

Political Communication Under Disruption: **Young Professionals On What's Next.**

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Abstract

As political communication in Germany undergoes profound change, the perspective of those just entering the field has received little attention. This white paper examines how young professionals perceive political communication as a place to work. Based on eight semi-structured interviews with German-speaking young professionals in politics, public institutions and consulting, it explores how they experience their work environment, which challenges they currently face and how they view the future of the industry.

The findings show a field in which importance and structures are drifting apart. Interviewees find their work meaningful and increasingly relevant, but entry depends on networks, career paths are unclear and recognition is uneven. AI sharpens this tension, and polarisation adds a dilemma between bolder communication and growing caution. Looking ahead, interviewees take a rational, crisis-aware view and call for participation, knowledge-sharing, humanity and transparency. Eight key findings summarise the results:

Key findings

1. **Needed, but not supported.** Political communication is gaining importance and employees are expected to keep their skills up to date, but labour structures and working conditions are falling behind.
2. **Access runs through networks, not job postings.** The industry largely recruits from insiders, which narrows who gets in.
3. **There are no fixed career paths.** Careers depend on networks and the right timing, which makes it difficult to work towards them.
4. **AI is eroding the learning ladder, not (yet) the jobs.** Automating junior tasks removes the spaces in which newcomers learn the craft.
5. **Speed is crowding out depth.** The acceleration of work puts the quality of political communication at risk.
6. **The democratic centre is caught between boldness and caution.** It is expected to communicate more boldly, while fear of backlash makes it more cautious.
7. **Judgement stays human.** As AI takes over production, the ability to evaluate critically, assess relevance and connect with people becomes the core of the profession.
8. **Knowledge-sharing must become an institutional task.** As AI removes classic learning tasks, passing on experience can no longer be left to chance.

Introduction

Germany's political communication landscape is changing rapidly, reflecting developments seen across Europe. Disinformation, the rise of extremist movements and constant technological advancement are reshaping how politics is communicated. For those working in the field, expectations are rising just as quickly.

As a professional field of practice, political communication is closely linked to strategic monitoring of the environment, network maintenance, and the mobilisation of support. Kaynak and Barley (2019) describe public affairs as a cross-boundary activity between an organisation and its political and social environment, in which political developments are monitored, organisational interests are strategically framed, and communicated in a way that fosters connections through sociopolitical networks. Falasca et al. (2019) expand this perspective to include the digital dimension of political communication. Using the concept of “digital political labor,” they demonstrate that political communication on social media is not generated solely by political parties or professional campaigners, but is significantly supported by users who comment on, share, and produce content themselves. This reveals political communication as a field of practice in which professional roles, organisational interests, networks, and active publics are closely intertwined.

With no doubt, we see that the environment of political communication is complex and continuously evolving - along with the requirements of the labour market, that can be challenging to fulfill, especially for the new generations. With the present study, we aim to investigate those changes from the perspective of young professionals with the following research questions:

***RQ1** How do young professionals experience the political communication industry as a working environment?*

***RQ2** What challenges do young professionals currently perceive in the political communication industry?*

***RQ3** How do young professionals view the future of the political communication industry?*

Method

Interviewees were selected through criterion-based purposeful sampling. The aim was to recruit professionals whose roles give them direct insight into entering political communication, rather than to obtain a statistically representative sample (Patton, 2015). This approach fits the study's exploratory aim and its role-based understanding of

expertise: participants are considered experts because of the practical knowledge they have gained in the field (Meuser & Nagel, 1991; Bogner, Littig & Menz, 2014).

Eligible participants had to be working full-time in political communication in a permanent professional role. Relevant settings included parties, parliamentary groups, ministries, public administrations, associations, NGOs, public affairs consultancies, political consultancies, and agencies with political clients. Internships and student-assistant positions were excluded because they do not provide the same sustained experience of professional responsibility.

The sample focused on two early-career cohorts, defined by the start date of each participant's first permanent position in political communication:

Cohort	First permanent position began	Politics institution	/ Consulting	Total
A	On or after 1 January 2025	2	2	4
B	1 January 2023–31 December 2024	2	2	4
Total		4	4	8

These dates kept participants within a comparable career phase while allowing the study to examine differences associated with how recently they had entered the field. People who entered before 2023 were excluded to maintain the focus on early-career experience under current conditions, including changing digital platforms, AI, and evolving professional requirements (Battista & Mangone, 2025; López Jiménez & Ouariachi, 2021; Klug, 2020).

Within each cohort, participants were recruited from both organisational or institutional roles and external advisory roles. This provided perspectives from settings with different mandates and working conditions (Kaynak & Barley, 2019; Patton, 2015). With only two participants per cell, setting served to diversify the sample; the main comparison was between the two entry cohorts.

Participants had to be German-speaking. Recruitment covered Germany and also included professionals working in Brussels on German-speaking or European policy matters. Location was documented for each participant rather than treated as a further sampling category. EU institutions were classified under politics/institution, and EU public affairs consultancies and agencies under consulting.

Eight semi-structured interviews were conducted. This is a defensible starting point for an exploratory study of a relatively focused group, although recurring themes could not be guaranteed in advance (Guest et al., 2006).

Results

RQ1: Political communication as a work environment

Interviewees describe the industry as meaningful and relevant, but also as structurally overburdening, fast-paced and at times lacking in appreciation for employees. The work itself is gaining importance in organisations, but the surrounding structures (entry routes, career progression, pay, recognition and further training) are trailing behind, resulting in young professionals feeling needed but unsupported.

Entry and selection

In the political field, access to the profession rarely runs through public job postings. Instead, it relies on personal contacts, party involvement and recommendations. In political institutions especially, vacancies are rarely advertised externally and tend to circulate among those already inside. Perceptions of selection processes were mixed and varied between and within sectors, depending on the organisation. Several interviewees described them as intransparent regarding certain job requirements. Two consultants, by contrast, experienced them as highly transparent.

Employment conditions: between strain and security

Interviewees strongly perceive pressure. Jobs exist, particularly at EU level and around the Bundestag, but vacancies are highly contested and conditions demanding. Interviewees described heavy workloads, overtime taken for granted, and a sense that employees' motivation and job insecurity are exploited. Interviewees with a consulting background also described a "pyramid system" built on junior workloads, along with downward pressure on entry salaries. In their view, external labour-market pressure, intensified as AI leads to cuts in communication departments, is used internally as a disciplining instrument. The industry also appears segmented: consulting is associated with volatility, political organisations and associations with stability.

Shifting recognition

Two social media managers in politics report growing appreciation of their field. MPs and organisations now hire dedicated staff, and more equipment is provided. One recalls earlier dismissiveness ("you've got a phone, just use that", B3) and contrasts it with the present:

"Now everyone somehow knows that it's simply the most important channel for reaching people [...]. That's why I feel that the appreciation has improved a bit, and the working conditions too." (B3, p. 3)

This upgrading is uneven, however. In some contexts social media is a full-time strategic task; in others it remains an auxiliary function or an intern's job.

In consulting, juniors are sometimes limited to giving presentations and doing monitoring, while their substantive expertise goes unrecognised. Interviewees also point to a widening gap between what graduates expect after investing in degrees and internships and what the market offers, leaving them often unsatisfied when starting their careers:

"You didn't just do your master's and your internships like that, you did them for a good reason [...] so that you'd at least have the choice to do exactly what you want to do. [...] The gap between what you can expect and what you'd like to expect is widening a bit." (B2, p. 4)

Career structures

In both politics and consulting, interviewees report no fixed career path and no transparent promotion logic (B1, B7). This makes it difficult to plan their careers or work towards a specific goal. Careers emerge through individual initiative but also through chance. B7, from public affairs consulting, stresses luck: "every now and then very big leaps are made. And a bit of luck is part of that" (B7, p. 3). For B3, working in a party, prospects are hard even to imagine:

"I'm a policy officer here now, and there would be nothing here in the organisation that I could do beyond that [...]. Of course you could leave the party and go to a ministry or the state parliament [...]. But I don't know if I'd call that a career jump, because it's the same task and you have the same powers." (B3, p. 3)

One consulting case is a positive exception. There, a clearly communicated role progression tied to defined targets is experienced as a relief, and the interviewee values its clarity and predictability.

However, transitions from internships, working-student jobs or traineeships into permanent positions are described as far less certain than before, because companies and agencies hire less and competition has increased (B4, p. 3). The economic situation further limits promotion opportunities.

Competence demands: constant updating

Interviewees name technical, political-substantive, social and media-aesthetic competences, whose relevance varies by role. The challenge lies in meeting all of them simultaneously at increasing speed, balancing technological efficiency with human closeness. Interviewees also highlight curiosity, the ability to interpret day-to-day politics, prior experience, and critical thinking, particularly in times of AI. B8 expects

interpersonal skills and an understanding of "how politics works in reality" to matter more as AI takes over other tasks (B8, p. 2). In consulting, AI literacy is considered relevant, but strong drafting skills remains essential:

"The texts my clients like, I definitely write myself, or at least I write them myself to a large extent and then have the AI improve them." (B2, p. 6)

Almost all interviewees consider networking highly relevant. They experience it as a permanent, low-threshold everyday practice: an invisible, unpaid workload. LinkedIn is used strategically for networking, visibility and monitoring industry news, more so in the private sector than in public administration, although interviewees criticise its corporate spam, shallow debate and self-promotion (B2, p. 7).

Role and self-understanding

Three positions emerge. Some interviewees describe role expansion, for example becoming an AI expert or innovation driver. Others describe role assertion, emphasising that human competences remain irreplaceable. A third group describes role continuity, with no change experienced. Identical job titles thus conceal very different realities depending on the organisation. However, interviewees from the private sector experienced more openness towards AI than interviewees from political organisations.

Key finding 1: Needed, but not supported. Political communication is gaining importance, employees are expected to stay up to date on current skillsets, but its labour structures and working conditions are falling behind.

Key finding 2: Access runs through networks, not job postings. The industry largely recruits from insiders, which narrows who gets in.

Key finding 3: Political communication often has no fixed career paths. Careers depend on networks and the right timing, making it difficult to work towards them.

RQ2: Current challenges

The challenges young professionals perceive are closely tied to broader industry trends: politicians' growing use of social media, changing expectations of political communication, political volatility, increasing polarisation and AI. A central challenge lies in the discrepancy between what the industry delivers communicatively (growth, acceleration, managing polarisation) and what it provides as a labour market (structures, training, security, recognition).

These challenges fall unevenly and weigh most heavily on juniors in consulting. The costs of change are delegated downwards, and young people are expected to always be at the cutting edge. Interviewees working as social media managers for MPs or in political

organisations stress that the task of building the necessary skills is shifted onto applicants, making unpaid pre-qualification a condition of entry.

Accordingly, many interviewees stress flexibility, openness, creativity and continuous, self-directed development. With regard to AI in particular, they see themselves as affected by this change rather than shaping it.

Adapting to platform logics and the political mood

Interviewees observe, in the industry and in their own work, a constant need to adapt communication to social media trends. Short, trend-driven formats aimed at short attention spans are increasingly adopted by actors of the political centre, including the federal government. Several interviewees see a challenge in balancing complex content against the shortening of political messages; one links this simplification to growing polarisation (B4, pp. 5–6). At the same time, many view this adaptation positively, since it enables more targeted communication and reaches more people with political content. Interviewees in political organisations note that the charged political climate, particularly around state elections, requires institutions to adapt their working methods and messages. To preserve authenticity and credibility, one social media manager in politics recommends storytelling, well-written and genuine texts, and classic photos that convey emotion over generic graphics.

Polarisation

In social media roles, polarisation is felt directly in dealing with hate speech and incitement. Community management and moderation require more effort, and the risk of online backlash together with a harsher tone leads to over-caution and many feedback loops. Interviewees frequently link the rise of the AfD to algorithms and platform fragmentation. In their view, right-wing actors have understood platforms better and, by their nature, can use them more effectively than the democratic centre, using a broad political ecosystem, decontextualisation and false information to build reach. All interviewees find the question of how to respond to this development difficult, and none offers a clear answer: "If I had an answer to that, we wouldn't have a problem" (B2, p. 11). B2 calls for the profession to define its own position:

"The very first thing we need to do is simply enter into dialogue with one another. What can we do? What are our options? [...] Where do we set boundaries? [...] How far can we go as a profession?" (B2, p. 11)

B2 also raises the commercial side: whether clients will continue to pay if consultancies refuse to engage with the AfD. As ways of responding to polarisation, interviewees call for bolder communication from the government and the chancellor, including new formats, more attention-grabbing messaging and the confident, repeated communication of successes. They also want clear language without "ivory-tower rhetoric" or long subordinate clauses:

"I think the democratic parties need to catch up [...] and show courage for new formats. [...] From the government, the chancellor, everyone who holds a mandate, I'd like to see the courage to communicate their work in a punchier way, and to communicate successes, repeatedly, so that it reaches people. [...] And not to treat citizens as stupid." (B7, pp. 5–6)

Dialogue is considered especially important as a way of winning back those who vote for the political extremes.

Artificial intelligence

AI is seen as both an opportunity and a challenge. Either way, political communicators must adapt their communication style and their skill sets. Interviewees do not perceive the change as overly disruptive: human qualities such as critical thinking, writing and empathy are still considered more relevant, with AI providing valuable support. The challenges can be grouped into four dimensions, each perceived differently by the interviewees:

- **Structural (negative):** In consulting, AI is taking over classic junior tasks such as monitoring, press reviews and first drafts. These tasks were not merely operational; they were learning spaces through which newcomers acquired subject knowledge and discursive competence. The industry thus risks a generation that can operate the tools without fully understanding the content.
- **Subjective (negative, uncertain):** Interviewees experience AI as an existential concern for their own positions and as a threat to their professional identity when AI-driven mass communication undermines the craft of communication.
- **Operational (ambivalent):** AI simplifies daily work, saving time on writing, brainstorming, monitoring, creating video content, emails, slides, analyses, editing and background research. In consulting, however, AI has already become indispensable, and those who don't use it fall behind. No comparable pressure emerged in interviews with those working in politics. Interviewees also describe an acceleration spiral: faster production raises expectations, leaving less time for reflection and resulting in more superficial work and lower quality.

"AI takes a lot of work off your hands, but it also makes everything even faster [...]. Results are expected faster [...] and I always have the feeling you have even less time to dive deeper into topics [...]. You prompt, you prompt, you prompt, but you no longer have the time to really work your way into a topic." (B8, p. 3)

- **Democratic (negative):** Beyond the risk of disinformation and deepfakes, the use of AI has itself become a reputational risk, leading political organisations to be over-cautious. This runs counter to the bolder communication interviewees see as necessary for the democratic centre to counter polarisation.

Key finding 4: AI is eroding the learning ladder, not (yet) the jobs. Automating junior tasks removes the spaces in which newcomers learn the craft.

Key finding 5: Speed is crowding out depth. This puts the quality of political communication at risk.

Key finding 6: The democratic centre is caught between boldness and caution. It is expected to communicate more boldly while fear of backlash makes it more cautious.

RQ3: Looking ahead

Interviewees' vision for the future of the industry is rational and crisis-aware. They picture a field in which fairly treated talent uses both established and new skills and deploys technology deliberately, guided by sharp judgement. Change and uncertainty are met with participation, knowledge-sharing, humanity and transparency. Interviewees also expect better working conditions, greater appreciation of their work, and employers whose ethical and political values match their own.

Qualified optimism about AI

Interviewees mostly see AI as a complement to human work rather than a full replacement. For the future role of young professionals, the decisive factor is therefore the ability to use AI purposefully, critically review its output and retain their own judgement. Skills that can only be automated to a limited extent remain particularly relevant: social competence, empathy, moderation, networking and the ability to assess relevance. "What I'm focusing on a bit are the things where AI can't replace me: giving talks, networking. Those are things where you always need people. [...] Demonising it and saying I'll do without AI seems wrong to me and gives me real boomer vibes." (B7, p. 5)

Attracting talent

In interviewees' view, proximity to politics alone will not be enough to keep the industry attractive. They expect working conditions in which young employees are taken seriously, supported and paid appropriately. Recognition is understood both structurally and personally: fair employment conditions, transparent development opportunities, functioning onboarding, and the recognition of young professionals' work as a professional part of political communication. Fields such as social media in particular should no longer be treated as secondary.

"That you're taken seriously, that the job is taken seriously and you're not laughed at, and, honestly, that there are simply fair and well-paid working conditions – not the minijob¹, not the intern." (B3, p. 10)

¹ A minijob is a form of marginal employment in Germany with a low monthly earnings cap and reduced social security contributions. It is typically used for side jobs and rarely offers career prospects.

An employer's political and ethical orientation is also gaining importance. Interviewees increasingly ask what values an employer stands for, where it draws lines towards political actors, and whether this stance holds up in everyday work. This concerns the AfD in particular: two interviewees doubt they would want to continue in their jobs if talking to AfD politicians became a central part of their work (B7, p. 6; B8, p. 5). Attractiveness thus depends not only on salary and career prospects but also on a perceived match between one's own convictions and the values an employer practises.

Wishes for the future: four guiding principles

Interviewees' wishes can be grouped into four recurring principles, relating both to young professionals' position within the industry and to the design of future working structures.

- **Participation:** Young people should be more closely involved in decisions and strategic processes, not as symbolic support for young talent, but as a functional contribution to better decisions. This requires listening to young employees, giving them responsibility and taking their professional perspective seriously.
- **Knowledge-sharing:** As AI removes or transforms classic learning tasks, the deliberate transfer of experience becomes more important. Interviewees see this as the responsibility of both senior professionals and organisations. At the same time, experienced staff must learn to pass on knowledge under new technological conditions and to assess AI-generated output. Training and structured onboarding thus become key conditions for developing young talent in the long term.
- **Humanit:** Despite increasing technologisation and professionalisation, the human component of political communication should be preserved. Interviewees emphasise interpersonal relationships, networking and a greater diversity of perspectives within the industry. In their view, not everything that matters can be measured, such as "this interpersonal factor that is hard to capture in a KPI" (B6, p. 4).
- **Transparency:** Transparency is seen as key to the attractiveness and reliability of future working conditions. Interviewees want comprehensible application processes, open salary structures, clear development prospects and honest feedback. In their view, transparency reduces uncertainty, allows young professionals to assess their prospects more realistically, and is itself an expression of recognition and fair working conditions.

Key finding 7: Judgement stays human. As AI takes over production, the ability to evaluate critically, assess relevance and connect with people becomes the core of the profession.

Key finding 8: Knowledge-sharing must become an institutional task. As AI removes classic learning tasks, passing on experience can no longer be left to chance.

Limitations

These findings should be read with several limitations in mind. First, they are based on eight qualitative interviews and reflect individual perspectives rather than representative trends. Second, the study addresses political communication as a whole, but the sample includes interviewees from public affairs, whose work focuses more on stakeholder relations and policy advocacy than on communication in a narrower sense. Not all of them identify primarily as communicators, which may shape how they perceive the industry. Third, "young professionals" covers both career starters and those with a few years of professional experience. No systematic differences between the two groups emerged; however, with four interviewees per cohort, the sample is too small to rule them out.

Conclusions

Political communication in Germany is gaining importance, while the conditions for those entering it lag behind. Young professionals find their work meaningful, but access depends on networks, career paths are unclear and recognition is uneven. AI sharpens this tension: it threatens less the jobs themselves than the junior tasks through which newcomers have learned the craft, and it accelerates work at the expense of depth. Polarisation adds a dilemma between bolder communication and growing caution. Interviewees nonetheless take a rational, crisis-aware view of the future: they see AI as a complement rather than a replacement, expect judgement and human skills to remain central, and call for participation, knowledge-sharing, humanity and transparency. For employers, transparent career and salary structures, deliberate knowledge transfer and the genuine involvement of young staff are therefore not perks but preconditions for securing the next generation. If the industry wants to attract and retain the talent it relies on, it must invest in the people behind its communication as much as in the communication itself.

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