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Co-creation as an Approach to Dialogue-based Communication Work in Academic Libraries: A Practical Example of the Collaborative Development of Communication Formats for Establishing Open Science in Business Research

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Abstract

Academic libraries are increasingly evolving from information providers into active participants in scientific and societal communication processes. This article examines how co-creation can serve as a strategic approach to strengthen dialogue-based communication in academic libraries. Drawing on a case study from the ZBW – Leibniz Information Centre for Economics, it analyses the collaborative development of a communication project on Open Science in business research. The study highlights how co-creation fosters mutual understanding, credibility, and organisational learning by integrating researchers at different career stages, designers, and communication professionals in shared meaning-making processes. It also discusses structural and cultural preconditions for successful co-creation as well as implications for the evolving role of communication departments as facilitators within academic libraries. The findings suggest that co-creation contributes to sustainable relationship building and enhances the visibility of libraries as mediators and partners in research transformation.

Keywords: Co-creation; Open Science; science communication; organisational learning; public relations

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1. Introduction

Academic libraries are undergoing a profound transformation. Digitisation, new forms of knowledge production and changing reception patterns among researchers and students are expanding their range of tasks. In addition to the traditional provision of information, libraries are increasingly taking on roles as mediators, data providers and actors in academic and science policy discourse (Dezuanni et al., 2024; Frey et al., 2023).

In order to fulfil these expanded functions, they must not only make their services, ideas and responsibilities visible, but also actively enter into diverse networks of relationships, some of which need to be redefined. The creation of added value for the respective counterparts must be clearly communicated, whether in interaction with researchers and students, professional associations, research data infrastructures, other libraries and information infrastructure service providers, science policy makers or technology partners. Communication and relationship building are increasingly becoming an integral part of the self-image of academic libraries. The guiding principle is: from library communication to library interaction – from communication to co-creation (Dantus, 2025; Selbmann, 2019; Siegfried, 2024).

This also increases the responsibility of communication managers in libraries to reflect on their internal processes, responsibilities and strategic roles and to adapt them to changing conditions. After all, the world of public relations is itself undergoing change: expectations of organisational communication are changing fundamentally (Botan & Taylor, 2004; Chen et al., 2020; Kent & Taylor, 2021; Macnamara, 2016; Seebacher, 2024; Zerfaß & Viertmann, 2017). Communication processes no longer proceed in a linear fashion, but rather as ongoing negotiations in open, digital public spheres. Institutions – including academic libraries – can only control their topics and narratives to a limited extent; they must develop them together with their stakeholders (Dantus, 2025).

Against this backdrop, the question arises as to how academic libraries can combine their transformation toward greater involvement in scientific and social processes with communication efforts that actively support this expanded remit and are geared toward dialogue, participation, and joint value creation. One promising approach here is the integration of co-creation

into communication work. It enables new roles to be not only communicated, but also made visible and tangible in collaboration with relevant stakeholders.

The following practical example from the ZBW – Leibniz Information Centre for Economics on Open Science communication in business research illustrates how joint development and moderation creates awareness, strengthens relationships and promotes organisational learning. This article shows how co-creation can be used as an approach in the professional communication work of academic libraries to strengthen relationships with stakeholders. The aim is to systematise theoretical principles, identify conditions for successful co-creation and illustrate its application using a practical example.

2. Theoretical Framework: Co-creation in Communication Work

2.1. Concept and Theoretical Classification

Co-creation refers to the joint creation of value by organisations and their stakeholders. In communications, the term describes processes in which meanings and content are not conveyed unilaterally, but are produced through dialogue. This understanding was formulated centrally by Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004a) and Vargo and Lusch (2008), who describe co-creation as interaction on an equal footing, in which organisations provide framework conditions while stakeholders are actively involved in the production of meaning. Galvagno and Dalli (2014) as well as Payne et al. (2008) classify co-creation similarly in communication and marketing research and emphasise the character of a joint design process that encompasses both material and symbolic value creation.

Public relations research interprets co-creation as a further development of dialogical communication theories. Kent and Taylor (2002) emphasise principles such as reciprocity, empathy, communicative closeness, willingness to engage in dialogue and take risks, which promote the development of resilient relationships. Botan and Taylor (2004) locate co-creation in the transition from one-sided persuasion to symmetrical, relationship-oriented communication. Communication is thus no longer understood as an instrument

of persuasion, but as a process of joint meaning production and shared responsibility.

In contrast to related concepts such as participation, collaboration or co-production, co-creation differs in terms of the degree of involvement and personal responsibility of those involved (Galvagno & Dalli, 2014; Gemser et al., 2025; Ind & Coates, 2013; Lee et al., 2020; Rock et al., 2018; Voorberg et al., 2015; Wang & Ran, 2025). While participation describes selective involvement and collaboration aims at cooperation based on the division of labour, co-creation assumes equal partnership in all phases of the design process, from problem definition to implementation (Rock et al., 2018; Voorberg et al., 2015). Unlike co-production, which focuses on operational involvement in existing processes, co-creation also encompasses strategic and symbolic dimensions (https://participatorymuseum.org; Capolupo et al., 2020).

2.2. Benefits and Potential for Communication Work

Current findings from PR research and science communication research show that co-creation in communication work serves to increase the relevance, comprehensibility and acceptance of messages (Enzingmüller & Marzavan, 2024; Islam et al., 2025; Kao et al., 2016; Kent & Taylor, 2021; Lee et al., 2020; Metcalfe et al., 2022; Momme et al., 2025; Muñiz & Schau, 2011; Ravazzani & Hazée, 2022). When organisations develop content and strategies together with their stakeholders, meanings emerge that gain legitimacy through the participation of peers from the target group (Lee et al., 2020; Momme et al., 2025; Ravazzani & Hazée, 2022).

Empirical findings also show that dialogue-based processes promote trust and engagement, especially when established structures for mutual resonance exist (Kent & Taylor, 2021; Men et al., 2018). Furthermore, co-creation strengthens organisational learning processes: by integrating external perspectives, early indicators of reputation developments, expectations or crisis potential can be identified at an early stage (Andersson, 2025). Empirical studies in science communication research show that jointly developed narratives are accepted more sustainably and active participation has been shown to strengthen perceptions of goodwill and integrity (Momme et al., 2025), while purely symbolic participation, known as ‘partici-washing’, has the opposite effect (Metcalfe et al., 2022).

At the same time, research points to the risks of so-called co-destruction – i.e. destructive dynamics caused by unequal roles, a lack of moderation or unclear goal definitions (Pera et al., 2021). The success of co-creation therefore depends on its reflexive embedding in the communication strategy and clear governance mechanisms that transparently regulate roles, decision-making powers and feedback loops (Kent & Taylor, 2021; Ko et al., 2022; Macnamara, 2016; Momme et al., 2025; Payne et al., 2008).

Effective co-creation requires an organisational culture of openness, trust and participation. It is based on an attitude of listening, accepting mistakes and sharing responsibility (Gemser et al., 2025; Gentile et al., 2007; Ind & Coates, 2013; Lee et al., 2020; Payne et al., 2008; Wang & Ran, 2025). What sounds obvious in theory often proves to be a major challenge in practice. Communications departments have established quality standards, routines and well-oiled production processes. When representatives of target groups who are not PR professionals are involved in these processes on an equal footing, this not only changes the group dynamics, but also the professional self-image of those involved in PR within the organisation. This shift requires communication managers and designers to be willing not only to tolerate new perspectives, but also to see them as an enrichment of their own professional activities (Chen et al., 2020; Kent & Taylor, 2002, 2021; Macnamara, 2016; Men et al., 2018).

3. Practical Example: Creation of a Travel Guide Entitled ‘Expedition to Open Science Land’

3.1. Context

3.1.1. Status of Open Science Practices in Business Research

In business research, there is a growing demand for robust and transparent results that can be directly used by science, politics, companies and institutions. At the same time, the discipline is increasingly facing criticism for its lack of reproducibility. In recent years, there have been increasing indications that fundamental effects reported in various areas of economic research are not reproducible to the extent necessary for a robust knowledge base (Siegfried, 2024; Soliman et al., 2025; Spellman et al., 2017).

At the same time, studies show that Open Science practices are not yet widespread in everyday business research. Legal, organisational and cultural barriers are often cited – such as lack of time, lack of recognition or uncertainty in dealing with open data and methods (Siegfried et al., 2024; Soliman et al., 2025).

In many places, researchers in business research have traditionally focused on publishing completed and methodologically sound work. Uncertainties, interim results and methodological decisions in the research process often remain unpublished and are therefore difficult for third parties to understand (Soliman et al., 2025).

3.1.2. Need for a Change in Scientific Culture

Given the claim of business research to deliver reliable and transparent results with social relevance, a fundamental change of perspective is needed within the professional community – a change that is closely linked to the principles of Open Science. This change aims to make scientific processes more transparent and to systematically disclose preliminary results, assumptions and potential limitations. While disciplines such as psychology already have an established Open Science culture, business research is still in a phase of orientation and gradual adaptation to these principles (Soliman et al., 2025).

The need for such a cultural change is already recognised by various advocates of Open Science within the business research community. They share the conviction that scientific work can only remain credible and relevant if it is transparent, replicable and open (Soliman et al., 2025).

This development has also been embraced by the ZBW – Leibniz Information Centre for Economics, which has embedded Open Science as a central component of its organisational strategy. While the institution engages with economists and business researchers through various professional roles and services, its Open Science Magazine (www.open-science-magazin.de) is coordinated specifically through the communications department. In this context, the Head of Communications maintains close contact with researchers in economics and business research. Against this backdrop, the ZBW identified leading advocates of Open Science within the field of business research and initiated a collaboration aimed at raising the visibility of Open Science

within the professional community and integrating it more firmly into scholarly practice.

3.2. Co-creation Process

3.2.1. Structure, Objective and Development of Co-creation

Specifically, the ZBW initiated a collaboration between four researchers at different career stages in business research and one senior researcher in psychology. The starting point was a panel on Open Science at the annual conference of the Association of University Professors of Business Research (VHB), which was followed by a joint article in the *Schmalenbach Journal of Business Research* (Soliman et al., 2025).

This collaboration gave rise to the joint idea of initiating a communication project that not only explains Open Science to the business research community in theoretical terms, but also makes it a practical experience – as a shared concern that combines scientific culture and communication practice. In line with Botan and Taylor (2004), the focus was on collaborative action and shared responsibility. The aim was to develop the principles of Open Science together with the target group itself (Lee et al., 2020, Momme et al., 2025; Ravazzani & Hazée, 2022) and communicating them in such a way that they become accessible to researchers, teachers and supervisors in business research and can be integrated into everyday work, gaining greater legitimacy through the peer-to-peer approach. The focus was not solely on conveying information, but on collaboratively developing a communication format that generates interest, offers guidance, and facilitates participation. The result of this co-creation process is a book project, a travel guide entitled *Expedition into Open Science Land*. The creation of this work is an example of collaborative communication practice in which researchers at different career stages, communication managers and other stakeholders jointly design content and formats. The project forms the practical example for the present case analysis.

3.2.2. Planning and Setting the Framework

At the start of the project, the entire team, consisting of the five scientific authors, the illustrators, the ZBW's communication designer and the head of

the ZBW's communications department, met for two consecutive virtual sessions. In these workshops, the plenary discussed what kind of book should be developed together. The starting point was the aforementioned article in the *Schmalenbach Journal of Business Research*, which was to serve as the basis for a new, visually and narratively accessible format. The process began with the idea of a fairy tale book, based on the joint essay "A Tale of Open Science: Emergence of a New Normal" (Soliman et al., 2025). However, further discussions quickly revealed that while the fictional and playful approach should be retained, the focus should be more on the character of a practice-oriented guide. This gave rise to the idea of a guidebook, a travel guide.

During the meetings, the group agreed on key parameters for the project: distribution of tasks, scope, ratio of text to illustrations, visual and linguistic tone, and the modular structure of the planned "travel guide". It was jointly decided that the final product should comprise a German-language print version and additional German and English digital editions. During the discussions, the idea arose to develop a supplementary landing page (see https://expedition-open-science.org) that would provide in-depth information and current guidelines on Open Science and could be updated regularly.

There was no need for an explicit debate on objectives, as all participants shared a common concern: to raise awareness of Open Science among the business research community in a playful yet practical way. The book was intended to provide a low-threshold introduction to the topic, offer concrete guidance, just like a travel guide, and thus contribute to a cultural shift towards greater transparency and openness.

The added value for those involved lay in several aspects of the collaboration itself. For the researchers, working with professional illustrators, designers and communication experts was a novel and inspiring process that broadened their creative perspectives on their specialist subject matter. For the illustrators, the intrinsic motivation and added value lay in participating in an extensive, bilingual book project that opened up the world of science communication to them and involved them as equal contributors whose perspectives and insights from non-scientific practice greatly enriched the work. For the ZBW's communications department, the project offered the opportunity to develop a peer-to-peer communication product together with representatives of its own target group – an approach that broke new ground in terms of both methodology and content.

The particular added value of the communication product 'Expedition to Open Science Land' lies in the fact that its content was developed not for the target group, but together with them. Co-creation with business researchers resulted in a communication product that precisely addresses the specific routines, uncertainties and decision-making situations in everyday business research. The authors knew from their own experience which terms needed to be explained and where brevity was sufficient, which steps in the Open Science process were realistic and where practical obstacles arose.

The tone of the guide – accessible, empathetic and at the same time technically precise – reflects this insider's perspective. Instead of normative demands, the book contains concrete tips, case studies and points of reference for typical uncertainties: for example, how to handle sensitive data, the limits of pre-registrations or the question of how much openness is possible in a given project. The result is a format that neither glosses over issues nor overwhelms the reader but rather points to realistic ways forward.

The guidebook 'Expedition into Open Science Land' enables the ZBW to present Open Science not as an abstract model, but as a practical, jointly developed option for action. Its credibility and connectivity result directly from the co-creation process: the design, language and dramatic structure reflect the perspectives of those for whom the product is intended. In this way, communication itself becomes a place of shared expertise and joint value creation.

3.2.3. Implementation and Interaction

After the initial virtual sessions to clarify roles, processes and timeframes, the actual co-creation phase began in the form of a collaborative writing process. The scope, structure and ratio of text to illustrations were defined as joint guidelines at this stage. On this basis, the communications manager created the first complete draft, which served as a 'co-creation artefact', a prototype that would enable further joint development at a later stage. The draft was based on classic travel guide categories such as history, geography, climate, travel season and etiquette, as well as chapters on sights, travel tips and checklists, and was designed to serve as a discursive starting point for commentary and supplementary work.

The team of authors, consisting of researchers and early-career researchers in business research and psychology, as well as the head of communications at the ZBW, then worked on a digital collaborative document with open comment functions. The phase was deliberately designed to be low-threshold in order to enable co-creation principles such as openness, equality and iterative development. The co-authors added additional examples, notes and sections and reflected on their own professional experience to determine which content would be relevant to the business research community. This resulted in a multi-layered raw text that integrated numerous perspectives on the practice of Open Science.

The group collectively evaluated the interim result. The text was deemed too detailed because the wealth of content and text types impaired readability and the character of an introductory guide. In addition, inconsistent tones became apparent, a typical result of early co-creation phases in which different perspectives first have to converge. The dramaturgical structure also did not yet meet the goal of providing a low-threshold introduction. The mix of informative and humorous elements was unbalanced, the length of individual chapters was disproportionately large, and the balance between illustrative and textual elements was not yet right.

Based on these findings, the team decided to conduct an editorial sprint in order to structure the co-creation process more clearly and align it synchronously. The sprint was chosen because it enables focused, clearly defined work phases in line with agile co-creation methods. The aim was to jointly compress and prioritise the previously heterogeneous content and bring it into a consistent narrative form. During the sprint, chapter sequences were rearranged, core messages were defined and content redundancies were eliminated. At the same time, a common style framework was created that became binding for further iterations. The condensed time frame of the sprint created a stronger sense of responsibility and belonging, which in turn stabilised the further co-creation process.

Once the text had been finalised, the design work began. The communication designer and the illustrators had already been involved in the project, but not in the development of the text content. Their involvement focused on questions of formal structure, in particular the length and structure of the headings, as well as the subsequent visual translation and supplementation of the material. This early follow-up communication facilitated the transition to the

design phase, as key layout requirements were already known. The actual visual development thus began on a stable textual basis and could be carried out without additional content coordination loops.

In parallel with the content and design work, the group of authors developed a distribution plan for the publication and dissemination of the travel guide 'Expedition Open Science Land' in printed and digital form. In addition, a cooperation agreement was concluded with the Association of University Lecturers in Business Administration, which, as a central distribution partner, will support further access to the specialist community in Germany.

The communications manager took the lead, creating the first complete draft of the "travel guide". On this basis, the co-authors enthusiastically added content, comments and new thematic sections such as tips for restaurants, sports activities, hiking routes and insider tips for selected sights. After completing this first draft, the project group evaluated the interim result, finding it too detailed, among other things, and initiated the next stage of editing in the form of an editorial sprint.

Once the text had been finalised, the design work began. As the communication designer and illustrators were continuously involved throughout the entire process, the transition to the visual design went smoothly and without any breaks in content.

The communications manager was responsible for moderation and process support. Her task was to maintain a balance between openness and goal orientation. She facilitated creative development and reflection but kept the content framework stable and ensured that the project remained within the defined target corridor. This role corresponds to what co-creation research describes as *boundary spanning* and *facilitative leadership*: communication managers do not primarily act as senders of organisational messages, but as moderators who structure interactions, enable negotiations of meaning and balance tensions between different professional logics (Ind & Coates, 2013; Kent & Taylor, 2002, 2021; Macnamara, 2016; Payne et al., 2008).

Studies on co-creation emphasise that it is precisely this intermediary role that is central to enabling joint value creation and steering active stakeholder participation in an orderly, productive direction (Gemser & Perks, 2015; Ko et al., 2022; Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004a, 2004b; Saarijärvi et al., 2013).

The project confirms these findings. The success of the process was largely based on the communication manager's ability to translate perspectives, synchronise expectations and structure the dialogue in such a way that a consistent joint product could be created. This shift in roles marks a fundamental change in the ZBW's communication work: communication managers are increasingly acting not as producers of finished content, but as process architects who create spaces for dialogue, bring together perspectives and make shared knowledge visible. This understanding of communication as a moderated negotiation process now opens up new scope for action for the ZBW, as communication is more strongly focused on shaping relationships and shared meaning production.

3.3. Evaluation Planning

Early on in this co-creation project, the project group agreed on a joint approach to measuring success after the publication of the travel guide and accompanying landing page. The aim is to record, systematically observe and reflect on the effectiveness of the joint communication work not only retrospectively, but also on an ongoing basis.

The planning is based on the established understanding of the impact of strategic communication in communication science (Botan & Taylor, 2004; Kent & Taylor, 2002, 2021; Macnamara, 2018a, 2018b; Men et al., 2018; Seebacher, 2024). The starting point is the assumption that impact cannot be measured solely by media metrics or reach, but manifests itself in the perception, understanding, relationship and behaviour of target groups (Macnamara, 2018a, 2018b; Siegfried, 2024; Zerfaß & Viertmann, 2017). Communication is understood as a social learning process that enables dialogue and resonance.

Based on the DPRG/ICV impact level model, the project group distinguishes between three levels of impact measurement: output, outcome and outflow (Macnamara, 2018a, 2018b; Siegfried, 2024; Zerfaß & Viertmann, 2017).

- At the **output level**, quantitative indicators on the distribution and use of *the travel guide* are to be collected, such as download figures, distribution via partner organisations and media response.
- The **outcome level** focuses on the perception, understanding and relevance of the travel guide within the business community in

Germany. To this end, qualitative feedback, accompanying short surveys and social media analyses are planned in order to gain insights into the comprehensibility and practicality of the travel guide.

- The **outflow level** refers to the impact of communication work in the respective field of activity of the actors involved. It encompasses effects that influence the actions, reputation and connectivity within relevant reference groups.
    - For the ZBW, the focus at this level is on assessing the extent to which its commitment to Open Science further develops its reputation as a research-oriented and dialogue-oriented library within the business research community and whether it is perceived more in its role as an Open Science actor and designer.
    - For the **co-authors** from the fields of Business research and psychology, however, the outflow perspective lies in the impact on their respective professional communities. The aim here is to determine whether the *guide* provides impetus for cultural change in Business research – for example, through new discussions, teaching initiatives, research collaborations or a changed attitude towards openness and transparency in the research process.

These indicators at the outflow level do not allow for a causal attribution of effects, but they do provide a reliable basis for making developments and areas of resonance visible. The project group therefore understands evaluation at the outflow level as an ongoing process of reflection that views impact as part of joint learning and change processes (Siegfried, 2024).

In line with Macnamara (2018a, 2018b), the project does not view evaluation at the above-mentioned levels as a retrospective performance review, but rather as an integral part of the communication process. Feedback from the community and the project team is continuously recorded and incorporated into the further design. This formative perspective makes it possible to adaptively control the process, immediately integrate learning experiences and reflect on the co-creation structure itself.

The planned evaluation thus combines quantitative and qualitative methods and serves both internal quality development and scientific reflection on the impact of dialogue-oriented communication projects. In the long term, it should contribute to the empirical foundation of co-creation in science

communication and show how impact analysis can be established as a learning-oriented tool in the communication practice of scientific libraries.

4. Discussion

4.1. Structural Communication Challenges Faced by Academic Libraries

Analysis of the practical example highlights structural characteristics of academic libraries that fundamentally shape their communication work. These characteristics can be described as areas of communicative tension that challenge traditional, primarily sender-oriented PR logic and suggest a more dialogue-oriented communication practice.

4.1.1. Communication Challenge I – Invisibility as an Infrastructure Paradox

Academic libraries fulfil central infrastructure tasks in the scientific ecosystem (Borgmann, 2010). They make publications findable, secure research data, develop metadata standards, negotiate licence models, advise on open access strategies, ensure long-term digital archiving and much more. Their contribution lies in stabilising the processes through which scholarship is produced, communicated, and sustained. Yet this stabilising function within the scholarly system is itself often rendered invisible (Cox et al., 2019; Lossau, 2012; Wynne et al., 2023).

However, this is precisely where a communicative paradox lies. As long as this infrastructure functions smoothly, it remains largely invisible in an academic culture where visibility and resonance are key success factors (Borgmann, 2003, 2025; Clarke et al., 2022).

Infrastructures usually only attract attention when there are disruptions. Libraries often only receive media attention when spectacular events such as fires, collapses or other visibly dramatic incidents occur (Clarke et al., 2022). Traditional PR approaches that focus on reach, event orientation or campaign-style visibility are useful, but their impact is limited. For academic libraries, whose tasks are becoming increasingly complex and strategically

relevant, the challenge is to generate relevance not primarily through selective attention, but through sustainable relationship management and structural integration into academic processes.

Co-creation opens up an alternative perspective here. Visibility does not arise through self-attribution, but relationally – through joint projects with stakeholders, shared authorship and cooperative problem solving. The library is not perceived solely as a provider of services, but as a partner in scientific transformation processes. Relevance arises through interaction.

4.1.2. Communication Challenge II – Stakeholder Diversity and Empathy Requirements

Academic libraries operate within a heterogeneous stakeholder structure. Their stakeholders include researchers from different disciplines and career stages, students, funding bodies, university management, cooperation partners, science policy actors and potential new employees. These groups differ in terms of their information needs as well as their institutional logic, expectations, time resources and risk perceptions.

Strategic communication work must systematically take these differences into account. Empathy becomes a core professional competence. It should not be understood as personal sensitivity, but as a methodically sound analytical and reflective skill. Communication managers must address the question of what goals, constraints and experiences guide their stakeholders (Wiggill, 2011). Different perspectives should not be evaluated normatively, but understood as expressions of specific professional and organisational rationalities.

Against this backdrop, communication work becomes a means of shaping spaces of meaning. It is not just a matter of publicising services, but of managing how they are interpreted. Open access can be perceived as a strategic opportunity or as an additional obligation, research data management as a bureaucratic requirement or as a contribution to quality assurance, research training as a time burden or as a gain in efficiency. Communication management influences these interpretative frameworks through narratives, argumentation structures and contextualisation.

Co-creation offers a structured approach to this. Representatives of key target groups can be involved in the development of communicative frameworks – for example, in the design of an information campaign on Open Science, in the development of argumentation guidelines for the use of institutional repositories, or in the design of an annual report for funding bodies. In such processes, it is not the service offering itself that is changed, but rather the communicative perspective on it that is jointly reflected upon. Which aspects require explanation? Which terms are compatible? Which arguments are actually convincing?

Through these processes, motives and concerns are not only anticipated, but also explicitly articulated. Communication is based less on assumptions about target groups and more on jointly developed interpretative frameworks. Co-creation thus becomes an instrument of empathy-based communication strategy that can address cognitive goals (knowledge building), affective goals (trust building) and conative goals (changes in usage and behaviour) in equal measure.

4.2. Co-creation as a Strategic Response

Against the backdrop of the areas of tension described above, co-creation cannot be understood as an optional participation format, but rather as a structural further development of strategic communication work in academic libraries (Eden & Fagan, 2014; Islam et al., 2015a, 2015b).

While dialogical approaches emphasise mutual interaction, co-creation shifts the level of communication itself. This means that not only are messages coordinated, but problem definitions, frames of reference and objectives are developed jointly. Communication thus becomes constitutive for the design of institutional roles (Kupper et al., 2022).

In the present case, Open Science was not merely communicated as a strategic field of action for the library, but was transformed into a narrative format in collaboration with representatives of the specialist community. The library thus positioned itself not exclusively as a service provider, but as a partner in scientific and cultural change.

Co-creation has an impact on several levels:

- It strengthens legitimacy through shared authorship.
- It promotes trust through transparent participation processes.
- It expands the competence profile of the communications department to include moderation and process competence.
- It makes the library relationally visible.

Communications departments take on an intermediary role in this context. They create spaces for dialogue, moderate diversity of perspectives and ensure the strategic coherence of participatory processes. Communication thus becomes an interface function between the organisation and the scientific environment.

4.3. Learning Potential and Relevance for Academic Libraries

The case study described here should not be understood as a singular project description, but rather as an exemplary expression of a changed understanding of communication. Several transferable insights can be derived from this for academic libraries.

First: Co-creation requires an institutional attitude of openness. Interpretative authority is partially shared, communication processes become more transparent and, to a certain extent, less controllable. For organisations, and especially for those responsible for communication, this means relativising familiar control logics. Content does not arise entirely from predefined narratives, but develops through dialogue. This 'letting go' is not a renunciation of professionalism, but an expression of confidence in one's own professional substance and in the viability of the joint process. At the same time, it requires a willingness to deal productively with unpredictability and differences in perspective.

Second: Co-creation requires clear structures. Participation is only effective if roles, decision-making processes and objectives are clearly defined. Unclear responsibilities or unspoken expectations can quickly lead to frustration. Co-creation does not mean a lack of hierarchy, but rather a conscious framework within which co-creation is possible. Symbolic participation remains ineffective and can, on the contrary, undermine trust.

Third: The professional self-image of communication work is shifting. In addition to text and media competence, process design, moderation, translation between specialist logics and strategic control of dialogue formats are becoming increasingly important. Communication departments are thus taking on an intermediary role that must balance both internal and external expectations. This role is challenging, as it must enable openness and ensure strategic coherence at the same time.

Fourth: The case study elucidates that co-creation requires time, resources and organisational willingness to learn. Iterative coordination, joint reflection phases and, if necessary, conflict management prolong processes compared to purely internally controlled communication projects. Short-term efficiency is not the main focus here. The added value lies rather in the quality of relationships, increased connectivity and long-term legitimacy.

Fifth: Co-creation opens up new forms of visibility, especially for infrastructure facilities such as libraries. Academic libraries cannot convey their relevance primarily through attention, but rather through co-creation and cooperation. Visibility arises relationally – through participation in professional discourse and through joint projects with the community.

Finally, the case study shows that co-creation is suitable for addressing classic communication goals in an integrated manner. It increases knowledge about offerings, strengthens trust in the institution and can support behavioural changes by jointly developing argumentation patterns and thus making them compatible.

Co-creation thus proves to be not an isolated project instrument, but a strategic structural principle of dialogue-oriented PR for academic libraries. It combines positioning, legitimacy building and organisational development – provided, however, that organisations are prepared to share some of their communicative control and take participation seriously in structural terms.

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