

# *COMMUNICATION INSIGHTS*

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# BEING CLOSE(D)

How community management on closed media channels contributes to social capital



**ACADEMIC SOCIETY**  
FOR MANAGEMENT & COMMUNICATION

An initiative of the Günter Thiele Foundation

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>KEY FINDINGS</b> .....	04
<b>SOCIAL CAPITAL THROUGH COMMUNITY MANAGEMENT</b> .....	06
Why relationships matter	
<b>ANALYZING CLOSED MEDIA CHANNELS</b> .....	08
Different channels, different barriers	
<b>CHARACTERISTICS OF CLOSED MEDIA CHANNELS</b> .....	11
Structural, relational, and communicative aspects	
<b>THE POTENTIAL OF CLOSED MEDIA CHANNELS FOR BUSINESSES</b> .....	14
Opportunities and risks for companies	
<b>LESSONS LEARNED</b> .....	17
<b>REFERENCES &amp; FURTHER READING</b> .....	18
<b>THE ACADEMIC SOCIETY FOR MANAGEMENT &amp; COMMUNICATION</b> .....	19

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# EDITORIAL



*» Intimate, productive, and less negative participation – we were surprised to see this part of closed communications. «*

Digital networks are constantly changing the way we communicate with each other, yet also how we communicate with companies and other organizations. As a response to the challenge of social media, community management has become a significant corporate communications practice.

Community management can be understood as a result-oriented attempt to control and coordinate (primarily virtual) communities through communication processes. However, users have recently been withdrawing from traditional public platforms and begun using semi-public or non-public channels known as closed media channels.

The terms “closed media” and “closed communications” are often associated with a general retreat into the private sphere. The Communications Trend Radar 2022 predicted that this development would change communications profoundly (Stieglitz et al., 2022). What we can see is that practitioners are worried about losing contact with their stakeholders. We therefore investigated how companies are coping with this change and are using their own closed media channels.

This publication by the University of Münster examines corporate closed media channels and their influence on organizational value creation through social capital. By analyzing these channels used by Germany’s Top 50 most valuable brands and eight

interviews with experts, we gained insights into how channels with barriers to entry can create advantages in innovation, market research, and cost efficiency for corporations. Our analysis showed that 21 of these 50 companies used at least one closed media channel. However, implementing these channels involves a few challenges that will also be addressed here.

Surprisingly, we observed a special form of togetherness on these platforms. It seems that being closed can result in more closeness and less dark participation, and thus represent a real opportunity for digital community management.

We’d like to thank the Academic Society for Management & Communication for making this research project possible. Special thanks are due to Christine Viertmann and Johanna Manka for their invaluable support.

We hope to have shed some light on a rather under-explored trend in communications. Even in times of social retreat, we saw a longing for connection that can be managed by corporate communications.

**Prof. Ulrike Röttger**  
Professor of Communications  
University of Münster



## KEY FINDINGS

*A one-year research project at the University of Münster showed how improving community management through the use of closed media channels could be considered a real opportunity for corporate communications departments.*

### COMMUNITY MANAGEMENT – A NECESSITY OR A WASTE OF RESOURCES?

Community management can be defined as “the nurturing of an audience, all of whom share a common interest” (Fabretti, 2015). In the context of corporate communications community management can be described as a result-oriented attempt to control and coordinate (primarily virtual) communities through communication processes. Nearly every corporate communications department has implemented some form of community management through digital communication by implementing processes for managing communities inside and outside the virtual space. Since users are able to produce communication at any time, community management is quite high-maintenance while the resulting value is rather vague. Furthermore, digital community management is complicated by hate speech, trolls, and negative comments. Is it thus just an expensive, time-consuming measure with very little outcome?

### CLOSED MEDIA CHANNELS – AN OPPORTUNITY FOR COMMUNITY MANAGEMENT

We define closed media channels as communication arenas “that are only accessible to selected individuals or groups” (Stieglitz et al., 2022, p. 12). Communication

on closed media channels appears to be more intimate, productive, and attract less negative participation. Closed media channels can strengthen social capital (p. 6) and so create advantages for digital community management in three respects (pp. 14–15):

- Doing market research, for example by requesting feedback about (new) products
- Driving innovation, for example by asking users about product ideas
- Decreasing opportunity costs by having users answer support questions

The results of our study indicate that closed media channels offer a new opportunity to dispel the negative aspects of community management while strengthening its positive aspects (pp. 11-13).

### CHALLENGES

Nevertheless, the implementation of closed media channels entails a few challenges. First of all, the right channel combined with the right access restriction needs to be found. Then, the desired users need to be persuaded to join and furthermore engage on

the channel. Corporate communications practitioners therefore need to create and maintain an environment that addresses these challenges by adequately **moderating** communication. Moreover, a **clear strategy** regarding why and how to engage on such platforms is key (pp. 16–17).

## RESEARCH DESIGN

The research was conducted by Ulrike Röttger and Lennart Rettler at the University of Münster. The research design included two steps:

### 1 Analysis of the closed media channels used by Germany's top 50 brands

To get an overview of who used what kind of closed media channel and identify possible interviewees, we considered the top **50 most valuable German brands of 2021** (Bowman, 2022). We looked for references to closed media channels on the company's websites as well as on social media channels by means of search engine searches and listings websites. We only looked at channels where interaction between users was possible, thus leaving out closed media channels such as messenger services where communication is only carried out by the company. We focused on **external communication channels** as well as chan-

nels in either English or German, and included only those channels that clearly indicated that they'd been set up by the company itself.

### 2 Semi-structured interviews with eight professionals responsible for a closed media channel

**Eight interviews** were conducted virtually in June and July 2022. Interviewees were selected who were involved in building and/or moderating a closed media channel used for external communications. The channels had to be active when the interviews took place to ensure that all the participants were able to share genuine expertise. The interviews covered the following aspects:

- The **types of closed media channels** chosen as well as the access restrictions used
- The **company's objectives** by using the channel
- The **role of the interviewee** and their colleagues in managing communication on the channel
- **Evaluation** of communication by the channel's users
- **Factors of success** for such channels
- **Opportunities and risks** of using the channel

## Selection of companies participating in this study



*Eight semi-structured interviews with experts responsible for closed media channels were conducted by the University of Münster.*

# SOCIAL CAPITAL THROUGH COMMUNITY MANAGEMENT

## WHY RELATIONSHIPS MATTER

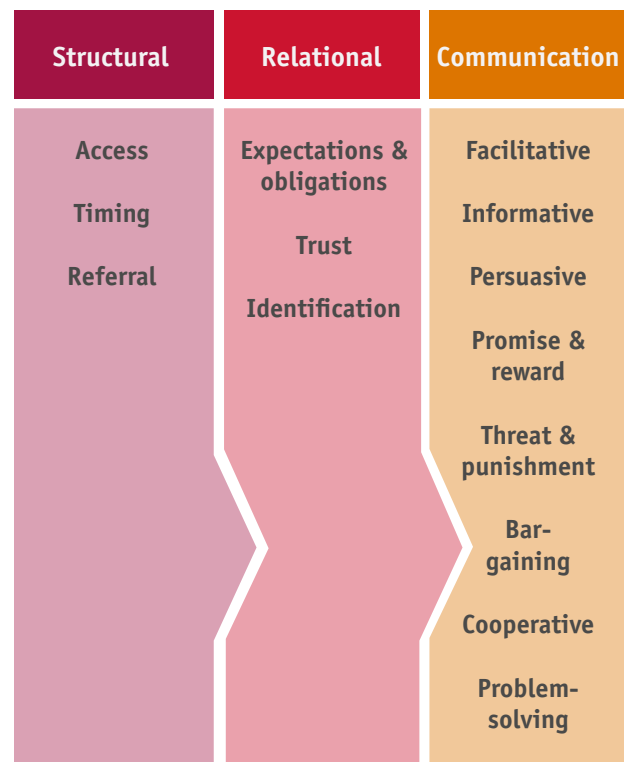
As a management function, corporate communications contributes to an organization’s strategic goals (Zerfass & Viertmann, 2017). Communication professionals often emphasize their contribution to intangible assets, such as legitimacy, trust, and identification. All these resources are part of a larger construct: relationships. Community management can be seen as a new way of managing relationships. One way of measuring the management of relationships is through the concept of social capital (Dodd, 2016).

## WHY COMPANIES NEED SOCIAL CAPITAL

Social capital deals with the outcomes and dynamics of social relationships. It can be described as the “ability companies have to create, maintain, and use relationships to achieve organizational goals” (Hazleton & Tydings, 2021). Social capital is a resource that can ultimately contribute to corporations’ value creation. As presented in the following figure, social capital can be divided into three different dimensions that build on each other (Hazleton & Tydings 2021).

- The **communication dimension** indicates what measures of communication the actors use, and how these measures may influence the relationships.

Three dimensions of social capital according to Hazleton & Tydings (2021)



## EVALUATING SOCIAL CAPITAL

- The **structural dimension** indicates how actors are positioned in certain networks or relationships, and how these networks are structured. The structure showcases the extent to which the actors are able to access different parts of the network (**access**), how fast they can access those parts (**timing**), and to what extent they’re able to reach out to other parts outside the network (**referral**).
- The **relational dimension** showcases the **expectations and obligations** shared by users and corporations, the level of **trust** users have in a company, and how much they **identify** with a company or the related community.



## COMMUNITY MANAGEMENT

Community management can be a productive way to manage (digital) relationships and thus create social capital. It has the potential to improve one's **position in a network**, secures **frequency** and **speed**

in **creating dialogue**, reaches out to **new users**, and focuses on **collaborative communication** with users (Karmasin & Weder, 2014).

### Four advantages of community management



**Better positioning within the network**  
by identifying important users to interact with



**More dialog options**  
by asking questions and engaging users



**Higher reach of new users**  
by creating visibility through commenting and liking



**Collaborative communication**  
by integrating user-generated content



- **Social capital** can be described as the “ability companies have to create, maintain, and use relationships to achieve organizational goals” (Hazleton & Tydings, 2021).
- **Community management** organizes the digital communication between a company and its stakeholders. Furthermore, it orchestrates the communication among stakeholders within specific communication arenas of the company.

# ANALYZING CLOSED MEDIA CHANNELS

## DIFFERENT CHANNELS, DIFFERENT BARRIERS

The research design included two steps: (1) analysis of closed media channels used by Germany's top 50 brands and (2) semi-structured expert interviews with eight professionals responsible for a closed media channel.

### A SPECIFIC COMMUNICATION ARENA

Closed media channels are characterized by barriers to entry which, once passed, grant **specific access** to **one specific** communication arena. Users are only able to experience the full communication if they pass the barrier to entry. These entry barriers are a significant part of closed media channels. They enable the exclu-

sion of certain users, lead to lower user figures, and make it possible to generate communication somewhere **between the private and the public sphere**. There are different forms of closed media channels and different forms of barriers to entry. Depending on the channel or barrier chosen, the closeness of channels differs.



**Closed media channels** are communication arenas with restricted access or barriers to entry. In contrast to other platforms, restricted access admits users to one specific communication arena.

### SOCIAL MEDIA VS. CLOSED MEDIA CHANNELS

Registered Facebook users can see all content posted by any company in the world on its Facebook pages. Facebook is therefore not a closed media channel because, even though general access to the platform is restricted (users must sign up to participate), once past this barrier to entry, users have access to millions of communication arenas. Nevertheless, there are communication arenas on Facebook where a specific barrier has to be passed in order to be granted access to certain communication, namely closed groups.

Communication arenas on social media platforms are beset by risks, such as having to deal with hate speech, trolls, or simply unfruitful communication. In our study, we found that the main difference between closed media and social media channels is that closed media channels attract a certain segment of users with whom communication appears to be more positive and productive. This can create many advantages – not only for corporations, but for stakeholders as well.

» Firstly, discussions about closed media channels are limited to a specific topic. So, already, there is a sort of very specific focus segment. This alone attracts a particular audience. And the audiences that feel engaged in a topic are generally found to be a bit more respectful, a bit more curious, or a bit more willing to share. I see some basic differences in WHO is part of these communities, HOW they communicate, and what value they take from them. Yes, there is definitely a difference to traditional social media. «

Clyde Araujo, Head of Global eCRM, Henkel





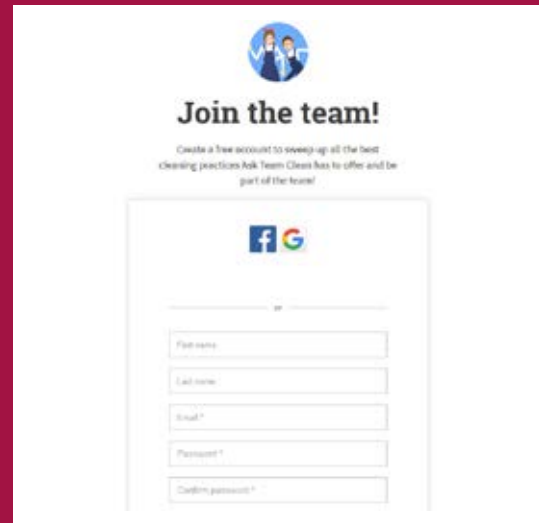
## THREE TYPES OF CLOSED MEDIA CHANNELS

Our analysis of the top 50 most valuable German brands of 2021 according to Bowman (2022) identified three different types of closed media channels for external communication on which users could interact with each other: (1) own-domain channels, (2) closed groups on open platforms, and (3) third-party channels.

### 1 Own-domain channels

Own-domain channels are communication platforms situated on a specific, company-owned website – perhaps a subdomain of the company’s general website or a specific, independent domain. To access such a platform, users need to sign up. In some cases, they need to prove that they are a customer of the company, for example, by entering their customer number.

One such channel is Ask Team Clean run by the German company Henkel, where users can receive and discuss cleaning tips. Exclusive discounts are also available.

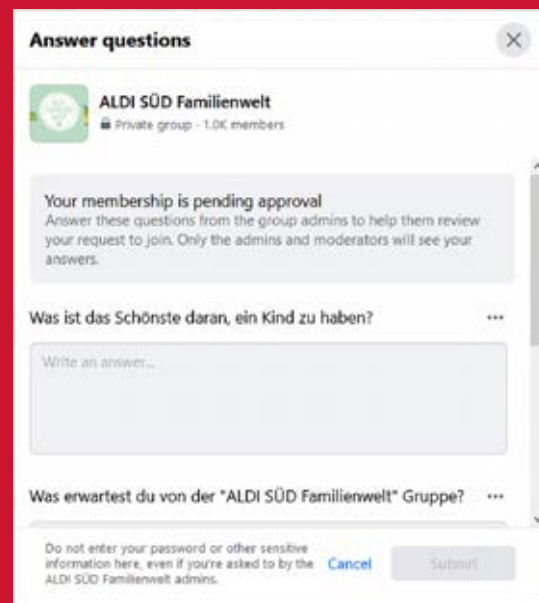


Screenshot of Ask Team Clean by Henkel

### 2 Closed groups on open platforms

The second type refers to closed groups on open platforms. These groups can be found on Facebook, LinkedIn, and similar platforms. While access to the platform itself requires general registration, the groups have an additional barrier to entry. A prospective user needs to send a membership request to the group admins. Usually, this application requires additional action, such as answering questions posed by the admins such as “Why do you want to join the group?” or “Have you read the terms of service?”

ALDI SÜD runs a closed Facebook group aimed at parents. To join, users need to answer three questions (e.g., “What’s the most beautiful thing about having a child?”) and are then normally granted access.

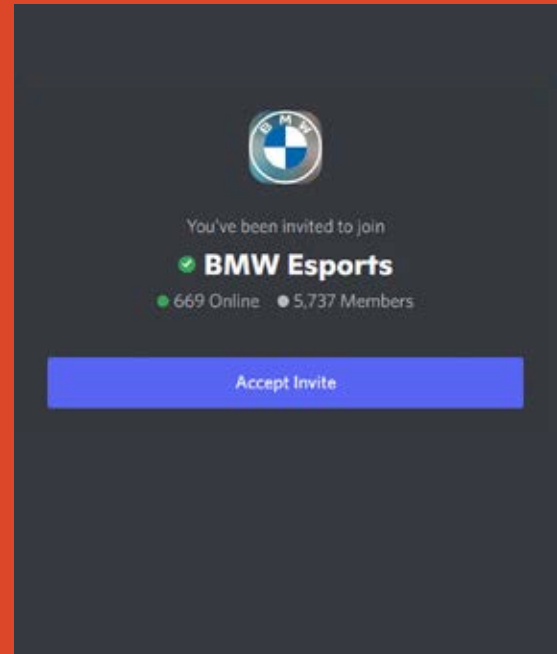


Screenshot of ALDI SÜD Familienwelt

### 3 Third-party-channels

The last type is third-party-channels. Those are channels or servers on platforms dedicated to creating a closed environment. On these platforms, various closed media channels are clustered without original content. Two typical platforms are Slack and Discord. While Slack is mostly used in internal communications, some companies use a Discord server for external communications as well. To join a certain channel, users need a specific invite link, which can often be found on the company's website or social media channels. On top of that, companies can add additional barriers to entry, such as being at least ten minutes on Discord or verifying one's telephone number before being able to interact.

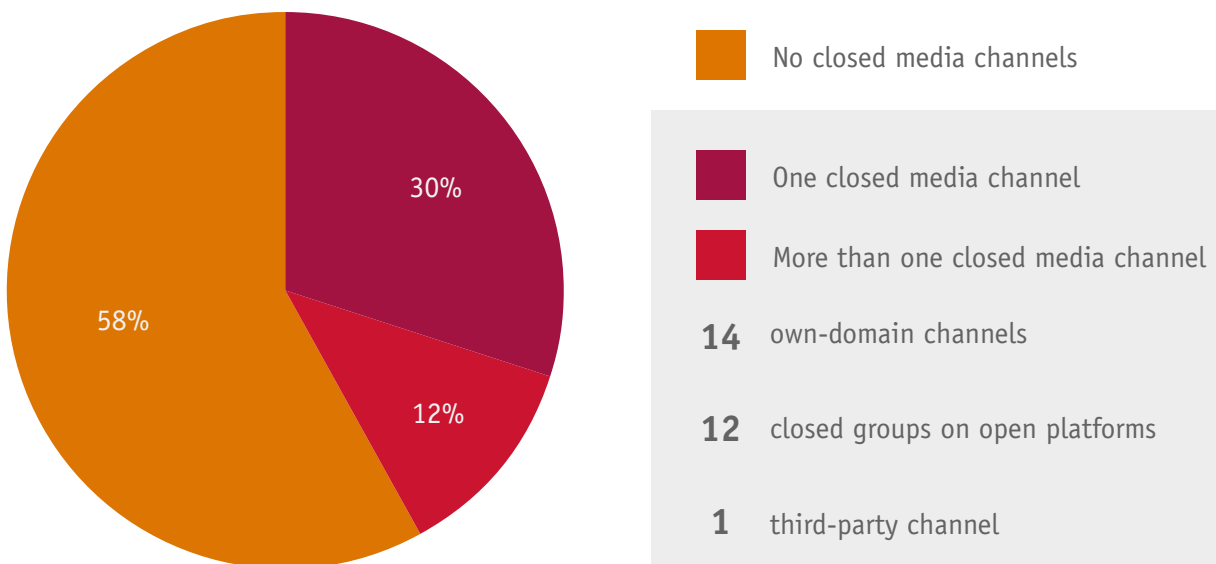
BMW uses a server on Discord for the external communication of its eSports department. By clicking the invite link on its website, users can join the server.



Screenshot of BMW Esports by BMW

## WHO USES WHICH TYPE OF CHANNEL?

Our analysis showed that **21** of the top **50** companies used at least one closed media channel, with **six** using more than one channel. We found **27** channels in total, of which **18** at least partly used German.



Companies using closed media channels in this study (n = 50)

# CHARACTERISTICS OF CLOSED MEDIA CHANNELS

## STRUCTURAL ASPECTS



The research team identified specific characteristics of closed media channels. This chapter will shed light on (1) structural, (2) relational and (3) communicative aspects of community management on closed media channels.

Closed media channels have a **specific structure** that changes the options and routines of communication. Although there are of course differences between the various channels and among companies, generally speaking, the interviewees stated that the channels granted them more **direct, closer access** to users.

Regarding timing, the channels enable **swift and ongoing** communication between users and the company. However, this fast-paced communication puts stress on employees responsible for managing the channels. They sometimes feel pressure to respond rapidly even outside working hours.

## RELATIONAL ASPECTS

The structural conditions enable the creation of a special atmosphere which influences the expectations and communicative behavior of users. In most cases, users are willing to discuss and communicate with their peers. Thus, communication appears to be very **productive, appreciative, supportive, positive and open**.

Most participants state that they experience the communication to be way **more positive than on traditional social media channels**. This may also be due to the fact that on closed media channels, instances of dark participation (Winterlin et al., 2020) such as

In structural terms, perhaps the biggest problem is reaching out to potential users to encourage them to join a channel (**referrals**). As the channel is closed, non-registered users are unlikely to notice it. Companies **cannot benefit from network effects** typically produced on social media sites. Similarly, many people may not want or be able to pass the barrier to entry. Accordingly, attracting new members is a constant struggle.

» *We use the channel to be close to customers, to have direct access to them.* «

*All quotes are by interviewees.*

trolling, bullying, criticizing or insulting appear to be very rare. The entry barrier lowers the likelihood of such communication happening on a large scale.

Many interviewees stated that users had high levels of **identification, interest and involvement** with the company and its products. Sometimes, the communities on closed media channels act as a mirror of real-life communities in digital space. To achieve such high levels of identification, communication professionals need to be empathetic listeners and storytellers within their community.



## COMMUNICATIVE ASPECTS

### COOPERATION WANTED

According to the interviewees, corporate communication on closed media channels is usually **facilitative**. Users engage in stimulating conversations and often help each other. Companies must be open to engaging in dialogue and in **cooperative problem-solving (collaboration) exercises**. Many interviewees stated that they created output by asking users for cooperation. Forms of collaboration include:

- Asking for and integrating feedback
- Working on rules and guidelines together

- Collecting and creating ideas together
- Communicating on an equal level

According to one interviewee, collaboration enables highly involved customers to evolve from a **value-receiving recipient** to a **value creating partner**. Since the users are usually very active and are intended to be integrated into a reciprocal process, companies should avoid **one-sided persuasive communication** on these channels.



» Because who, if not the customers, know best what moves them, what excites them, or what they'd like to see in the future? Only through this approach can something be created that's completely tailored to the needs of the customers. And I think that a closed media channel is the ideal place for this to happen. «

Isabelle Schütz, Community Manager, Allianz



## A SPECIAL FORM OF “TOGETHERNESS”

Some participants directly referred to users as fans. Others mentioned a good group spirit or a sense of community among the users. One company even includes customers as voluntary moderators on the channels. One interviewee called the channel a living room or even something of a home for the users.

*» I would say it's something like an exemplary togetherness, something which scarcely occurs on social media. «*

### RESPECT OUR “NETIQUETTE”

All the interviewees highlighted the importance of having **good moderation and clear guidelines**. Inappropriate communication behavior must be defined and **sanctioned** by the deletion of posts or ultimately exclusion from the group. To offer good moderation, the companies use:

- Guidelines, rules, ideals, “netiquette”
- Automated moderation flows that flag up potential unwanted keywords
- An option for other users to report unwanted behavior
- Prior approval of user posts

### GENTLE MODERATORS AND GROUP DYNAMICS

It's important that moderation isn't experienced as too limiting, as this may discourage users from engaging (Stieglitz, 2009). Guidelines need to be built

on a strong foundation to broaden their acceptance. With this in mind, it's a good idea to compile guidelines together with the community.

Alongside explicit rules, communities tend to independently establish **implicit rules** based on which users coordinate their own behavior and call out those who break them. One interviewee even mentioned a user who acted as an unofficial **sheriff** by always keeping an eye on other users.

In addition to moderation, companies often strengthen users' willingness to communicate, for example through **promise or reward** (Ziegele & Heinbach, 2021). Enabling measures used by the study participants include free gifts for (very active) users and reacting to posts and comments by giving them a “like” or commenting favorably on them.

*» I react to everything that's posted there to show that posts are seen and read. It gives users a bit of encouragement and perhaps emboldens others. «*



# THE POTENTIAL OF CLOSED MEDIA CHANNELS FOR BUSINESSES

## THREE OPPORTUNITIES FOR COMPANIES

*Building on the interviewees' statements, three major advantages emerge from using closed media channels and thus generate more social capital: market research, driving innovation, and decreasing (opportunity) costs. These three advantages make an impact on the productivity of a company, ultimately leading to value creation. In contrast, the experts also mentioned three major risks: lack of purpose, lack of registrations and lack of interaction on closed media channels.*

### DOING MARKET RESEARCH

Many interviewees stated that they benefit from the closed media channels by using them as a tool for market research. In fact, some channels are primarily created for this purpose. Companies can actively ask how products or measures are perceived by the customers or silently “listen” to what users have to say about the company and its products. Closed media channels perfectly match what Macnamara (2015) labels as an architecture of listening. Further, closed media channels offer a way to get unfiltered, emotional and also continuous feedback. In comparison to traditional social media channels, the inter-

viewees state that users are more likely to give their honest opinion because they feel less observed.

### DRIVING INNOVATION

According to the participants, closed media channels are perfect for creating new ideas or improving old ones by integrating customers into the innovation process. Products and measures can be designed according to their requirements. As stated above, primarily highly involved users will very likely be active on these channels. These users may know the company and the products best, and can thus give the best feedback for improvements.

Further, these users may give answers, assistance, or recommendations in areas least expected by the company, as stated by one interviewee. Other examples of innovation are sharing code, product improvement, or suggesting new ways in which products can be used. The demand to create innovation through such channels is also reflected in many of the domain channels' names, such as Republic of innovators by E.ON, Future shaper [Zukunftsgestalter] by Allianz, Idea factory [Ideenschmiede] by Telekom, etc.

## DECREASING (OPPORTUNITY) COSTS

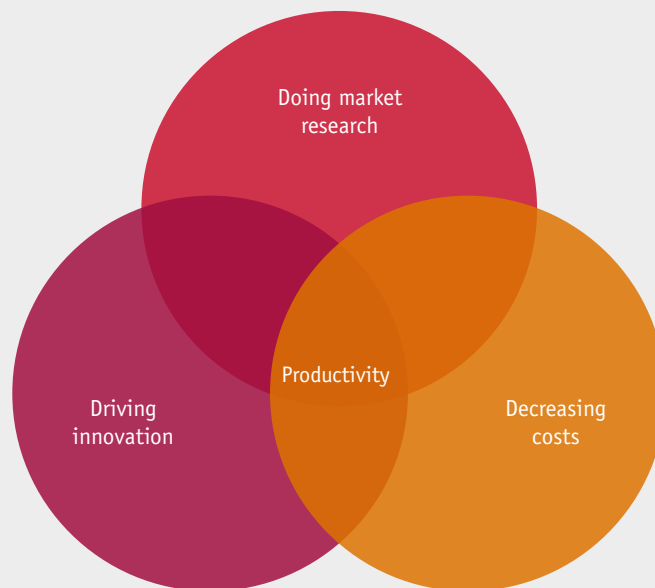
Closed media channels can help to **save costs** arising during value creation. As mentioned by the interviewees, the level of dark participation (trolls, bots, and hypercritical users) is found to be rather low, and so the time it wastes can be put to better use, such as **engaging** with users. A good example of

this was reported by an interviewee whose digital product failed to work. While some users started to complain, others called for patience and also encouraged everyone else to stay calm and have faith in the company fixing the problem.

*» We are guaranteed to receive (and this is a subjective estimate) several hundred or a thousand fewer questions a year thanks to the group. And for every company, customer inquiries are associated with costs. «*

In general, the channels' utility in decreasing costs can be seen in their potential to be **support-channels** where users help each other. Questions, concerns, and problems to be conveyed to the company can be formulated and answered by the very dedicated users present on these channels.

## How companies benefit from closed media channels



*» I think this represents an absolute opportunity for the company to have its entire communication measures or its entire pricing policy evaluated in an unfiltered way by a group of volunteers who are more inclined towards the company. «*

## THREE RISKS FOR COMPANIES

The possible risk of investing in closed media channels lies in failing to create any value for the company. Value can be created through the generation of social capital, which leads to the advantages mentioned above.

According to the interviewees, there are three major risks: **(1) lacking a clear purpose (2) lacking enough registrations and (3) lacking desired activity.**

### LACK OF PURPOSE

All participants stated that the **purpose** of the channel needed to be clear. While the company needs to know **what it wants to achieve** with it, the users need to be able to clearly recognize the purpose of such a channel as well. As stated in the literature, a community can

only function effectively if it has a **common goal** which the members are aware of (Lee & Lee, 2010). For example, Allianz's closed media channel is supposed to shape the future of the company and its products.

### Example for a purpose map of closed media channels

Company	Name of the closed media channel	Purpose for the customer (examples)	Purpose for the company (examples)
Henkel	Ask Team Clean	Sharing tips about cleaning, exclusive offers and coupons	Doing market research Driving innovation
Allianz	Allianz Zukunftsgestalter (Allianz future-shaper)	Sharing and rating new ideas, concepts and products	Doing market research Driving innovation
Siemens Healthineers	Siemens Healthcare User Forum	Sharing and gaining peer-to-peer clinical knowledge	Decreasing opportunity costs

### LACK OF REGISTRATIONS

The barrier to entry is a way to reduce the number of users. This may be the essence of closed media channels, but it can also be a risk. Therefore, corporate communication needs to be able to guide users to these channels. Some companies **actively invite** potential stakeholders to join their channels either through banners on their website, social media

*» Facebook groups seem to have had their day. «*

posts, direct emails, or even through face-to-face communication. Interviewees who use closed groups on

Facebook stated that Facebook usage – and therefore the usage of groups – is steadily declining, reducing the potential value of Facebook groups.

Some companies like Urlaubsguru have already decided to close down their Facebook groups.



## LACK OF INTERACTION

Communication between users (peer-to-peer-communication) relies heavily on extensive moderation and good **community healthiness**, according to an interviewee. Such moderation can be quite challenging and time-consuming, since generating ongoing communication is frequently not limited to normal working hours. The level of engagement can be very low, particularly on companies' own-domain channels, because the environment there isn't integrated into the daily social media routine. That's why two

participating companies shut down their own-domain channels and switched to closed groups on social media platforms. One participant stated that the level of activity in their Facebook group was also steadily declining.

*» The number of posts has dropped drastically. It used to be about 800 per week; now it's only about 80. «*

## LESSONS LEARNED

Closed media channels present an opportunity for online corporate communications. We conclude by outlining **four major factors** in which closed media channels used by companies differ from traditional corporate communications on social media.



### More closeness

Thanks to fast, direct access, as well as a reduced number of users, closed media channels can create close relationships between companies and users as well as among users.



### Less dark participation

Barriers to entry reduce the number of users, thus eliminating the scope of dark participation. Users on companies' closed media channels are likely to identify more with the company.



### More effort

A closed media channel only works effectively if users are regularly active. To achieve this, corporate communication needs to show good moderation and enable communications by the users. This can be quite time-consuming.



### Smaller reach

Closed media channels rarely lead to network effects, while restricted access reduces the number of users witnessing communication on these channels.

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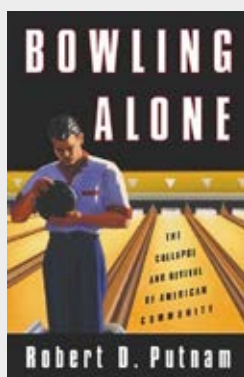
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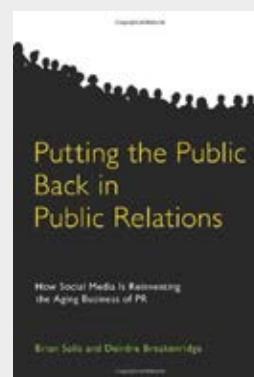
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# FURTHER READING



**Putnam, R. D. (2000).** *Bowling Alone. The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. Touchstone Books by Simon & Schuster.

A heavily discussed book in the scientific and social arenas. Putnam outlines the importance of community for the functioning of our democracy and society as a whole.



**Solis, B., & Breakenridge, D. (2009).** *Putting the Public Back in Public Relations: How Social Media Is Reinventing the Aging Business of PR*. Pearson Education.

Although some views may be outdated, Solis & Breakenridge highlight what PR on social media should be about today: building better relationships, communicating socially, and profiting from the importance of communities.

# ACADEMIC SOCIETY FOR MANAGEMENT & COMMUNICATION

The Academic Society for Management & Communication is a non-profit think tank for corporate communications. Through collaborative research and knowledge sharing, it aims to actively shape the future of corporate communications. The initiative was founded in 2010, and is currently supported by six professors, four universities, and approximately 40 corporate partners.

The Academic Society initiates practical, forward-looking research projects. These extensive, multi-disciplinary studies are designed to support the ongoing professionalization of corporate communications. In the past years, more than 20 research projects have been carried out in areas such as value creation, agility, virtualization, digitalization, and automated communication.

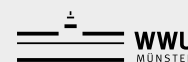
Since 2020, the Communications Trend Radar, an annual research project, has identified trends that impact corporate communications. The aim is to help communication leaders to identify emerging challenges and opportunities early on and set the right course.

The research project “Community management on closed media channels” is one of the in-depth projects of the Communications Trend Radar.

The Academic Society is part of the Günter Thiele Foundation for Communication & Management dedicated to advancing science and knowledge transfer in the field of communications.

For more information and updates, please visit [academic-society.net](http://academic-society.net).

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