



**NANYANG  
TECHNOLOGICAL  
UNIVERSITY**  
**SINGAPORE**

**Wee Kim Wee School of  
Communication and Information**  
College of Humanities, Arts, and Social Sciences

# **The Future of the Corporate Communication Officer**

## **Report**

### **Observations, Research Findings & Roundtable Proceedings**

Organised by: Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information, Nanyang Technological University, as part of the Master of Mass Communication Programme

With the support of:  
The Holmes Report | WATATAWA | WE Communications



## **Executive summary**

This document describes a research project undertaken by Ferdinand de Bakker, lecturer at Nanyang Technological University's Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information, in collaboration with Amanda Huan, a researcher; a group of 16 graduate communication students; and communication professionals.

The project was developed to address the opportunities, issues and threats chief communication officers face in today's increasingly complex and ever faster changing world.

These include the increasing need for CEOs to have access to top-level communication counsel; the concern when it comes to the communication strategies and skills of CEOs themselves; tasks being taken over by other departments; and a trend showing corporate communication being subsumed under marketing.

Fifty communication professionals from around the world were interviewed and their responses were discussed by a panel of seven professionals in Singapore during a roundtable discussion, moderated by Ferdinand de Bakker.

These professionals recognised that the role of the chief communication officer is at a crossroads, and that action is required to preserve the function of corporate communication to manage the company's reputation and the perceptions of all of its stakeholders.

In addition, there was an agreement that corporate communication executives should ideally report to the CEO and have access to all C-Suite executives. However, a seat on the board was not considered a necessity by everyone. Close working relationships with other departments and business units was considered of importance.

Noted also is the increasing importance of employee engagement and the leading role corporate communication departments should play in this discipline. Other key tasks of corporate communication executives include crisis management and preparedness, issues management, media relations, corporate digital communication and aspects of social engagement and investor relations.

## Introduction

In December of last year, I had the opportunity to discuss the role, position and challenges of chief communication officers with Alan VanderMolen. He is one of the world's most experienced and outspoken communication professionals, whose distinguished career includes long-term top positions at Burson-Marsteller, Edelman and, more recently, WE Communications.

We agreed that C-Suite executives all over the world now recognize the importance of professional corporate communication for the success of their organisations. More than ever before, they understand that corporate reputation building, investor relations, scenario development and crisis preparedness planning, competitive intelligence, communication research and, in particular, employee engagement, among other communication disciplines are critical in today's world, with ever more complicated stakeholder structures, alliances and interests. This was confirmed by Spencer Stuart, which reported that 64% of CCOs report directly to the CEO or president. However, the firm also revealed that only 16 CCOs serve on boards of S&P 500 companies.

There is yet another issue that requires the presence of experienced communication professionals and it is the CEO him or herself. On the one hand it appears to be sometimes necessary to reign in CEOs who believe they are on a mission to enhance their own brand, rather than that of the company they serve. On the other, improbable as it may seem, we have more than just a few CEOs who simply don't know or don't understand how to communicate. The latest example in a long list is Boeing's CEO Dennis Muilenberg, who appeared both defensive and hapless when responding to the airplane maker's 737 MAX issues. And, according to a recent article in *The Economist*, Cornelius Baur, the German head of McKinsey & Co, puts some of German firms' recent mishaps to chief executives' poor communication strategy.

At the same time, we have noticed in the past decade that even as the need for solid communication advice is getting indispensable, key tasks of the corporate communication officer are under threat and sometimes taken over by others: employee engagement by the human resources department, investor relations by the finance team, and corporate reputation by the legal department. On top of this we encounter ever more powerful chief marketing officers who believe corporate communication to be part of their remit.

We also shared a particular concern about resource-challenged departments in many corporations, where we have witnessed chief communication officers finding themselves short of the in-house skills required to deal with complex issues and engagements around fast-moving developments and changes. In addition to this, we have noticed a shift in the agency world towards marketing communication, with the largest firms to become ever more powerful, yet often being forced into a buyer-vendor engagement by their clients, rather than having a more balanced consulting relationship.

So... this poses the question: "what *is* the future of the corporate communication officer?" and I decided to embark on a project that included qualitative research comprising of 50 interviews with professionals around the world, and a roundtable discussion with experienced communicators in Singapore. The project was organised by students of my Master's programme module *Managerial Seminar in Corporate Communication* at NTU's Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information, in collaboration with WE and Watatawa, as well as our profession's leading global publication, *The Holmes Report*.

Ferdinand de Bakker  
9 May 2019

## Research Methodology

In-depth interviews were conducted with 50 communication professionals between January 2019 to March 2019. The interviews were conducted by graduate students as part of the course, 'Managerial Seminar in Corporate Communication', at the Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. The research was done under the supervision of Mr. Ferdinand de Bakker and Ms. Amanda Huan.

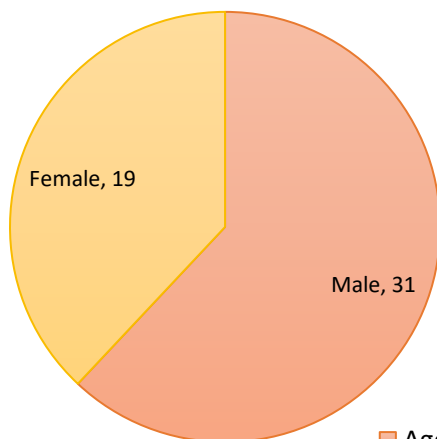
The interviews covered two aspects: perceptions about the role and value of corporate communications professionals in companies, and perceptions about the specific issues and responsibilities of such professionals. Interviews were done either face-to-face or over the phone.

The research findings were then used as a basis for discussion at the industry roundtable. The industry roundtable comprised of the following experts:

- Jeremy Seow, CEO, Singapore, WE Communications
- Simon Pangrazio, Founding Partner, WATATAWA
- Arun Sudhaman, CEO & Editor-in-Chief, The Holmes Report
- Georgette Tan, President, Singapore Committee for UN Women
- Melissa Cheah, Communications Director, Southeast Asia, The Boeing Company
- Belina Tan, Head of Corporate Communications, Asia-Pacific, Bloomberg LP
- Andrew Pickup, Senior Director, Communications, Microsoft Asia
- Ferdinand de Bakker, Lecturer, Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information, Nanyang Technological University

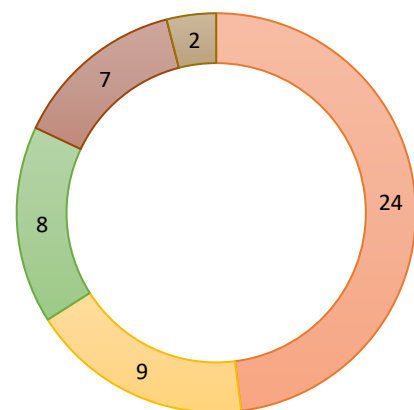
### Interviewee Demographics

Gender



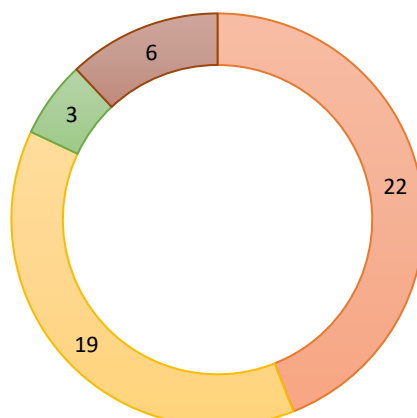
Region/Country

Legend: Singapore (orange), Asia (yellow), North America (green), Europe (brown), Australia (tan)



Professional Background

Legend: Agency (orange), Inhouse (yellow), Academic (green), Other (brown)



## Research Findings

### *The Evolving Role of the Corporate Communication Professional*

Most practitioners agree that the role of the corporate communication professional has largely remained constant over the last few decades. What has changed, however, is the environment in which such professionals operate in.

First, there have been significant changes in the media landscape; where traditional print media was once king, social and digital platforms are fast becoming consumers' top choice for media and information consumption. This has been facilitated by the rapid advancement of technology. Whereas top-down communication pushed out by corporates meant that they were in control of pace and content, today's 24/7 news-cycle and the decentralisation of content creation means that corporate communication professionals are forced to monitor news constantly and to respond quickly to any potential crisis, no matter big or small. The changes in the operating environment have added layers of complexity to the corporate communication role.

The impact from these environmental changes have not been entirely negative. As communication becomes more complex, the value of communicators has increased. Organisations are recognising the value that corporate communication professionals bring and the influence that these professionals wield has amplified. The role of chief communicators has been elevated and many often play the role of the CEO's information custodian, keeping him or her updated of relevant developments and helping to understand communication issues.

Corporate communication professionals now play an important role as the organisation's chief corporate brand guardian. While this may have primarily entailed media relations in the past, in today's world, the scope of work has expanded to a multi-stakeholder approach towards narrative building and reputation management. There has also been a paradigm shift in mindset from a tactically-focused one to a more strategic level of thinking. Corporate communication professionals are now expected to be knowledgeable about the different aspects of the business beyond the communication function as well.

Many practitioners predict that there will be further change. It will continue to be challenging as reputation becomes exceedingly important due to the increasing lack of trust in public institutions. People will continue to demand more from brands and will want to better understand brands that they buy from. An added layer of complexity is regulation. The rise of the digital economy and the loss of faith and trust in organisations will necessitate a shift towards greater regulation. Corporate communication professionals will have to deal with new constraints in an already-challenging environment.

### *Measuring the Success of Corporate Communications*

The days of measuring column inches and AVEs are long past. With the advent of big data and data-driven communication, there has been a turn towards digital metrics and measures of online engagements. While these measures offer a somewhat greater sophistication in terms of indicators of corporate communication effectiveness, they remain far from perfect. In fact, the rush for big data and other metrics has led to an obsession with numbers with no real appreciation for what exactly one is measuring.

Most practitioners talked about the ultimate end goal – impact on sales, or revenue – but there remains a struggle in linking communication initiatives directly to revenue figures. A vast majority of practitioners also talked about the other ultimate end goal – impact on brand perception – but it remains unclear how one might measure it effectively.

There remains an industry need to develop more accurate and useful assessors for the effectiveness of corporate communication. While the development of the Barcelona Declaration of Research Principles have helped shift mindsets away from AVEs and other output-oriented measures, the industry still falls short in being able to measure its own effectiveness.

### *The Blurring of Marketing and Corporate Communication*

Practitioners largely agreed that the role of marketing and corporate communication has blurred. While some viewed this optimistically and felt that the two should be integrated, others were more wary of the lack of clarity between the two functions. Most agreed that the two should minimally have a collaborative relationship where neither function is superior to the other. In today's world where a company's brand is key to its survival, it is necessary that the two functions are in sync. Most practitioners felt that the importance of both functions was of such a high degree that both should report directly to the CEO.

### *Responsibilities of the Corporate Communication Team*

Across the different types of issues and responsibilities, namely, employee engagement, investor relations, CSR, crisis preparedness and communication planning, social media engagement, public affairs and government relations, and corporate advertising, most practitioners felt that the corporate communication team should be involved in varying capacities across all of them.

This harkens back to the notion that in today's age, an organisation's brand lies at its heart and all other functions flow from it. Not involving someone who is familiar with the brand narrative in any of these core functions risks brand misrepresentation stemming from incoherent or inconsistent messaging. This applies to both internal and external stakeholders.

While some functions (i.e. investor relations and employee engagement) will require the expertise of other professionals (i.e. financial analysts and HR professionals), most practitioners felt that a communication person or at least a communication-trained person must sit in all of these functions. This goes back to the earlier idea of how today's corporate communication professionals should be knowledgeable about and comfortable with dealing with the entire business across functions and business units.

## Roundtable Discussion

### *Communication in a Disrupted World*

Communication professionals are now living in a real-time, issues-rich environment due to the proliferation of technology and digital platforms. The speed of change in the media ecosystem, coupled with toxic content and fake news, requires corporate communication officers to be adept at thinking quickly on their feet and reacting with equivalent alacrity. The interconnectedness of issues also calls for greater social and cultural awareness and sensitivity. Where media engagement was once the bread-and-butter for the corporate communication professional, panelists remarked that media relations comprises a mere one-fifth of the work now.

The panelists also agreed that there are now greater demands for companies to be 'authentic'. In contrast to yesteryears, consumers today are buying brands and not products. In order for companies to engender trust, businesses need to start thinking about what they are going to stand for and what their mission is. The job of the communicator is to communicate these key messages consistently and companies must live up to the values that they set for themselves or risk alienating consumers. Therein highlights the key tasks of communicators in today's world – building and protecting the brand and building relationships with stakeholders.

### *The Synergy between Marketing and Communications*

Marketers and communicators often, unfortunately, have an antagonistic relationship; this stems from perceptions over one being a profit center and the other a cost center. Technology and ever-blurring lines between paid, earned, and owned media have since spurred a convergence of both sides. While tension remains between marketers and communicators, today's business environment calls for a more synergistic relationship between the two.

The panel highlighted the importance for both departments to work together in order to successfully communicate company narratives and drive both short- and long-term revenues. What has further complicated the divide between the two disciplines is the blurring of responsibilities and platforms – when does social media become marketing tool and when does it become a communication tool?

Chief Marketing Officers are also increasingly taking on responsibilities that would more naturally appear in a communication officer's job scope. One panelist made a mention of the backlash surrounding the Kendall Jenner PepsiCo ad campaign as a clear example of a marketer trying to weave a narrative around a social issue without the proper communication or public relations expertise.

How can one reconcile the divide? A deeper understanding and appreciation of both functions will reduce both the need to compete and the need to prove that one is superior to the other. The marketing department often has, at its disposal, valuable tools that can measure key information such as sales data and promotion take-up rates – data that would be useful for the communications department to leverage on.

The panel offered another perspective of the relationship between the two, noting that while marketing is primarily concerned with revenue, communication exists as a lubricant to facilitate sales; one cannot do without the other. One suggested. recourse is to take a step back and address the fundamental questions: "What is the problem we are trying to solve? What is the opportunity we are trying to seize?". With this approach, both departments can focus on the true issue at hand and use the relevant means to address it.

### *Skillsets of the Future Corporate Communication Officer*

For the new generation adjusting to the disrupted landscape, the panel pointed to core skillsets that communicators must equip themselves with. First, they must read widely and keep themselves abreast of worldly issues and current affairs. Understanding how an issue may impact a business across multiple fronts is a necessity in today's world.

Related to this skill is the need for communicators to write well. Communication officers must be able to deconstruct complex and technical issues into messages that are simple, clear, and compelling. Second, communicators must possess a degree of nimbleness and cultural sensitivity in order to better navigate cross-cultural situations.

Third, communicators need to be adept at multiple aspects of the business and must lose any fear of numbers and data. In today's big data world, an appreciation for spreadsheets and analytics is key to maintaining an edge over the competition. Consumer insights gleaned from data is necessary to calibrate communication messages, create more targeted messaging, and refine audience segmentation.

The use of data in communication needs to be combined with a deep understanding of business needs and societal trends. One panelist posted the following: how is it that companies can still get things wrong so often in a world awash with data and analytics? In response, other panelists commented that a major reason for why the communication department is so important is because of the need for corporate communication officers to blend data with good judgment, strategy, and common sense and avoid a blind adherence to data.

### *Importance of Employee Engagement*

Panelists stressed the increasing importance of employee communications, and how the role of employees has evolved from just working for a company to becoming an advocate for the company's brand. They foresee increased investment in employee communication and engagement and predict that there will be a shift from employee engagement to employee activism where employees are empowered and can truly connect with a company's purpose. One such example is Google's decision to abandon a military program that uses artificial intelligence to analyse drone footage after employees objected strongly to the program.

Employees are actively seeking ways in which they can have more influence on company decisions. With the proliferation of social media platforms, it is easier to 'talk up' to the C-suite executives. This has effectively eliminated the age-old model of one-way employee communication and paved the way for more open conversations that can drive positive change, create more conducive working environments, and increase employee satisfaction.



## **Roundtable Discussion Participants**

*Melissa Cheah, Communications Director, Southeast Asia, The Boeing Company*

Melissa is a seasoned communication professional with significant in-house experience honed at the Singapore Government and global corporations such as Rolls-Royce, Standard Chartered Bank, GSK and Boeing.

Throughout the course of her career, she has delivered on a broad range of areas in the communication field, from branding to events, editorial, internal/external communication, thought leadership development, executive/leadership communication, and crisis communication.

She holds a Bachelor of Arts (English Language & Literature) from the National University of Singapore and a Master of Communication from the University of South Australia, and has worked in Singapore and London.

*Simon Pangrazio, Founding Partner, WATATAWA*

Simon has more than 25 years of experience in strategic communications in Asia-Pacific. A corporate positioning, financial communications and crisis management specialist, Simon has worked extensively with clients in Mainland China, Hong Kong, Australia, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia and Singapore.

He has an extensive network of business relationships in the region and an in-depth understanding of industry sectors includes banking and financial services, agriculture, telecommunications, food and beverage, mining and resources and technology.

Prior to becoming a founding partner of WATATAWA, Simon was CEO for Burson-Marsteller's operations across Asia-Pacific. His work focuses on consulting at the CEO and Board level and has done so for multinational and Asian companies, governments and other organisations.

*Andrew Pickup, Senior Director, Communications, Microsoft Asia*

Andrew is in charge of leading communications for Microsoft in the Asia Pacific region. His responsibilities include managing all media relations, analyst relations, internal and executive communications, crisis and change management and government/citizenship outreach.

Previously, he was Microsoft's chief marketing and operations officer, focusing on the ASEAN and ANZ markets. He was responsible for the revenue, market share and P&L performance of all Microsoft Business Groups for the Asia Pacific region and the overall orchestration of regional go-to-market sales, marketing and services plans.

Andrew also oversaw the long-term growth planning, the management of the regional core business processes – business and marketing planning, target setting, marketing budget management – market intelligence, competitive initiatives, integrated marketing communications and public relations.

Prior to this, he was chief of staff, Microsoft Asia Pacific, and chief marketing and operations officer of Singapore operations. Some of his previous accolades with the company include head of desktop marketing, group marketing manager and relationship marketing manager in the UK. Before joining Microsoft in 1988, Pickup was with Saatchi & Saatchi.

*Jeremy Seow, CEO, Singapore, WE Communications*

Jeremy is CEO of the Singapore operations of WE Communications and has over 15 years' experience in business development, communication and digital marketing in Singapore and across the Asia-Pacific region.

He has a BA in Media Studies from RMIT University, Melbourne and started his career at the Straits Times, before turning to marketing. Prior to joining WE in 2016, he held positions at Ogilvy One Worldwide, Social@Ogilvy, Edelman and Zeno Group, where he was managing director.

*Arun Sudhaman, CEO & Editor-in-Chief, The Holmes Report*

Arun has more than a decade's experience as a journalist and digital content specialist, most of which has been spent analysing the media, marketing and communications industries. His career has encompassed coverage and analysis of reputation and leadership issues in numerous countries across the world, including the US and UK, Russia, China, India and South Africa.

Since joining the Holmes Report in 2010, Arun has led a comprehensive relaunch of the title's content platform. Prior to this, he spent more than seven years with Haymarket Media in Hong Kong, Singapore and London. He joined Haymarket's title PRWeek UK in January 2009, after covering Asia's media and marketing landscape at sister Haymarket title Campaign Asia-Pacific in Hong Kong and Singapore.

Before Haymarket, Arun spent one year at public relations firm Weber Shandwick during its tumultuous mergers with Weber and BSMG. During his career as a journalist he has also contributed to The Guardian and the South China Morning Post, where he began his career as a business reporter. In 2015, Arun was inducted into the ICCO Hall of Fame.

*Belina Tan, Head of Corporate Communications, Asia-Pacific, Bloomberg LP*

Belina is Head of Corporate Communications, Asia-Pacific at Bloomberg LP, where she leads the company's external relations, media relations and employee communications across its financial products, news and media businesses in Asia Pacific.

With over 20 years of corporate communications experience, Belina has worked with leading companies in New York, London, Singapore, Shanghai and Beijing. She spent many years on the agency side, advising companies on corporate reputation, issues management and international media relations across the financial services, technology and consumer sectors.

*Georgette Tan, President, Singapore Committee for UN Women*

Georgette was appointed President, Singapore Committee for UN Women in June 2018, and has served on the Executive Council since 2012. In this role, she focuses on advancing gender equality, women's empowerment and anti-violence against women. She is co-founder of the award-winning Project Inspire initiative.

She sits on the board for BoardAgender, an organisation focused on supporting and increasing the number of women to take on board positions in Singapore. She is also adjunct

faculty lecturing in Communications at the Lee Kong Chian School of Business at the Singapore Management University.

Georgette was previously Senior Vice President, Communications at Mastercard, responsible for external and internal communications and corporate social responsibility throughout the Asia Pacific region. Prior to joining Mastercard, Georgette was Vice President of Communications at CNBC Asia and Dow Jones Asia.

*Ferdinand ('Ferry') de Bakker, Lecturer, Wee Kim Wee School of Communication & Information, Nanyang Technological University (Moderator)*

Ferry teaches various communication subjects at NTU's Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information, where he is also involved in internship supervision matters.

He is chairman of Cognac Groperrin in France, and managing director of La Croisette, a boutique consulting firm in Singapore. He serves on boards and/or committees of various non-profits, including the Singapore Institute of Directors.

He had a two decades-long career at the international public relations firm Burson-Marsteller as a country manager and later CEO of its European and Asia-Pacific operations. He has written for various publications on education, corporate communication and lifestyle matters in The Netherlands, the UK, France and Singapore.

## **Graduate Students**

This project was part of the module *Managerial Seminar in Corporate Communication*, an elective of the *Master's in Mass Communication* programme of the Wee Kim Wee School of Communication & Information. The students participated in the development of the project, as well as in the interviews and the completion of the final report. They are:

- Andrew Donald Renfrew
- Nooraini Shah Binte Sikkander
- Tan Li Ting
- Tao Na (Echo)
- Chan Zhi Yang (Isaac)
- Tazkira Shafat Sattar
- Vandana Ramesh Advani (Veenu Ria Anandani)
- Yu Xiameng
- Jessica Ann Thomas
- Lee Sia Chua Lenett
- Wang Ziyi
- Yasmeen Banu Binte Abdul Khalid
- Jasmin Kelly Six
- Lim Cheng How Eric
- Nuanza Cinta Adita
- Qian Kun (Crystal)

## **Project Organiser**

*About the Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information, Nanyang Technological University*

The Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information is Asia's top-ranked school featuring communication and information studies.

Established in 1992, it is the only full-fledged communication school in Singapore. It is known as a world-class centre of excellence with an international faculty, state-of-the-art research laboratories, and global institutional affiliations.

The school stewards an in-depth focus in research, generating empirical and humanistic analyses of communication topics and policy issues important to Singapore, the region and the world.

The school has established and maintains an international network of educators, researchers and professionals through collaborative projects, conferences and other exchanges.

<http://www.wkwsci.ntu.edu.sg/Pages/Home.aspx>

## **Project Partners**

### *About WE*

WE is an integrated communications agency that lives at the intersection of people, brands and technology. For more than three decades, it has helped world-class brands in motion tell transformative stories that shift perceptions and drive people to positive action.

Female-founded, female-led, and fiercely independent, it invests and focuses on cutting-edge to keep it current. It also employs a variety of cross-capability partnerships in the PLUS network.

One of the largest communications agencies in the world, WE shapes stories for global brands like Microsoft, Honeywell, McDonalds, iRobot and Volvo. Its 23 global offices are staffed with 1,000 experts in the technology, health and consumer sectors.

<https://www.we-worldwide.com/>

### *About WATATAWA*

WATATAWA is a Singapore-headquartered strategic communication consultancy committed to delivering tangible business results for our clients. It specialises in investor relations, public and corporate affairs, financial services and fintech and in helping clients communicate across the entire media eco-system.

The agency's experience spans all of Asia's major markets and four decades of involvement in some of the region's most significant market developments, business initiatives and international events. WATATAWA has been a WE Communications company since 2018.

<https://www.watatawa.asia>

### *About The Holmes Report*

The Holmes Report is the authoritative voice of the global public relations industry, dedicated to proving and improving the value of public relations by providing insight, knowledge and recognition to public relations professionals.

The Holmes Group was founded in 2000 by Paul Holmes, founder and chair, who has more than two decades of experience writing about and evaluating the public relations business and consulting with both public relations firms and their clients.

The Holmes Group delivers against its mission by providing the most sophisticated reporting and analysis on public relations trends and issues, along with an extensive global footprint of events and awards.

<https://www.holmesreport.com>

## **Acknowledgments**

First of all, we would like to thank the 50 communication professionals around the world for their willingness to participate in the project and to share their valuable insights during in-depth personal and telephone interviews.

We are equally grateful to the seven professionals who agreed to participate in what turned to be a lively roundtable discussion, held on 11 April 2019 at NTU's Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information.

We also wish to thank our partners in this project, The Holmes Report, WE Communications and Watatawa, as well as the leadership and staff of our Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information for their support.