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Maturity as A Way Forward for Improving Organizations' Communication Evaluation and Measurement Practices: A Definition and Concept Explication

Nathan Gilkerson
Marquette University, nathan.gilkerson@marquette.edu

Rebecca Swenson
University of Minnesota - Twin Cities

Fraser Likely
University of Ottawa

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Nathan David Gilkerson
Strategic Communication, Marquette University, Milwaukee, WI

Rebecca Swenson
College of Food, Agricultural, and Natural Resource Sciences, University of Minnesota, St Paul, MN

Fraser Likely
Fraser Likely PR/C Performance, University of Ottawa, Ottawa, Canada

Abstract

Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to propose an explication of the concept of "maturity," as it applies to communication evaluation and measurement (E&M) practice, along with contextualization of recent maturity model adoption within academic and professional communities.

Design/methodology/approach

Drawing from previous work on maturity models within other fields, recent communication scholarship and industry practice, this paper fills a gap in the literature by offering a theoretical conceptualization of communication E&M maturity, including the construct's core dimensions and sub-dimensions.

Findings

Communication E&M maturity is conceptualized into four essential elements: holistic approach, investment, alignment and culture. The contribution of E&M efforts is represented as the direct support of corporate strategy, and ultimately increased value, from the communications function. Operational elements of maturity include levels of analysis, time, budget, tools, skills, process, integration, motivations, relationships and standards.

Originality/value

In exploring the factors necessary for "mature" E&M programs, and specifically emphasizing the need for a holistic approach, along with sufficient investment and alignment, and conducive cultural factors, the research builds upon existing work examining how communication can serve to inform corporate strategy and create value for an organization. Greater understanding and application of the maturity concept has the potential to advance the field by increasing both accountability and credibility for the work done by the communications function.

Keywords

Evaluation, Corporate communication, Measurement, Public relations, Communication management

1. Introduction

Much has been written in the past decade, since it was first highlighted by researchers Anne Gregory and Tom Watson (2008), about the perceived "stasis" afflicting the realm of public relations and communication evaluation and measurement (E&M). Scholars have recently noted the field can look back on more than four decades of study on how practitioners and educators have evolved their efforts to determine the value and measure the effectiveness of public relations, and to promote more sophisticated evaluation within the profession (Volk, 2016; Likely and Watson, 2013). Meanwhile, others have compellingly argued that true evolution (i.e. improvement and innovation) in the area has stalled and perhaps even turned into deadlock, requiring new models and approaches to advance the profession (Macnamara, 2015).

Risking topic fatigue in some circles, the profession continues to engage in debate about the relative strengths and benefits of various E&M models and frameworks, alongside earnest discussion regarding industry best practices and topics such as measurement standardization and strategies for encouraging practical implementation. For the vast majority of communication leaders within a specific company or organization, however, the key questions most commonly posed related to E&M practice focus on where their company stands among its peers and competitors — and what specific steps can be taken to improve the organization's

E&M processes and outcomes. These questions point directly to the maturity of an organization's E&M program, and aspects such as the relative investment and sophistication a company applies to its communication evaluation efforts.

A sign of its perceived utility, the concept of communication E&M maturity has become a focal point of independent but parallel initiatives occurring within both industry and academia. In late 2018, the International Association for Measurement and Evaluation of Communication (AMEC), an industry trade body comprised of vendors, consultants and service providers, announced a major new initiative promoting its "M3" (pronounced "M-Cubed") E&M maturity mapping tool, which is designed to allow users to complete self-assessments of their company or organization's measurement sophistication and practices. Concurrently, a group of academics and practitioners (Swenson *et al.*, 2018) published research similarly proposing the application of a multi-stage maturity model process to evaluate and advance E&M implementation.

While the notion of E&M maturity rests at the center of these initiatives, the core concept has yet to be fully explicated or defined. Although Swenson *et al.* highlight the opportunity the application of maturity may offer the field of E&M, the literature does not explicitly define the concept. Similarly, AMEC's promotions surrounding the M3 tool imply maturity is linked to E&M program "sophistication," but otherwise the concept is not defined. Thus, the following questions guide this research:

> *RQ1.* What are the dimensions and sub-dimensions of E&M maturity?
> *RQ2.* How might a specific E&M maturity model help to improve E&M practice?

This paper explores the utility of maturity-based programs by examining the concept's origins and application in other fields. A review of the communication literature focused on barriers to successful E&M is then followed by an analysis of Swenson *et al.*'s (2018) maturity model, which is based upon the overcoming of these barriers. Informed by this scholarship, the research offers a formal definition and concept explication of "maturity" relative to communication E&M. A discussion of past industry efforts in advancing E&M practice, including drives for best practices and standardization, provides important context. Finally, the paper connects the maturity concept to current industry practice, including AMEC's M3 tool, and discusses the unique dynamics of communication E&M along with opportunities for future maturity-focused research.

2. Literature review

Evaluation & measurement: terminology and reviews of existing scholarship

Within the communications industry, the terms E&M are often used interchangeably, with "measurement" sometimes serving as an umbrella term to broadly describe E&M efforts and activities (Macnamara, 2018b). In his 2018 book on the subject, however, Macnamara notes that measurement is simply the "taking of measures" (i.e. collecting and analyzing data), while evaluation is the use of measurement-based information to learn, and make a judgement or assessment about something – often its relative impact, success or effectiveness. Thus, in communication, measurement without intentional and considered evaluation carries limited value for an organization; evaluation of measurement data is what actually creates insights, informs strategic decision making and provides value to a business and communications function. Put another way, while measurement is a necessary component to the process, especially considering increasing expectations from management and calls for accountability, "evaluation is essential" (Macnamara, 2018b). Several articles offer thorough reviews, assessments and historical accounts of the progression of communication E&M work (Volk, 2016; Macnamara and Likely, 2017; Likely and Watson, 2013; Watson, 2012; Lindenmann, 2005). Additional research has examined the evolution, and to some extent proliferation, of various models of communication E&M over the past several decades (Watson, 2012; Macnamara, 2014; Macnamara and Likely, 2017; Buhmann and Likely, 2018; Macnamara, 2018a).

Maturity and maturity model applications

As is evident from the robust literature and evolution of theoretical models, communication practitioners and leading academics alike have long advocated the communication field more fully embrace a culture of consistent, reliable and trustworthy E&M. Leaders have noted the adoption of E&M best practices not only promotes professional accountability, but strengthens the credibility of the industry as a whole while driving improved value from the communication function for clients and employers (Gregory and Watson, 2008; Macnamara, 2015). As noted earlier, however, the concept of maturity has only recently been applied to assessing and helping advance E&M practice. Before addressing the research questions specific to communication E&M maturity, an understanding of the origins of maturity models and their applications within other industries is useful.

Notions of evolution and a process of "completion" and advancement over time are evident in various academic publications that define the term "maturity model." A piece in the journal Performance Improvement uses this definition: "A maturity model is a structured collection of elements that describe the characteristics of effective processes at different stages of development. It also suggests points of demarcation between stages and methods of transitioning from one stage to another" (Pullen, 2007). Similarly, an article focused on knowledge management emphasizes the versatility of the maturity concept, explaining how "Maturity models describe the development of an entity over time. This entity can be anything of interest: a human being, an organizational function, etc." (Klimko, 2001).

An assessment technique that first gained traction in the field of software engineering, and has since been adopted by a wide range of industries, the application of maturity-model-style tools can help provide an organization with a simple yet effective method of evaluating the quality of its processes (Wendler, 2012). The modern concept of a maturity model can be traced back to 1979, with the publication of a book on quality management by Philip Crosby (1979), who proposed a quality management process maturity grid and outlined how maturity stages could be conceptualized as progressive building blocks, and thus also serve as a simple analysis and assessment tool. That same year, an article on the maturation of data processing was also published, and proposed six distinct and progressive stages of growth necessary to reach process maturity (Nolan, 1979). The basic "stage" technique has since been adapted to a wide variety of fields – and the approach has been used in numerous academic studies conceptualizing, developing and proposing custom models in varying applications. A 2012 meta-analysis of maturity model research that examined the content of more than 230 journal articles found maturity-model-focused publications in more than 20 different domains, with the large majority appearing in venues focused on software development and information technology, as well as government, engineering and education sectors, and business specialties such as supply chain management (Wendler, 2012).

One of the most widely used maturity models is commonly known and frequently referred to as the capability maturity model, or CMM. First developed with funding support from the US Department of Defense, the model's original description notes "the CMM framework represents a path of improvements to increased software-process capability" (Paulk *et al.*, 1993, p. 24). More recent overviews of the CMM (2018) describe it as an assessment tool that utilizes a "five-level evolutionary path of increasingly organized and systematically more mature processes." The representation of the CMM as the path, or the way forward, conveys the maturity model's perceived connection to the notion of movement and progress. Today, a version of the framework serves as the foundation of services sold by the CMMI Institute (2018), a diversified company offering products designed to "elevate business performance and provide insights for baselining and optimizing key organizational capabilities" – and used by over "10,000 organizations in 106 countries around the world."

An important consideration of maturity is whether the concept promotes an idea of progression toward a final, perfect or "complete" ideal (i.e. full maturity), or if it conveys a continuous and never finished process. In his 2012 analysis of maturity model research, Wendler identified two points of view found in developed models: the life cycle perspective and the potential performance perspective. Life-cycle-style-models emphasize a defined evolutionary course and specify and denote a "final" stage, or state, of maturity. Potential performance models, while similarly structured with a progressive development path, are distinct in that the stages focus on potential improvements that may be achieved by progression: "Every stage holds an inherent effectiveness and self-evident value. The user has to decide by himself which level of maturity (i.e. completeness, perfection) is best for the situation" (Wendler, 2012). In considering the features and structures of various models, Wendler determined most contemporary models follow the potential performance approach vs the life-cycle design.

Key basic components of all maturity models include the definition of a set of stages, or levels, in a simplified manner (Klimko, 2001), which are presented to the user in a sequential or hierarchical progression, and designed to "be closely connected to organizational structures and activities" (Gottschalk and Solli-Sæther, 2009). While some models are quite simple and represent just a single criterion and are thus described as one-dimensional, most models used currently are multi-dimensional and consider several elements and perspectives, such as corporate processes, organizational units and problem domains (Lyytinen, 1991). While interest in the development and usage of maturity models has grown substantially in the past two decades, Wendler (2012) in his meta-analysis determined that "many maturity models suffer a lack of a proper validation of their structure and applicability," with qualitative approaches such as case studies (and interviews) used predominantly as the typical methods of validation, when such efforts are employed at all. A longitudinal and multi-method approach using empirical data at various stages of the model, and the application of insights from an ongoing combination of qualitative and quantitative assessments, is recommended for effective refinement and validation of a custom maturity model tool (Wendler, 2012). Reflecting on the purpose of maturity models, Wendler (2012) is careful to point out that while the tools do offer useful benefits, "they are no 'silver bullets'" and cannot solve all problems.

A maturity model developed around overcoming E&M barriers

A significant portion of the existing literature on communication E&M has focused on perceived "barriers" to implementing successful programs. The earlier-referenced Swenson *et al.*'s (2018) maturity model (discussed in detail below), was developed through an in-depth examination of the literature on barriers, and with a general understanding that advancing maturity, as it relates to communication E&M, is directly related to an organization's ability to work past, or overcome, these various barriers. The discussion below categorizes each area, or type, of barrier, and briefly reviews relevant literature, before exploring the development of the Swenson *et al.* model. Barriers to E&M identified in the literature include: lack of time and budget; lack of an organizational performance measurement culture; lack of competencies; lack of an appropriate set of measurement tools; lack of accepted best practices or standards around units of analysis, stages of evaluation, frameworks and terminology; and lack of involvement in the management's strategic planning efforts.

Lack of time and budget

Lack of time is often cited in research and falls into one of two categories: no time to measure, or monitoring, tracking and measuring takes too much staff time. For budget, explanations include: budgets are too tight to allocate resources for E&M or more sophisticated techniques are too costly. Lack of time and budget were regularly reported as primary barriers in earlier studies (Watson, 1994; Xavier *et al.*, 2006; Wright *et al.*, 2009) and put forward by practitioners (Lindenmann, 1990; Gaunt and Wright, 2004; AMEC, 2016a, b, c).

Conversely, Macnamara (2015, 2017) and Macnamara and Zerfass (2017) suggest that these supposed barriers have less relevance today and should be dismissed, arguing that there are numerous low-cost options and the overall spend on strategic communication has grown.

Lack of organizational performance measurement culture

This barrier is presented as a lack of performance measurement culture at the level of the organization or business unit. It can also be understood as a lack of management demand for a strategic communication performance measurement program, or a lack of management support or interest in its results (Baskin *et al.*, 2010). This has been expressed as the fear that management will question the value of communication performance results (Wright *et al.*, 2009), low confidence in the value of available communication metrics (Gaunt and Wright, 2004) and a deep frustration with the management's misunderstanding of strategic communication (Watson and Simmons, 2004). Other scholars have pointed to organizations that are not innovative or proactive, and thus not likely to have a self-evaluative culture (O'Neil, 2013; Thorson *et al.*, 2015; AMEC, 2016a, b, c).

Lack of knowledge and competencies

Multiple studies have found that departmental expertise and analytical confidence was indeed missing (Gaunt and Wright, 2004; Baskin *et al.*, 2010; Cacciatore *et al.*, 2016; Zerfass *et al.*, 2017). Watson and Simmons (2004) suggest that a lack of confidence among practitioners is "illustrated by an inability to make a case for evaluation budgets with their clients or managers" (p. 3). Research has also linked intention to conduct E&M work to practitioner attitudes and perceived behavior control related to E&M expertise and skills (Buhmann and Brønn, 2018).

Lack of tools

This barrier – variously described as tools, techniques or methodologies – is often explained as: the department's technicians employ only basic process, output and outtake measurement tools; the organization itself does not employ more sophisticated performance measurement techniques; or other functions have ownership of more sophisticated measurement tools but the communication department lacks access (O'Neil, 2013; Tench *et al.*, 2017). Ownership includes those functions involved with customer relationship management, brand image, employee engagement, stakeholder management, corporate reputation and corporate social responsibility. Many studies have also focused on the sophistication level of research methodologies employed by practitioners (Gregory, 2001; Baskin *et al.*, 2010; O'Neil, 2013; Place, 2015). Some studies suggest that a practitioner's emphasis on basic tools at the expense of advanced tools derives from either a lack of expertise (Xavier *et al.*, 2006; Baskin *et al.*, 2010; Michaelson and Stacks, 2011) or a misunderstanding of program objective setting and its complexities (Gregory, 2001; O'Neil, 2013).

Lack of standards

A lack of industry standards is a more recent identifiable barrier. Practitioners and scholars often articulate it as a lack of consensus on terminology and their definitions, a lack of consensus on a "best" evaluation model, and a lack of consensus on the various units of analysis for E&M. Various studies report this barrier (Wright *et al.*, 2009; AMEC, 2011; Ragan, 2013; Thorson *et al.*, 2015; AMEC, 2016a, b, c) and a number of researchers have commented on the state of industry standardization (Michaelson and Stacks, 2011; Macnamara, 2014, 2017; Macnamara and Likely, 2017). Researchers such as Watson (1997), Macnamara (2014) and Buhmann and Likely (2018) commented on the lack of shared definitions, even for terms like measurement and evaluation. Thorson *et al.* (2015) found that 25 percent of respondents in their survey of senior-level communication practitioners in the USA were trying to standardize in some way.

Lack of strategic management

With this barrier, research focuses on how communication planning goals are tied to client program objectives. It also addresses if the communication department is aligned with the strategizing, planning and decision-making functions of the organization and its business units, and if there is a strong link with organizational financial goals. Various studies have examined the placement of E&M within strategic management, particularly with regard to planning systems (Baerns, 2008; Baskin *et al.*, 2010; Tench *et al.*, 2017; Zerfass *et al.*, 2017). Others have looked at the return on investment or concepts such as market mixed modeling as part of the process of linking communication results to financial goals (Gaunt and Wright, 2004; Baskin *et al.*, 2010; Likely and Watson, 2013; Zerfass *et al.*, 2017). Zerfass *et al.* (2017) report "the value of data for managing strategic communication seems to be overlooked by many communication departments today" (p. 12).

Drawing from the literature on barriers, and informed by a series of interviews conducted among large-company communication executives viewed as E&M industry leaders, Swenson *et al.* (2018) examined how organizations regarded among their peers as implementing highly effective measurement programs have successfully overcome the known barriers. As part of their analysis, Swenson *et al.* (2018) developed and proposed an assessment tool, described as a "scalable maturity model that aids in the development, formalization, and optimization of strategic communication measurement and evaluation" (Table I).

The Swenson *et al.* maturity model is multi-dimensional in its structured representation of four evolving stages or sequential categories (early, mid-, advanced- and optimal growth), seven common "barriers" to overcome, including time, budget, culture, knowledge/skills, research tools, industry standards and strategic management, and four distinct increasing "levels" of perspective (channel/media/product/message, campaign/program, organizational and societal). Along with outlining short descriptions of each distinct categorical stage, a unique contribution of the model is its final levels of analysis dimension, which promotes a holistic understanding of evaluation and guides the user's attention through the spectrum of lower-level "tactical" perspectives (within early maturity), to the higher-level organizational concerns and societal, big-picture "license to operate" considerations. This perspective supports and informs the holistic approach core dimension of E&M maturity.

Although not explicitly named within the model, another key finding from Swenson *et al.*'s (2018) research was the crucial role of alignment within various aspects of successful E&M programs. Though often described by participants using varying anecdotes and terminologies – including the application of E&M for driving key adjustments (to tactics, and strategies), integrating communication programs (with broader business priorities) and effectively positioning the communication function within the larger organizational structure – alignment, in its various forms, was regularly viewed as an essential element of E&M that helped to bring value to the organization. This emphasis on alignment directly connects to recent scholarship examining and explicating the concept of alignment and its varied role as a "central aspect" within strategic communication (Volk and Zerfass, 2018). In detailing the various types and applications of alignment within (and outside) an organization, and its processes, Volk and Zerfass conceptualize and present a comprehensive definition of alignment, emphasizing effective alignment is essential to successful strategic communication. This understanding of the necessity of alignment similarly positions the concept as a core dimension of E&M maturity.

3. Toward a definition and conceptualization of E&M maturity

Scholars and practitioners alike have long emphasized the importance of clarity and shared understanding as it relates to terminology and key constructs. Despite its central application to recent initiatives, communication E&M maturity has not been formally defined or explicated. Following a similar process used in past communication research for explication of core concepts (Kiousis, 2002; Volk and Zerfass, 2018), including the exploration of general historical background, identification of existing definitions, scrutiny of relevant literature, and review and determination of relationships between key elements and concepts (Chaffee, 1991), the construct of E&M "maturity" was closely examined.

The communication literature demonstrates a holistic approach for E&M is paramount, in that it is required for understanding and recognizing the complexity of the public relations function. Research also shows that without sufficient investment, however, none of the process occurs to begin with – and, similarly, without alignment (i.e. the application and usage of E&M efforts), the investment of both personnel and operational costs is of negligible value. Finally, scholarship has concluded that an organizational culture that is supportive and receptive to the benefits of E&M – and, ideally, demanding of its rigorous presence – promotes the necessary investment of resources and opportunities for alignment from its generated insights. Working in concert, the combined elements of a holistic approach, investment, alignment and culture allow communication E&M efforts to help inform corporate strategy. The ultimate support of strategy is essential because, as visualized by Zerfass and Viertmann (2017), corporate strategy rests at the center of how communication can create value for an organization. Thus, drawing from and building upon the existing literature, including a synthesis of the scholarship on barriers, a definition for the concept of maturity is proposed:

Maturity within communication evaluation and measurement (E&M), dependent upon a *holistic approach* and understanding of the activity, is the relative degree of *investment* (in E&M efforts), *alignment* of activities and decision-making (within and outside the unit and organization), and organizational *culture* conducive to utilizing insights. The overall level of maturity serves to create value through the support of corporate strategy.

This conceptualization of E&M maturity can be thought of as a "four-legged stool," in that each core component (a holistic approach, investment, alignment and culture) captures an inherently unique, but also essential, aspect of the phenomenon. As represented in Figure 1, E&M maturity depends on the presence and degree of each of the four necessary components. The definition allows for qualitative assessment of the its components, in particular aspects such as alignment or culture, which are essential for mature E&M but may be dynamic and difficult to quantify.

The above designation of four distinctive elements of E&M maturity speaks to the first part of *RQ1*, which asks about both the dimensions and sub-dimension of E&M maturity: the four legs of the stool are the main dimensions of the construct.

Addressing the second part of *RQ1*, which explores the sub-dimensions of E&M maturity, the proposed conceptualization draws more deeply upon the reviewed literature on E&M barriers. Extending the basic conceptualization of maturity outlined above to operational levels, the four core dimensions of E&M can be broken down into distinct and measurable elements. Designation of these sub-dimensions of E&M maturity allows for a simple visualization and understanding of the construct. As illustrated in Figure 2, the presence of a holistic approach can be operationalized through the adoption of levels of analysis (see Buhmann and Likely, 2018; Swenson *et al.*, 2018, for descriptions of various levels: messages, products and media/channels; campaigns/programs; organizational; society), and accepts that evaluation, and not "measurement," is the primary goal and focus of activities, and allows communicators to see how value can be determined at various places or levels of production and output. The importance is the need to have a sophisticated understanding of the goods and services a function produces and their effect on various aspects of organizational strategizing, planning and execution processes. Each level of analysis has its own measurement regime.

Arguably, the most straight-forward dimension, investment, can be measured through basic aspects such as allocation of time and budget for E&M activities, use of specific tools (e.g. software platforms, etc.), and hiring and designating of skilled people capable of conducting analysis and insights generation work. As demonstrated in the review of existing E&M literature, lack of time and budget have historically been among the most frequently cited factors by practitioners as perceived barriers to implementing effective E&M programs (Watson, 1994; Xavier *et al.*, 2006; Wright *et al.*, 2009). Similarly, research has found professionals commonly view access to measurement tools, combined with trained staff with specialized evaluation expertise, as inherent E&M challenges (Gregory, 2001; Baskin *et al.*, 2010). The grouping of these four sub-dimensions (time, budget, tools and skills) of E&M Maturity under the broader investment dimension speaks to the ability, or opportunity, organizations have for strengthening and prioritizing these elements of their E&M program, with an understanding that increasing levels (or building up capabilities) in these respective areas can pay dividends relative to insight generation and strategic success.

Alignment, as articulated by Volk and Zerfass (2018), is a highly complex and wide-ranging concept, yet it can also be broken down into two simple aspects: outcomes and processes. For the purposes of operationalization of maturity, one component of alignment has been labeled to represent the ongoing process of aligning organizational efforts based upon E&M insights, while the other, integration, represents the level of alignment that has occurred. Integration could be thought of as an assessment of the tangible “nuts and bolts” elements to implementing alignment-focused actions. Both are thus connected to the strategic management decisions made within the organization. In their examination of the construct, Volk and Zerfass (2018) defined primary alignment as rooted in the connection between communication strategy and overall organizational strategy, and secondary alignment as the rationality of various communication activities, compared against overall communication strategy and organizational goals. The Volk and Zerfass explication and framework of the concept also distinguishes between ideas such as internal and external communication alignment, alignment within and across organizational functions, and alignment in management and organizational processes. This conceptualization of alignment works in unison with the proposed sub-dimensions of E&M maturity, since E&M is inherent at least in some way to achieving each type of alignment. In breaking alignment into the two sub-dimensions within E&M maturity, the notion of process can be thought of as the degree of ongoing efforts being put into (each unique aspect of) alignment – while integration is the level of successful alignment, throughout the organization, which has been achieved.

Finally, as the fourth component, elements of culture include the motivations (or lack thereof) within the organization, and its people, for conducting rigorous and effective E&M; the relationships between and among personnel, whether it be executive leadership dynamics or attitudes of lower-level support staff; and, finally, the adoption and regular usage of designated standards for collecting, measuring and reporting communication activities and metrics. As noted earlier, the broad category of organizational culture has been highlighted by numerous scholars examining E&M barriers, with research focusing on whether specific environments value and demand performance measurement within the communications function. Research has examined aspects such as accountability expectations from organizational leadership and management’s awareness and understanding of the dynamics of strategic communication (Wright *et al.*, 2009; O’Neil, 2013). Interview-based research has shown that relationships among colleagues can influence E&M practice, in particular rapport between communication function leaders and organizational management related to aspects of trust and credibility (Swenson *et al.*, 2018). The conceptual dimension of culture also encompasses the organization’s attitude toward and application of communication measurement standards, a function of the professionalism (and rigor and consistency) with which E&M efforts are conducted. (Discussed in detail below, standardization of E&M practices has seen limited success.)

4. Discussion: maturity models and advancing E&M practice in industry

While the refinement of models and explication of conceptual definitions is an important exercise, a likely question from communication leaders working in industry aligns with *RQ2*, which specifically asks how maturity model-based tools might help to guide E&M practice forward. Before exploring that question, however, it is worthwhile to examine the evolution of past E&M initiatives from professional groups and associations, including some of the challenges such efforts have faced while working to advance E&M adoption in the field. The current initiative to leverage maturity as a driver of E&M is best understood with historical context via a review of recent industry-sponsored E&M efforts.

Referenced earlier, a key international entity within this area of the industry, particularly among traditional media, social media and digital measurement consultants, vendors and service providers, has been AMEC, a trade body which was originally formed and known as the Association of Media Evaluation Companies (Watson, 2012). AMEC (2010) has provided industry leadership with a series of measurement-focused initiatives in the past decade, including the original 2010 issuing of "The Barcelona Declaration of Measurement Principles," a list of seven basic measurement principles, or broad "Best Practices," to assist communicators in assessing and adopting communication evaluation efforts focused on things like outcomes vs outputs. An outgrowth of the principles, in 2011, AMEC also launched a measurement effectiveness assessment instrument titled the "Valid Metrics Framework" – which was followed up, a year later, with an updated version incorporating social media considerations (AMEC, 2011, 2012). Several years later, AMEC also promoted a re-launch of the Barcelona Principles, with the newer "2.0" version addressing the heightened importance of social media, and promoting a stronger emphasis on evaluating outcomes (vs only measuring outputs and outtakes) and connecting evaluation results to overall organizational performance (AMEC, 2015a, b).

AMEC (2016c) launched its "Integrated Evaluation Framework" (IEF), an online tool which walks the user through a sequentialized process of assessing an organization's communications efforts within categories, including Objectives, Inputs, Activities, Outputs, Outtakes, Outcomes, and Organizational Impact, and applying "drop down" style menu options to help determine and develop evaluation strategies (AMEC, 2016c). As part of the introduction of the IEF, AMEC (2016b) highlighted how the tool's design was rooted in social science research and developed by "look[ing] beyond PR evaluation models" and applying knowledge from other fields and disciplines such as performance management. An AMEC (2016a) web page tells readers how the framework "shows how to 'operationalise' the Barcelona Principles and demonstrates how to turn Principles into action, and to finally prove the value of our work." Most recently, in late 2018, AMEC (2018) launched its "M3 Measurement Maturity Mapper" (described below), an online tool which positioned the existing elements of the organization's recommended metrics and framework within the broader context of maturity. From 2010 to 2018, AMEC's focus moved from measuring effectiveness of traditional media, social media and digital communications to evaluating campaign planning inputs, campaign outcomes and the effect of those outcomes on business unit and organizational strategies and, ultimately, organizational goals. This evolution of perspective is reflective of the conceptualization of E&M maturity proposed here, in that AMEC's more recent initiatives, particularly the M3, have adopted a more holistic approach.

The challenge of establishing "standards" of E&M

Another key element, as well as perhaps one of the most debated and challenging aspects, of the push toward improving communication E&M practice has been the mixed success of academic and industry attempts to designate and agree upon specific "standards" of public relations and communications research metrics and terminology. As Macnamara (2014) noted in 2014, "despite a move towards standards, there is lack of consistency and agreement within industry even on basic metrics" (p. 13) – and part of the reason the field is "going round in circles" is connected to weak engagement between practitioners and academics attempting to develop standards, a dynamic which unfortunately has "resulted in insular debates and simplistic solutions" (p. 23). Early industry and scholarly efforts were made attempting to define and agree upon numerous measurement related terms, which multiplied with the advent of social media (Lindenmann, 1997; Stacks, 2006; Michaelson and Stacks, 2011; Paarlberg, 2013; Paine, 2018). With newer labels like "views," "tone" (or "sentiment"), and "engagement," being added on top of traditional output focused metrics, such as audience, reach and impressions, digital technology – and the widespread usage of social channels for public relations campaigns – compounded the need (and spurred industry desire) for common definitions of terminology and standard measurement approaches for communication metrics.

In 2011, a co-sponsored initiative, supported by industry organizations including the IPR, the Council of PR Firms, the Global Alliance for Public Relations and Communication Management, PRSA and AMEC, was formed to address the issue, with the establishment of the Coalition for Public Relations Research Standards (Macnamara, 2014). Following the guidelines and six-step adoption process recommended by the International Standards Organization (ISO) (IPR, 2018a), the Coalition collaborated with business and communication industry leaders, and in 2012 released a 12-page document outlining definitions and proposed methods for determining five basic standards related to traditional media analysis – with the initial guidelines "designed to be used in the interim pending industry feedback" (IPR, 2012). A year later, IPR announced four large US-based companies, including McDonald's USA, General Electric, General Motors and Southwest Airlines (all "major buyers of public relations research and measurement services") had agreed to adopt the first round of standards within their organizations (IPR, 2013a, b; Bradley, 2013). In his critical analysis of progress within the standards movement, Macnamara (2014) acknowledged other efforts around this time, including AMEC's (2012) introduction of its Valid Metrics for Social Media standards, and work done by a wide-ranging group of industry representatives known as the "Social Media Measurement Standards Conclave" (or #SMMStandards Conclave).

Despite a 2012 AMEC European Summit presentation titled "The March to Standards" (Marklein and Paine, 2012), evidence shows achieving standardization within the industry in the years since these efforts has been challenging and seen mixed results (Buhmann *et al.*, 2018; Paine, 2018). Buhmann *et al.* state that "Standards development is advancing on two levels consistent with ISO recommendations: the level of technical standards for the measurement of communication, in other words, 'how to standards,' as in how to measure impressions and how to calculate ROI; and the level of process standards for evaluation as in the broader frameworks (of which measurement itself is just one important element)" (p. 115). Initial work under the Coalition for Public Relations Research Standards banner on traditional media analysis standards (e.g. see Eisenmann *et al.*, 2015) and on social media standards (Paine, 2018) has stalled. The Coalition itself never did examine E&M frameworks.

As leading academics have noted, there are complex factors involved, especially among competing agencies and measurement service providers – many of which utilize "black box" approaches, based on proprietary data collection and analysis techniques, in selling clients their measurement services – which may be serving in some ways to create disincentives or structural impediments to the industry's willingness, or ability, to adopt proposed standards (Macnamara, 2014; Buhmann *et al.*, 2018). As Paine (2018) suggests, the work to date on social media measurement standards are more "guidelines and best practices" than actual standards. The same can be said for traditional media measurement standards.

Complexities, however, and the inherent challenges in identifying and implementing standards, are not solely reserved to industry, as was the determination of a recent "task force" group, made up of academics and industry practitioners, charged with examining existing public relations planning, objective-setting and measurement models, in order to offer a recommendation on model standardization (Likely, 2017; IPR, 2018c). Members of the Task Force on Standardization of Communication Planning/Objective Setting and Evaluation/Measurement Models (Buhmann *et al.*, 2018), with a mandate to explore standards, produced a number of peer reviewed research papers as well as blog posts directed to professionals but this output did not focus on standards *per se*, given the Task Force's determination after extensive study that measurement standards were probably impossible and that evaluation standards were more likely best left at evaluation best practice models. While limited progress has been made, identification of a single standardized (or universal) "model" (or system for conducting measurement and evaluations for use within the field), based upon existing tools, has been elusive. The industry saga of establishing E&M-focused standards is linked to today's focus on maturity because maturity model-based tools do not necessarily require agreement related to specific processes or terminologies, but instead focus on the nature of an organization's own internal practices.

Maturity as a driver of E&M – an industry association push for a maturity "mapper"

The proposed definition and conceptualization of maturity is useful when considering *RQ2*, and the broader question of how maturity models might help to guide E&M practice. From industry, AMEC's (2018) launch of an interactive online tool, the "M3 Measurement Maturity Mapper" represents the most noteworthy application of maturity in the profession to date, and the ambition from industry leaders the concept will serve to help advance communication E&M adoption beyond the success of prior initiatives. The tool guides the user, presumably a corporate communication executive or measurement consultant working with a client, through a detailed questionnaire that asks questions about the user's organization, such as size, industry, global region and current measurement activities related to earned, owned, shared (including social) and paid media. The M3 prompts users to indicate basic information, such as how frequently they report various metrics, such as volume of coverage (including "advertising value equivalencies"), coverage quality, social media posts and total impressions, before probing about more sophisticated activities such as the use of KPIs, evaluation benchmarks, measurement for planning, and the regular review and adjustment of organizational goals, objectives and strategy based upon evaluation-generated insights.

Connected to the above discussions, and this study's conceptualization of E&M maturity, the Mapper also gauges aspects of organizational measurement culture, explores internal relationship dynamics, and asks users about the application of innovative technologies and "more advanced tools and techniques," such as big data analysis, randomized control trials, and the tracking of cultural and societal trends (AMEC, 2018). Upon completion, the user is provided with a series of benchmarked percentages indicating their company's total overall performance and relative scores in reporting, planning and impact categories. A final report highlights specific strengths of the user's organization and recommends actions to improve the relative maturity level within each area.

In unveiling the new Maturity Mapper at the organization's 2018 Global Summit event in Barcelona, AMEC representatives were careful to repeatedly stress to audience members that it was NOT "a model," but instead was a "tool," a diagnostic device, or just a "Mapper." The implicit message, which was humorosly depicted in an infographic summarizing the conference session – including numerous declarations ("It's a TOOL!!" "Nope, not a model." "Really: NOT a Model.") – was that AMEC was aware of and sensitive to industry fatigue and past baggage from previously introduced models of measurement. Still, the M3's design and use of progressive stages (basic, standard, advanced, fully integrated), and varied assessment elements of reporting, planning and impact, positions it squarely in the realm of traditional multi-dimensional maturity models.

The tool's incorporation of culture-based questions, assessment of overall E&M investment, and items measuring the organization's integration of E&M activities (i.e. alignment) also correspond directly with this study's defined dimensions and sub-dimensions of E&M maturity. Furthermore, the M3's climbing themed imagery (showing the pathway of measurement maturity as a journey to the top of the mountain) extends the map metaphor and conveys that the tool's purpose is to guide the user forward. By emphasizing the benefits and benchmarking abilities of the M3, AMEC's Mapper tool, with its easy-to-follow and understand interactive survey design, circumvents much of the perceived tedium and aversion associated with models while providing users a simple method for self-assessment and guidance for increasing measurement and evaluation sophistication. In addition, the M3's reliance on self-assessment indicators, and use of relatively broad survey item terminology, similarly sidesteps much of the debate, confusion and controversy related to industry standards.

In reference to *RQ2*, it is too early to assess whether maturity-focused initiatives such as AMEC's M3 will succeed in advancing E&M practice within the communications industry, but the tool does appear to be designed well to speak directly to the key questions and concerns of practitioners: where does my organization stand compared to peers and competitors, and what can we do to improve? In framing the conversation around E&M through the concept of maturity, tools like the M3 (and the Swenson *et al.* maturity model) explicitly show practitioners that the evaluation of communication is an ongoing progressive process, and one that can be strategically invested in and continually improved upon. The potential performance perspective of maturity model design allows users to assess levels of E&M that are achievable and optimal, and intentionally pursue steps necessary to improve. Maturity tools like AMEC's M3, and its feature allowing users to benchmark their own organization's E&M practices among industry peers, may harness the demands of a competitive marketplace, helping motivate communication executives to invest in measurement efforts – or perhaps provide data and persuasive "ammunition" to make budgetary requests to management for E&M prioritization.

Maturity models, and the explication of the concept's key dimensions proposed here, should help users re-envision E&M barriers instead as potential strategic opportunities. Beyond "best practices," which often focus just on certain aspect of E&M, or formal models which can preoccupy users with things like stages and categories, the concept of maturity acknowledges there may not be one best way to conduct E&M efforts – and that practical solutions are typically unique and specific to an organization's goals and capabilities. Conceptualizing maturity as reliant upon a holistic approach to M&E, combined with essential investment, alignment and culture, should help practitioners better understand the "big picture" dynamics within their evaluation efforts, while an appreciation of the concept's sub-dimensions may support day-to-day decision making. Perhaps the most promising aspect of maturity model approaches for advancing E&M practice is that the maturity assessment process can help to simplify and demystify the (at times, esoteric and technical) topic and provide professionals with a practical method for initiating discussion around ways to improve.

A candid reflection and assessment of the complex nature of E&M culture

While maturity-focused initiatives give reason for optimism, it is also worthwhile to thoughtfully revisit the topic of culture, both at the organization-level and industry-wide, and the important role that dynamics such as relationships and motivations may play in the "real world" implementation of E&M efforts. Recent research by Romenti and Murtarelli (2018) addressed potential "conflicting logics" between communication departments and management leaders, which could influence the implementation and maturity level of E&M systems within an organization. In their contribution to this Special Issue, Murtarelli *et al.* (2019) argued for more research that closely examines contextual factors of effective E&M management processes, including, e.g. evaluative capacity and history, evaluation culture and leadership, stakeholder–evaluator relationships, and evaluation communicative network.

The wider perspective of the Murtarelli *et al.* research aligns closely with the proposed definition and conceptualization of E&M maturity, in that it speaks directly to notions of adopting a holistic approach to measurement, with multiple levels of analysis, and the role of organizational culture and professional business relationships. If a company does not value, or is even culturally resistant to, improving E&M efforts, spearheading such an initiative may be minimally beneficial or even present professional risks. In a similar vein, Swenson *et al.* (2018) also concluded that maturity of evaluation practice was linked to key cultural and behavioral aspects, including the overall measurement culture within an organization, strength of relationships with senior management, authority given to the communication department, and the ability to build and leverage reports with value, including actionable insights to influence organizational decision making. In other words, motivations and ability to advance E&M maturity are likely very dependent upon relationships and organizational culture. It might also depend upon the level of skill of individual communicators, as Buhmann and Brønn (2018) pointed out. In a study that used the theory of planned behavior to test factors that prevent or support measurement and evaluation efforts among communicators, they found that attitude toward outcome measurement and evaluation and perceived behavioral control, specifically skill or capability with measurement and evaluation, were the strongest drivers of practitioners' intention to measure and evaluate communication initiatives (Buhmann and Brønn, 2018).

Other scholars have also speculated on ways in which behavioral components might stunt maturity. In a provocative challenge to many industry assumptions, Nothhaft and Stensson (2019) in this Special Issue suggest that communication practitioners' self-interest as business people might hinder progress in E&M practices. According to their argumentation, the communication industry has continually been overpromising on communication outcomes and under-delivering on actual communication performance. Following this line of thought, maturity of communication E&M might be deadlocked because communication practitioners need to play this game to survive, and in reality, more rigorous practices might impede practitioners' competitive advantage and demonstrable success (Nothhaft and Stensson, 2019). The perspective that advancing E&M maturity may not necessarily be in the best interest of many communication professionals – or, even at a macro level, the broader communications industry as a whole – is a thought-provoking consideration. The arguments posed by Nothhaft and Stensson are worth further study and reflection, and can be applied against several of the dimensions of E&M maturity including aspects of motivations and holistic approach.

5. Conclusion and directions for future research

In offering a definition of E&M maturity, and a practical concept explication of the dimensions and sub-dimensions of the construct, informed by and framed around existing research into E&M barriers, this research aims to help clarify understanding of the topic for both academics and professionals alike – and contribute to the ongoing conversation around how E&M practices can be improved, hopefully helping to strengthen the credibility of the broader communication field. Looking down from a higher perspective, while there has certainly been a "long and winding road" (Macnamara, 2014, p. 8), it does seem as though progress has recently been made, and more momentum may now be taking hold within both academic and industry circles for advancing communication E&M. As Buhmann *et al.* (2018) note, "the last decade saw more consensus within the greater E&M community of practice than all the previous three decades beforehand."

Future research might offer an in-depth study of maturity and how concepts provided here are managed in practice. Longitudinal studies that assess the impact of applying a maturity lens to advancing the communication research, measurement and evaluation practices of diverse organizations is one promising avenue for scholarship. An empirical and comparative look at conditions that support maturity would also strengthen the theoretical foundations of evaluation and help translate insights into practice. Finally, opportunity exists for more conceptual exploration into the foundational elements of E&M, and the preliminary and ongoing research component of the process, which often receives scant attention and discussion, suffers from implicit assumptions regarding its presence, or lacks theoretical connections within professional and academic conceptualizations.

Tracing the progression of events from an early emphasis on best practices, including the Barcelona Principles declarations, to the important but challenged movement toward consensus definitions of key terms and industry standards, to today's focus and interest in advancing E&M maturity, instead of just "reinventing the wheel" (Macnamara and Likely, 2017), perhaps the field is beginning to roll forward. As many have noted, the future viability and success of the industry is at stake. It is still important, however, to remember that, as experts from other fields have warned, the maturity model is *not* a silver bullet (Wendler, 2012) – and past initiatives have suffered from unrealistic expectations due to a preoccupation with the idea that a single "mythical magic formula" or silver bullet solution exists (Macnamara, 2014). Only time and careful evaluation and measurement will tell whether the notion of maturity is to become useful to the cause. It is the modest hope of the researchers that the contributions made in this study, if nothing else, will help to further the conversation on maturity, and may serve to promote both its understanding and its usage.

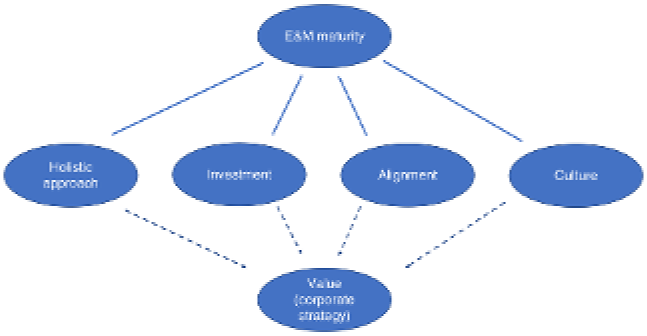

Figure 1 Conceptualization of E&M maturity

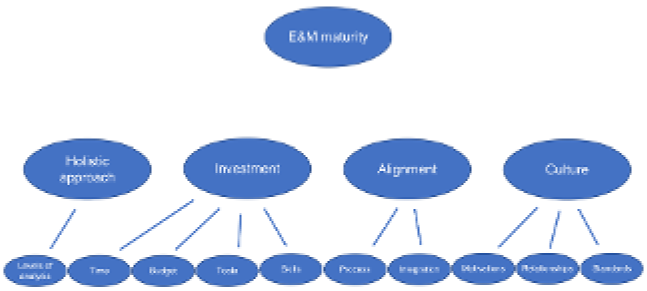

Figure 2 Operationalization of E&M maturity

Table I Maturity model for communication department evaluation and measurement program sophistication

MATURITY MODEL FOR COMMUNICATION DEPARTMENT EVALUATION & MEASUREMENT PROGRAM SOPHISTICATION

Optimal Growth	Time is not an issue.	We have sufficient budget to meet the costs of organizational and societal impact evaluation.	We report actionable insights on the communication impact on intangible assets (reputation; brand image; stakeholder relations; CSR) to the organization's executives.	We have scientific expertise on staff and/or we work with expertise in other functional areas and/or suppliers and we customize the available data stream to create unique dashboards.	We employ research tools that capture stakeholder and societal perspectives, organizational-stakeholder and organizational-societal relationships and communication impact on these.	We establish our own standards and best practices for our communication evaluation program and communication measurement systems.	We use measurement data to determine if the organization has 'license to operate' support within its constituencies.	Societal Level
Advanced Growth	Time is not an issue.	We have sufficient budget to meet the costs of outcome and business impact evaluation.	We report communication outcomes to business unit and organizational clients and the impact that meeting our goals has on their tangible program objectives.	We have expertise on staff to capture and analyze outcome data and its impact on other data sources and/or to work with expertise in other functional areas and/or suppliers and we trained staff to apply learnings.	We employ research tools that capture the impact of communication outcomes on business and organizational performance objectives.	We establish our own standards and best practices for our communication evaluation program and its impact on business and organizational performance objectives.	We use measurement data to determine if meeting the goals for our communication activities impacted on the objectives set for business unit or organizational programs.	Organiza-tional Level
Mid Growth	Time is not an issue.	We have sufficient budget to meet the costs of communication outcome evaluation.	We report communication outcomes within the department to improve our project/campaign goal setting and planning.	We have expertise on staff to capture and analyze outcome data and/or to work with suppliers and we trained staff to apply learnings.	We employ research tools that capture communication outcomes, such as attitudinal, opinion and behavioural changes.	We establish our own standards and best practices for our communication evaluation program and/or we learn from outside experts.	We use measurement data to determine if we met the goals we set for our communication activities.	Campaign/ Program Levels
Early Growth	Time is not an issue.	We have sufficient budget to meet the costs of output and outtake measurement.	We aggregate measurement data and report that data only within the communication department in order to improve our communication processes.	We have trained staff members to capture output data and to monitor and analyze traditional media, social media and digital outtake data and/or to work with suppliers.	We employ research tools that capture activity outputs and outtakes, such results as coverage, reach, tonality, engagement, and awareness.	We establish our own standards and best practices for our communication evaluation program and/or we learn from outside experts.	We use measurement data to determine the effectiveness of our communication processes (for channels; products; messages).	Channel Media Product Message Level
BEYOND BARRIERS	TIME	BUDGET	CULTURE	KNOWLEDGE SKILLS	RESEARCH TOOLS	INDUSTRY STANDARDS	STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT	ANALYSIS OF LEVELS
IDENTIFIED BARRIERS	TIME	BUDGET	CULTURE	KNOWLEDGE SKILLS	RESEARCH TOOLS	INDUSTRY STANDARDS	STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT	IDENTIFIED BARRIERS
	We have so much work, that taking time for proper measurement is a luxury.	We think spending money on execution gives a better bang for the buck.	Our organization doesn't have a robust self-measurement culture.	As a staff, we haven't the confidence in math, stats, analytics, etc.	We only use tools for output and outtake tracking and monitoring.	The terminology we see is confusing and contradictory.	We do not set measurable goals for our communication activities.	
	Tracking, monitoring and measuring our activities takes a regular and routine time commitment, which we can't make.	We were not allotted a specific budget for evaluation and measurement.	There is no demand from management for us to provide measures.	There's no impetus to pursue educational or training opportunities.	More sophisticated tools are owned by other functions and we don't have access to data.	We have no knowledge of any industry measurement standards and each supplier seems to have its own 'better' proprietary system.	Our activities do not stem from or tie to business unit or organizational measurable objectives.	
	More sophisticated evaluation takes too much time, particularly for the long period of evaluation required.	We believe more sophisticated evaluation is too costly and we can't rationalize its benefit.	Management has not supported any evaluation and measurement initiatives we've brought forward.	We don't have specialized expertise on staff nor do we employ E&M specialists who could coach and mentor.	Even if we bought more sophisticated methodologies, we still wouldn't have the ability to leverage the resulting data.	We don't see that industry has a best way to tie together all that we could measure into a single framework. (silver bullet)	We do not input research, info/data or insight into organizational strategic management processes.	

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Corresponding author

Nathan David Gilkerson can be contacted at: nathan.gilkerson@marquette.edu