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Strategic Silence

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Strategic silence occurs when an organization takes a calculated decision to avoid internal and/or external communication in order to advance long-term goals. When a reputational threat emerges, the likelihood that the organization will be faced with negative media coverage and be drawn into a public debate increases. Strategic silence is then employed to minimize the potential association of the organization with the reputational threat. In this respect, “strategic” refers to the type or content of information that is not released to the public sphere.

Strategic silence is also employed around policy decisions. Central banks, for example, often abstain from communication just before policy meetings. They do so for fear that communication may create excessive market speculation, narrow the organization’s room for maneuverability, and undermine the message of the decision. In this respect, “strategic” refers to the time during which information is not released. This entry addresses the choice between talk and silence, the balance between them, and how strategic silence is measured.

In a study that directly addresses the choice between strategic silence and talk by a banking regulator, Moshe Maor, Sharon Gilad, and Pazit Bin-Nun Bloom found that an organization tends to keep silent in domains where it generally enjoys a strong reputation and in domains that are outside its distinct jurisdiction, while responding to criticism targeted at domains where its reputation is weak and in domains where its reputation is still evolving. These findings are important because they demonstrate how an organization’s assessment of the relative threat to its reputation influences its communicative strategy across functional areas. The choice between silence and talk emphasizes therefore that reputation is derived not solely from the track record of the organization but also from the organization’s attempt to protect its reputation, to strategically balance its overall reputations in different domains, and to actively construct the way in which multiple audiences, which hold conflicting views and assessment criteria, judge its performance.

Striking a fine balance between strategic silence and talk is a very complex task, and so is the task of maintaining silence. It requires a centralization of external communication, a formulation of blackout guidelines, the creation of an incentive structure to enhance compliance with these guidelines, and the establishment of enforcement mechanisms to ensure that none of the organization employees break these guidelines and that, if they do, deviant behavior is penalized.

Strategic silence may be measured by the media content analysis of an organization’s inclination to respond to audience opinions across the different functional areas where its reputation varies or across the different decisions and events from which reputational threats may be generated. A data set of an organization’s responses and nonresponses to external opinions can be constructed by collating all the articles mentioning the organization, either in the title or body of the article, published in the period under investigation. Controlling, among others, for the intensity of media coverage and for source clout, one can examine, for example, how the variance in the organization’s reputation across functional areas affects its choice between response and silence.

The small number of studies addressing strategic silence points to the neglect of this kind of reputation management strategy. This is surprising given the fact that this strategy is consistently employed by the Federal Reserve and other central banks, as well as by corporations and political actors worldwide. The challenge faced by corporate reputation scholars and practitioners is to delve into the nuances of the endogenous nature of organizational responses to external threats and allegations—that is, the impact that corporations’ assessment of their unique multidimensional reputation has on their attempts to manage their overall reputation.

See also [Accountability](#); [Anonymity and Privacy](#); [Collective Intentionality](#); [Commercial and Political Speech](#); [Content Analysis](#); [Corporate Communication](#); [Corporate Communication Policies](#); [Crisis Response Strategies](#); [Critical Theory](#); [Disclosure](#); [Engagement](#); [Ethical Business Practice](#); [Ethics of Reputation Management](#); [Mediatization](#); [Political Positioning](#); [Strategic Inaction](#); [Strategy](#); [Transparency](#)

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Further Readings

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