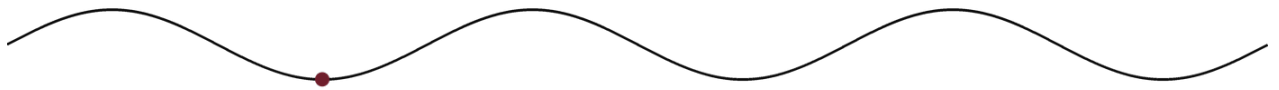


WHAT IF.

A *metamodern* manifesto for
responsible persuasion
in the polycrisis ✦



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Wicked times demand more than tame solutions.

Crises no longer take turns. Climate, conflict, inequality, the unknown consequences of artificial intelligence: they intersect and compound, in what Adam Tooze calls the polycrisis. At its heart sits radical uncertainty: not risk to be calculated, but situations genuinely equivocal and indeterminate, where the future refuses to hold still long enough to be planned against. *This is the condition in which every act of communication now occurs.*

Problems come in kinds, and the kinds matter.

- **Tame problems** (see Rittel and Webber, 1973) yield to standard operating procedures, SMART objectives and KPIs. This is where most day-to-day practice legitimately lives.
- **Wicked problems** are complex, interdependent, open-ended, they resist definition and have no single right answer.
- **Super wicked problems** (like climate change and pandemics) exceed even our organizational structures.

The category error our field keeps committing is applying tame means to wicked problems. Not only this is doomed to fail, it creates a false sense of security that makes things worse.

Organized persuasive communication (or PR/Comms by whatever name) meets this condition still holding modernist commitments built for firmer ground: excellence frameworks, managerial control, measurement in service of a seat at the table, and a studied silence about its own uneasy alliance with persuasion.

This manifesto is a reorientation: toward responsibility and accountability at every level of the work, toward the persuasion and AI literacies the work now demands, and toward an honest account of what this field is for in society (beyond thus its immediate needs in organisations, institutions, associations etc.).

It begins where honest reorientation must: with the tensions that cannot be resolved, only held.

Five tensions. Held, not solved.

What follows are not problems awaiting frameworks. They are the permanent conditions of responsible practice and the honest starting point for everything after. We believe that a practice that claims to have resolved them has stopped paying attention.



The mandate. *Paid by one, answerable to all.*

Practitioners serve clients, bosses, organizations: that is the job, and the rent. And the work shapes publics, discourse, and the conditions of shared life: that is the consequence, whether acknowledged or not. Both loyalties are real. Neither cancels the other. The modernist toolkit resolves this by making organisational interest primary and everything else secondary; the activist stance resolves it the other way. These resolutions cancel each other out and out of this tension there is more than one way out. This is where the work is done: inside the tension advocating and accommodating along a continuum, deciding case by case, and owning each decision.



The uncertainty. *Decide now. Know later, if ever.*

Humans do not know what the future holds, and communicators must act anyway under radical uncertainty, among unknown unknowns, on evidence that might change dramatically at any point. The tame reflex is to manufacture confidence: more data, tighter forecasts, thicker decks. The honest alternative is to decide provisionally and say so: document assumptions, build in revision, and treat every plan as a hypothesis wearing a deadline. Confidence is not a virtue when the ground is moving. *Revisability is.*



The persuasion. *We do it. We don't say it.*

This field persuades. Engagement, storytelling, dialogue, community – these are all cleaner, gentler, laundered words. And they've been used so often that the euphemism became an image problem of its own: stakeholder publics distrust most what refuses to name its intent.

Owning the persuasive intent is not a confession; it is the precondition of legitimacy. Persuasion, openly declared and responsibly practiced (truthful, authentic, respectful, equitable, socially responsible) can be defended. Persuasion denied cannot.



The value. *Whose value, at which scale, on whose clock?*

A simple project with immediate effect can honestly speak of social impact (the change the organization caused, countable now, inside-out) and of social value (the worth stakeholders themselves judge it to have, granted or withheld, outside-in). Complex and connected work plays out on other clocks entirely: public value, settled in deliberation, asking who was in the room when direction was set; societal value, compounded across generations, invisible to any campaign cycle.

Each register's blind spot is another register's focus. The temptation is to harmonise them into one metric. This would quietly hand 'what counts' to whoever owns the standard.

These concepts are distinct and we need to make them conversant: *connection, not harmonisation*. Name the register you are claiming, admit what it cannot see, and never bill a campaign-cycle result as a generational one.



The address. *Sender and audience at once. And neither.*

The communicator is not outside the communication, aiming messages at others. We are immersed in the same persuasion environment we help build - persuaded while persuading, audience to the very techniques we deploy, trained on the same feeds, exposed to the same synthetic content. This is the metamodern stance in one image: sender and audience simultaneously, and neither purely. It is why the literacies this manifesto demands are owed twice over: to the publics we address, and to ourselves.

Six things we no longer believe.

- **That there is no alternative.** TINA is not an analysis; it is a narrative (one our own industry helped write, and now recites about AI with special conviction). The market-based framing of business, politics and society is a hundred-year construction, maintained daily in the language of commercial promotion. *What was constructed can be renegotiated.*
- **That tame means can solve wicked problems.** Standard operating procedures, SMART objectives and KPIs are adequate for tame problems, and only for those. Applied to wicked ones, they produce well-managed failure and a false sense of security. Most corporate attempts to tame ecological or societal crises with compliance toolkits end as washing, however well-meaning.
- **That the seat at the table justifies the theatre.** A measurement paradigm built to prove departmental worth to management is not accountability; it is performance. After decades of it, the share of self-reportedly excellent departments has barely moved. *Holistic societal accountability asks harder questions than the dashboard answers.*
- **That persuasion is a word for other people.** Advertising persuades, propaganda persuades - and we, apparently, engage. This laundering deceives no one and corrodes trust in everyone. The field's image problem is not that it persuades; it is that it will not say so.
- **That efficiency is a purpose.** Efficiency is a ratio, not a reason. The dominant AI discourse in practice (faster and more content, streamlined workflows, optimized engagement) answers questions that were never asked, and treats the delegation of relational work to machines as progress. Technochauvinism mistakes the tool for the task.
- **That the organization is the protagonist.** The value-creation plot in which the organization stars, stakeholders applaud, and society provides the set: that story is long exhausted. The register of value must be named honestly, and at every scale beyond the single project, the protagonist is neither the organisation as an entity nor the communication department. *It is time we focused on the humans and their stories.*

Four levels. No hiding between them.

Responsibility that lives at only one level is an alibi. The practitioner blames the client (or the other departments), the client blames the market, the profession blames the jurisdiction, and society is told to be more resilient. We all hold all four levels at once (personal, professional, organizational, societal) each with its own discipline, none delegable to the others.

A·1

Personal. *Are we sure about this?*

Responsibility starts with the practitioner, before any code reaches them. To thine own self be true (see Shakespeare's Hamlet) is harder than it sounds, because the self is not a reliable witness: we align with our in-groups, avoid dissonance, and reason our way to whatever loyalty requires. **The personal discipline is reflection with teeth:** know your values, name your biases and their cultural roots, and keep asking the question every shadow avoids: *am I/ are we sure about this?* Principles like truthfulness, authenticity, respect, equity, social responsibility help as pocket equipment, not as absolution.

A·2

Professional. *Codes without consequences are decoration.*

When Bell Pottinger stoked racial division in South Africa, the firm was punished and the individuals who did the work moved on. That asymmetry is the professional accountability gap in one case. **A profession that openly owns persuasion must be answerable at both levels: the organization and the person.**

We are deliberate here about principle over mechanism. Licensing, registries, arbitration boards with sanctioning power are all potential routes, plausible in some jurisdictions, unthinkable in others. Accountability infrastructure is culturally and locally dependent. Importing one model everywhere is its own kind of solutionism. **There needs to be a commitment that does not bend: the profession must find its way to consequences, by whatever means its context allows, and professional bodies and educators must build that route together rather than competing for members. The question is not whether to get there. It is how, even by different means.**

A·3

Organizational. *Incentives determine outcomes.*

Business models are incentive-and-reward structures with consequences whether intended and not. If betterment of society is a business objective, it lives in the model (in what gets rewarded, funded and promoted) or it is washing, however sincere the campaign. Communicators cannot outrun their organization's incentives; they can make them visible, and refuse to decorate them.

And the accountability for communication belongs to the whole organisation, not just its communicators. *It is time to train organisations in communication rather than only sending communicators to yet more training; time for management teams to reflect on their own understanding of communication and its persuasive freight, from the interpersonal to the mediated. Everyone who communicates on an organization's behalf persuades on its behalf.*

A·4

Societal. *The literacies we owe.*

The outward duty, and the largest: a field that persuades for a living owes society the capacity to recognize and weigh persuasion. Persuasion literacy (how organized persuasive communication works, who pays for it, how to read intent) belongs in general education, not just in our trade curricula; communication is too consequential to remain a specialist literacy. And now we need AI literacy alongside it: knowing what generative systems actually do (fluent language without understanding), whose incentives drive them, and when the content they produce is persuading, and on whose behalf.

This is a double bind: we are sender and audience at once.

A field that builds public literacy builds the very scrutiny that holds it accountable.

This is what it means for the role of PR/Comms in society to be an answer rather than an embarrassment: *the profession of persuasion becoming the teacher of its own defences.*

Nine tenets. Held in tension, not in sequence.



I

Plan with uncertainty, *not against it.*

Replace the if-then reflex with the what-if habit. At every stage of every plan, ask: *what if things change?* Build the pause into the structure (revision loops, reflection checkpoints, tangential development spaces) because insights are only as good as a knowledge base that can change dramatically at any point. Not decoration. Structure.



II

Both. And neither.

Modern confidence proved too rigid for a wicked world; postmodern doubt too dissolving. Metamodernism does not split the difference. It oscillates; simultaneously modern and postmodern, and neither. Not a metronome's tick, but a pendulum without constant rhythm whose swing responds to the moment. Whenever your position hardens into certainty, ask what it forecloses.



III

Own the persuasion.

Name the intent, name the paymaster, and let the work be judged as what it is. The responsible persuader does openly what the field has long done apologetically: accepts the scrutiny that openness invites as the cost, and the proof, of legitimacy.



IV

Name the value register.

Impact for whom, value to whom, decided by whom, on which clock. A project's social impact and social value are honest claims at project scale; societal and public value belong to connected work on generational and deliberative clocks, and each register is blind to what another sees. Connect the registers; never collapse them. If all the answers point back at the organization, start again.



V

Stakeholders are not audiences.

Outside-in before inside-out. The organizational perspective is a perspective entitled to advocacy, required to accommodate. Planning worth the name lets stakeholder positions interrogate organizational goals, expects disagreement to survive the process, and treats a well-understood disagreement as a legitimate outcome.



VI

AI is a provocation, *not a solution.*

Generative AI mirrors our sociotechnical condition: commercially driven, consequence-rich, wrapped in a there-is-no-alternative narrative. Use it as a companion that widens the view: more scenarios, more stakeholder positions, more discomfort. Never as an oracle, never as a substitute for relationship, and always as a literacy under construction.



VII

Slowness *is rigor.*

In a field addicted to speed, the radical act is time stolen back: for reflection, documentation, the second look. The pause is not lost productivity; it is the difference between measuring numbers and understanding value. *We mistake speed for quality.* Stop.



VIII

Communitas over corporatas.

The deepest purpose of this work is cultivating shared meaning across difference. Instead of smoothing difference over or campaigning permanently to the like-minded until the echo chamber closes, metamodernism seeks that difference. *In a dividing society, the field's normative remit is counterbalance: curators of complexity, facilitators of communitas.*



IX

Dance with the problems.

Communication cannot control, let alone fix, the problems of a wicked world but it can learn how to dance with them: clumsy solutions, provisional moves, honest about their provisionality. It is the only ambition that survives contact with the polycrisis. *We propose some new moves.*

**This is a reorientation, not a recruitment. Nothing to join.
Everything to change.**

Take the tensions with you, into your meetings and into your breaks. Locate yourself on all four levels of accountability and notice which one you have been delegating. Then try something different: name a refusal and make it out loud.

The manifesto is unfinished on purpose — its name, like the field it addresses, is still moving.



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