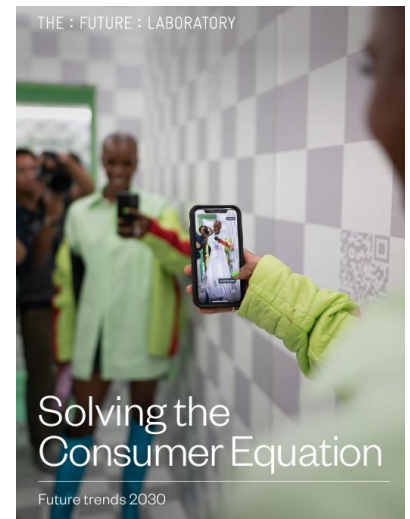
Communication impact

The aim should be interactions that strengthen collective well-being, trust, and relationship quality.

Future 100, 2026 - VML

Consumer Equation - balancing functional value, emotional impact, alignment with personal values, and trust

“Consumers are no longer passive buyers; they are active participants in shaping brands”.



Core insight

Reputation is co-created, not controlled.

Communication impact

Coherence among the organization's value proposition, actions, and public expectations is firmly on the agenda.

[Afterpay 2030: Solving the Consumer Equation - The Future Laboratory](#)

PATHS FOR FURTHER EXPLORATION

This broad, **interdisciplinary subject warrants robust bibliographic curation**. The recommendations below—most already mentioned above—are organized into **thematic modules** reflecting the interaction among these domains.

Psychological and cognitive layer

how individuals think, judge, and radicalize

- HAIDT, Jonathan. **The righteous mind**: why good people are divided by politics and religion. New York: Pantheon Books, 2012
Psychological foundations of polarization and intuitive morality.
- RAUCH, Jonathan. **The Constitution of Knowledge**: a defense of truth. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2021.
The crisis of truth and institutional trust.
- FISHER, Max. **The chaos machine**: the inside story of how social media rewired our minds and our world. New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2022.
Digital platforms and the amplification of social conflict.
- KAHNEMAN, Daniel; SIBONY, Olivier; SUNSTEIN, Cass R. **Noise**: a flaw in human judgment. New York: Little, Brown Spark, 2021.
Governance, inconsistent decisions, and organizational judgment.

Institutional and social-perception layer

trust, culture, trends, and the future

- EDELMAN TRUST INSTITUTE. **2026 Edelman Trust Barometer**: global report. New York: Edelman Trust Institute, 2026.
Global trends in trust, legitimacy, and institutional reputation.
- HAVAS MEDIA NETWORK. **Meaningful Brands™ 2025 Global Report**: Dynamic Adaptability – The New Imperative for Brand Growth. [S. l.]: Havas Media Network, 2025.
Purpose, social utility, and brand legitimacy.
- IPSOS. **Ipsos Global Trends 2025**: The Uneasy Decade – Reshaping Society, Technology and the Global Economy. [S. l.]: Ipsos, 2025.
Global cultural change, social anxiety, and perceptions of the future.
- VML INTELLIGENCE. **The Future 100**: 2026. [S. l.]: VML, 2026.
Global foresight on behavior, culture, and communication.

Digital and political structural layer

platforms, power, and the attention economy

- KLEIN, Ezra. **Why we're polarized**. New York: Avid Reader Press, 2020.
Polarization as the convergence of political, cultural, and social identity.
- NAÍM, Moisés. **The revenge of power**: how autocrats are reinventing politics for the 21st century. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2022.
Institutional fragmentation and highly mobilized actors.
- ZUBOFF, Shoshana. **The age of surveillance capitalism**: the fight for a human future at the new frontier of power. New York: PublicAffairs, 2019.
Data economics, behavioral manipulation, and digital-platform power.

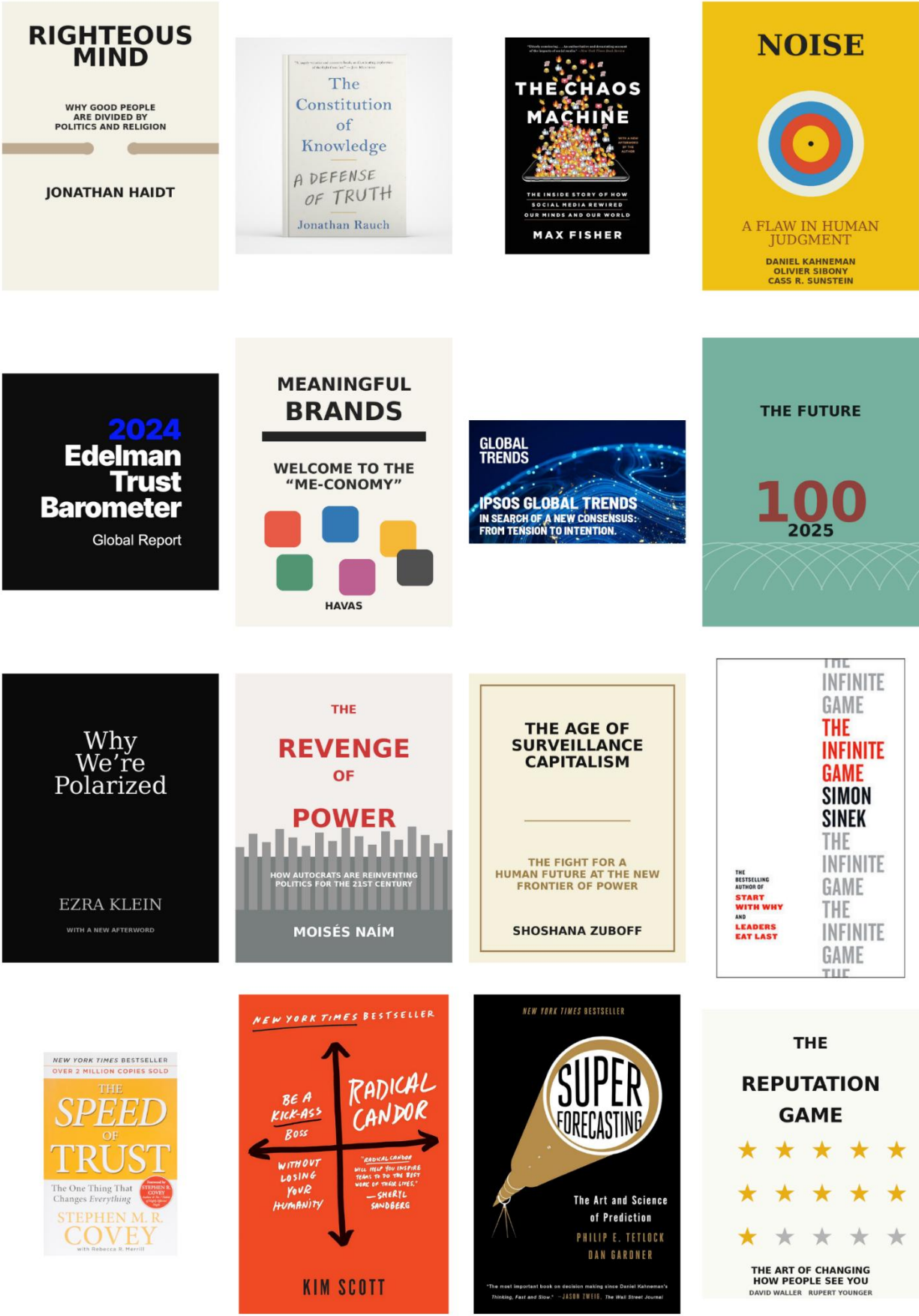
Systemic reputational layer

- WALLER, David; YOUNGER, Rupert. **The reputation game**: the art of changing how people see you. London: Oneworld Publications, 2017.
Reputation as a dynamic system of narrative dispute and social legitimacy.

Organizational and strategic layer

leadership, trust, decisions, and internal culture

- SINEK, Simon. **The infinite game**. New York: Portfolio, 2019.
Reputation as a long-term construction based on purpose and coherence.
- COVEY, Stephen M. R. **The speed of trust**: the one thing that changes everything. New York: Free Press, 2006.
Trust as an economic asset and institutional accelerator.
- SCOTT, Kim. **Radical candor**: be a kick-ass boss without losing your humanity. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2017.
Organizational culture, feedback, and internal coherence as foundations of external reputation.



CRITICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Polarization has emerged as part of the **cognitive infrastructure of contemporary life**. It is no longer confined to particular political, cultural, or social debates; it increasingly **shapes the conditions under which reality is interpreted**.

Societies are not permanently divided into two groups. What is happening is more specific: **differences, conflicts, and struggles over meaning increasingly structure the ways in which individuals, groups, and institutions interpret events, decisions, and positions.**

In this sense, polarization forms part of the cognitive infrastructure through which organizational decisions are interpreted in **polycentric, hyperconnected societies marked by continuing struggles over meaning.**

DECISION-MAKING — An organization makes decisions: it launches a product, acquires another company, changes its workplace policies, invests in a particular region, supports a cause, revises its environmental strategy, adopts artificial intelligence, or simply remains silent in the face of an event. Yet it does not control the meanings that different audiences will attach to those choices. A decision is observed, framed, compared with past experience, evaluated against values, associated with identities, narrated by different actors, and reinterpreted in different settings.

Different perspectives advance their own versions of the truth and may absorb organizational

decisions into pre-existing symbols and narratives. Strategic communication often seeks to encourage a particular interpretation and designs its arguments, sources, channels, and timing accordingly. Yet it cannot succeed without first understanding the interpretive environment in which the message will be received.

ENVIRONMENT — Contemporary society is polycentric. Interpretations can be produced, contested, and legitimized from multiple centers; authority no longer rests only with newspapers, television and radio broadcasters, universities, governments, political parties, religious institutions, and large organizations. Influencers, digital communities, independent researchers, content creators, consumers, employees, social movements, platforms, experts, local communities, and organized groups also produce narratives capable of reaching large audiences.

Society is hyperconnected: events, interpretations, and reactions circulate at unprecedented speed and scale. A decision made inside an organization may be discussed by employees, taken up by consumers, reinterpreted by influencers, turned into a news story, absorbed into political communities, and eventually brought to the attention of investors or regulators. Boundaries have become more permeable, calling

into question familiar distinctions between internal and external, local and global, consumer and citizen, employee and activist, expert and influencer, company and society. This fluidity helps explain why static stakeholder models struggle to account for the current environment.

INFRASTRUCTURE — The term is used here as an analytical metaphor for the structures that shape the conditions under which interpretation occurs. Infrastructure normally goes unnoticed when it works. In this case, it consists of repertoires, categories, narratives, identities, reference points, and mechanisms of attention that act as filters, conditioning how events can be perceived and interpreted.

Contemporary organizations make decisions in societies where multiple centers of meaning-making are continuously connected and where structures of polarization shape the interpretation of events. Understanding an organizational decision therefore requires knowing not only what the organization decided, but also the interpretive fields in which that decision will be received, contested, amplified, and transformed.

Contemporary polarization should be understood not only as a consequence of social, political, or

cultural conflict, but also as part of the cognitive infrastructure of public life: **a dynamic set of differences, identities, narratives, emotions, and reference points that shape the interpretation of events and reorganize relationships between organizations and their fields of influence.**

CREDITS

Mapa is an intelligence project that performs content analysis and proposes ways to consolidate knowledge sources of interest to the Aberje network.

Produced by the **Center for Economic Studies and Analyses Applied to Communication.**

Executive Production: **Leonardo Müller**, Chief Economist at Aberje and Professor at PPGEco-UFABC

Coordination and Editorial Production: **Rodrigo Cogo**, Master in Communication Sciences and Trend's Specialist at CEAEC

Aberje - Brazilian Association for Business Communication

Board: **Paulo Nassar**, President-Director of Aberje and Full Professor at ECA-USP; **Hamilton dos Santos**, Executive Director of Aberje

Copyright © 2026 by ABERJE. All rights to this publication are reserved to ABERJE. Duplication or reproduction in whole or in part, by any means, is prohibited without express authorization.

Use of Artificial Intelligence Tools: this report was prepared with the support of ChatGPT 5 and Gemini 3.6 Flash for some of the synthesis and organization tasks, between July and August 2026.

ABOUT ABERJE

Aberje - the Brazilian Association for Business Communication - is a nonprofit, nonpartisan professional and scientific organization. Its main objectives are to strengthen the role of communication in companies and institutions, offer training and career development to professionals in the function, and produce and disseminate knowledge in communication.

Founded in 1967, the association develops research, strategic studies, and publications; offers courses through the Aberje School of Communication and training events; promotes knowledge exchange among members; and recognizes the field's best practices and professionals.

ABOUT CEAEC

CEAEC (Center for Economic Studies and Analyses Applied to Communication) was created by Aberje in 2023 to deepen its scientific mission and strengthen the communication field through robust economic analysis and data.

To ensure the excellence and relevance of its research, Aberje established a strategic partnership with FGV Comunicação Rio. The collaboration seeks to integrate knowledge from communication and economics, producing valuable insights for the market.

CEAEC's main objective is to provide data, studies, and analysis that support communication professionals in the strategic and budgetary management of their areas. Our commitment is to offer accurate and relevant information that supports decision-making and promotes effectiveness in corporate communication.

