RED SKY PREDICTIONS 2026

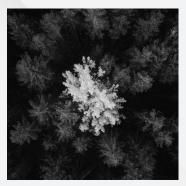
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Predictions for Communicators on the Cutting Edge





















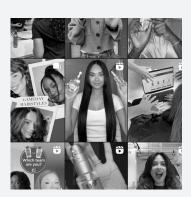










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Welcome to the future of communications.

As our predictions report shows each year, the future is moving fast. Our goal is to make the forecast not just digestible, but inviting — setting the stage for another year of reinvention — one in which communicators like you will play an important role.

To shape this report, Redsters from across all 24 HAVAS Red markets contributed their collective intelligence. Together, these perspectives represent our informed projections about how the future will unfold — grounded in our lived expertise, diverse cultural contexts and a shared pulse on what's next. In some cases, our predictions are next-gen iterations of previous trends we've identified. For example, we've returned once more to cast predictions on crisis comms, influencers and Al — spaces that are ever-evolving and utterly fascinating to us.

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CRISIS MODE AS BUSINESS AS USUAL

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Once treated as a rare disruption, crisis will be the default state in which brands and communicators operate.

Pandemic, war, climate disasters, technological disruption and misinformation have created an era of permanent turbulence (we call this "permacrisis").

For communicators, this means moving beyond the old "break-glass-in-case-of-emergency" mindset. Crisis readiness will be embedded into daily communications, with an emphasis on readiness. As the first clear and human message often wins, responding rapidly will be central to brand trust.

Executives around the world are waking up to this new reality. Crisis management is no longer a specialist skill; it's a baseline expectation across PR and marketing teams. And with stakeholders demanding greater accountability from leadership, the C-Suite is stepping directly into the arena. Media training has evolved accordingly — today, it's inseparable from crisis preparedness.

Looking ahead, communicators will serve as strategic advisors who not only manage turbulence but harness it. The brands that succeed will be those that turn crisis into a catalyst for trust, adaptability and new forms of public engagement.

FROM TRANSPARENCY TO TRANSLUCENCY

For years, transparency has been the gold standard of trust, with brands readily revealing supply chains, carbon footprints and raw data. But data without context often confuses or fuels distrust. In an era of Al-blurred realities, audiences want translucency instead. Like frosted glass, translucency blends openness with context: enough detail to see the shape but framed so it's meaningful. Instead of just publishing numbers, brands will explain trade-offs, progress and setbacks, and why it matters. Those that move from "showing everything" to "showing with meaning" will earn deeper, more resilient trust.



SYNTHETIC RESEARCH BECOMES STANDARD

Synthetic audiences — Al-built simulations of hyper-specific demographics — will move from fringe experiments to standard practice, embedded in campaign planning, crisis playbooks and trust measurement across global comms teams.

Forget asking ChatGPT to "pretend to be a Gen Z woman." These models run deeper: Stitched together from CRM data, syndicated research, psychographics and even lifestyle preferences, they mimic how real groups think, scroll and react. The payoff? Comms teams can pressure-test messaging in minutes, stress-check crisis response or float sensitive ideas without NDAs or focus groups.

In early 2025, for example, "The Times" began conducting synthetic research by taking a reader panel from its database of 642,000 subscribers and making an Al-generated clone of that panel. It also created an Al-generated audience panel modeled off the broader British newsreading population and used these audiences to decide on the name of a new podcast and to determine new ways to engage readers.

Of course, the fine print matters. Synthetic feedback isn't a replacement for lived human insight, especially in scenarios with trauma, loss or high emotional stakes — e.g., in the healthcare space, where the human touch is most needed. But as a default tool for planning, testing and iteration? Sign us up.





TRUTH AS THE ULTIMATE BRAND VALUE

TRUTH AS THE ULTIMATE BRAND VALUE

In an oversaturated media landscape, the real differentiator won't be volume or velocity. It will be the willingness to prove what you say is true.

While social media has democratized informationsharing and allowed for the amplification of vital stories, it's also spread misinformation, fostered polarization and eroded trust in factual reporting. Audiences are now exhausted by conflicting headlines, half-truths and algorithmic noise. They're craving certainty, not spin.

In recent years, global newsrooms and social media platforms have scrambled to adapt to this new era. In 2026, journalists must double down on verification, transparency and a clear separation of fact from opinion. Newsrooms that invest in independent reporting — and resist the gravitational pull of polarized narratives — will be best positioned to regain public confidence.

Some, like **BBC Verify**, are building specialized units to authenticate user-generated content.

Others are investing in applications like **Google Fact Check Tools**, **Truepic** and **InVID** to flag manipulated images, deepfakes and disinformation. Meanwhile, independent collectives like **Bellingcat** have pioneered open-source intelligence (OSINT) methods that are now frequently referenced by major outlets, highlighting a growing reliance on citizen data paired with professional verification.

For brands, this presents both a challenge and an opportunity. Consumers are increasingly assessing companies not just on what they say, but how they substantiate it. PR teams must evolve from storytellers to stewards of truth — prioritizing verification, clear sourcing and transparent motives. Brands that communicate openly, admit imperfections and show their work will stand apart from those who obscure or over-claim.

Ultimately, restoring trust isn't a technological fix. It's a return to the core values that established journalism's authority: accuracy, fairness, transparency and a genuine commitment to the public good.

We're living in the 'age of rage'. Consumers feel left out, unheard and often wronged — by institutions, by brands, by each other. The path forward is not to shout louder but to listen deeper — to move from rage to resonance. As communicators, we have the tools to make that shift real. We can help brands earn trust, invite participation and create value that lasts long after the hashtag fades. To do this, make trust your cornerstone. Transparency and accountability are not campaigns; they are continuous practices.

James Wright,
 HAVAS Red Group CEO



THE RETURN OF SPECIALIZATION

As newsrooms continue to evolve, the future of journalism won't hinge on covering everything — but on covering something deeply, credibly and consistently.

The deep expertise that once defined great reporting has been at risk. Faced with budget cuts and stretched thinner than ever by an insatiable digital-first news cycle, many journalists are expected to cover a wide range of topics without the specialized knowledge that once set their reporting apart. The pressures of the digital age have led many outlets to prioritize viral headlines and SEO-driven content over original, beat-driven reporting. Audiences are left overwhelmed but often under-informed and uninspired.

The solve? From a public relations perspective, publicists must take the time to read what reporters are writing (for their publications but also on their social channels and perhaps even on their own personal Substack and Patreon), sleuth out their areas of focus — especially if formal beats are less defined — and tailor pitches accordingly. Creative, thoughtful storytelling that fits naturally into a reporter's evolving interests is essential.

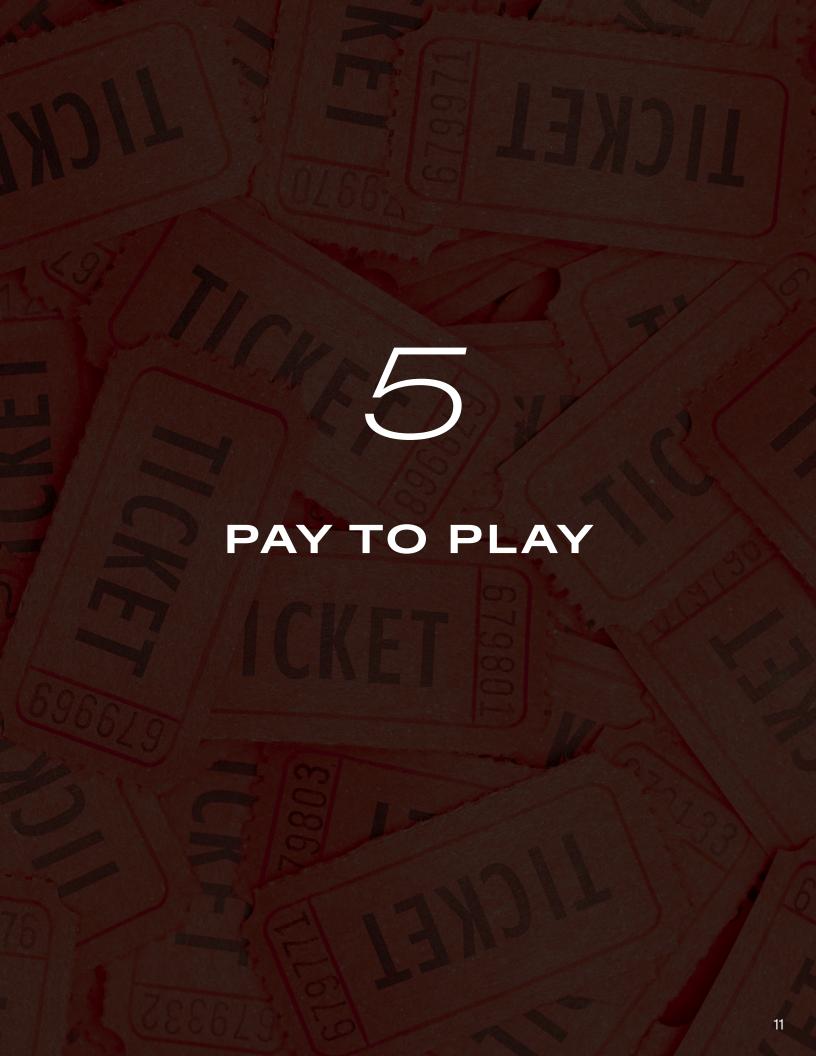
Paywall and subscription models, while controversial, may also support this shift to more specialized reporting by providing a financial foundation for deeper, beat-driven writing that audiences are willing to pay for — and that rewards loyal, informed readerships over fleeting clicks. Paywalls are the ultimate proof that relevance trumps reach; if your target audience is behind a paywall and you can get to them where they have paid to hear you, your message will be heard.

SURVIVING THE SUBSCRIPTION ERA

To stay competitive, media companies are evolving beyond simple subscriptions. Many are introducing premium memberships that offer exclusive newsletters, events, insider reporting and, increasingly, video content — a high-value differentiator with strong monetization potential.

Others are exploring entirely new revenue models. Perplexity AI, for example, is sharing revenue with publishers whose content appears in its chatbot responses — suggesting AI platforms may become partners in monetization rather than just a threat.





PAY TO PLAY

Brands will increasingly curate experiences so unique, intentional and exclusive that people will be willing to pay for the privilege of entry.

The age of free-for-all brand experiences is evolving. From the immersive brand playgrounds at Coachella to ticketed runway shows in fashion and tech's large-scale installations, brands are moving beyond simply competing for attention.

They are increasingly curating experiences so unique, intentional and exclusive that people are willing to pay for the privilege of entry. When executed well, the ticket becomes more than a transaction. It signals belonging, an invitation to something rare, high quality and culturally resonant. For attendees, paying for entry isn't about access alone; it's about participation in a story that feels meaningful to be part of.

For brands, this shift carries real benefits. Ticketed experiences unlock higher production value, allowing for more ambitious design, storytelling and talent partnerships. They also encourage deeper participation, as consumers who pay to attend arrive with stronger intent, deepening engagement and generating more authentic advocacy. They can also offset costs, making creative ambition both sustainable and scalable. Collaborations with artists, creators and influencers extend this value further, adding credibility and emotional depth that money can't buy but attendance can.

A prime example: Vans' House of Vans
Johannesburg 2024. Once a free festival, it was reimagined as a ticketed, three-day celebration of skateboarding culture featuring headline acts such as Little Simz, skate clinics and curated art exhibitions. Charging admission elevated the experience's exclusivity and sustained revenue, while reinforcing Vans' deep connection to the skating community. Attendees walked away as brand advocates, while curious newcomers didn't just watch the culture, they became part of it.

Across industries, the rise of curated, paid-for brand experiences signals a powerful shift in consumer behavior. People are no longer paying for products or perks, they're willing to exchange money, time and attention for moments that feel rare, high-quality and unforgettable. For brands, this marks a powerful evolution: from event hosts to cultural curators.

NEW LENS ON BRAND EXPERIENCE

Today's brand experience landscape is more fragmented than ever, but that fragmentation has become its superpower. We're witnessing a rich, multi-threaded ecosystem emerge: one where data and human emotion are equally weighted, where fandoms are embraced as powerful engines of loyalty and where bold ideas win over familiar experiential formulas.

HAVAS Red's A New Lens on Brand
Experience 2026 white paper provides a fresh perspective on the future of brand experience.
Through six emerging trends, we explore how brands are cutting through the noise of a crowded landscape, transforming the moments that capture attention into those that create lasting connection.



BOLDNESS IS THE NEW BENCHMARK

The brands winning attention will be those that move beyond "safe" and craft experiences that feel unforgettable because of how far they dared to push the envelope.

From pop-ups to PR stunts to social feed-friendly activations, too many executions blur together, feeding a growing sense of content fatigue. This isn't just an aesthetic issue, it's a strategic one. Uninspired, templated ideas no longer cut through. The brands that matter now are the ones that take creative risks, those willing to go off script and make people stop, think and feel.

One of the year's most talked-about examples came from <u>Duolingo</u>, which "killed off" its beloved mascot, Duo the Owl. After a total blackout of its social channels and the launch of a fake memorial site, Duolingo stirred a frenzy online. Fans mourned, speculated, and created a storm of memes. The twist? Users could bring Duo back by completing lessons in the app. The result: a global frenzy that boosted engagement, app downloads and affection for the brand. Wildly unexpected, yet perfectly on-brand, it was a masterclass in earned attention.

But bold doesn't always mean viral. Sometimes it's about clever cultural play. Take <u>Vita Coco</u>'s Valentine's Day activation. Recognizing growing fatigue with influencer-led gifting campaigns and glossy, overproduced Valentine promotions, the brand launched a cheeky vending machine in New York that dispensed coconuts and lo-fi, playful "anti-gifts." By mocking over-the-top consumerism with humor and authenticity, Vita Coco successfully tapped into a cultural undercurrent, winning attention not by scale but by relevance.

Meanwhile, HAVAS Red client **Wise** took a similarly inventive approach with its "Fleece Free FX" activation at Bondi Beach. Using physical theater to dramatize its anti-bank-fee message ("fleece" being slang for being ripped off), the brand staged a surreal but smart, memorable and shareable stunt: live sheep roaming a branded pop-up, fleece-themed prizes and witty signage.

Beyond a spectacle, it was a brand truth made tangible, entertaining passersby while embedding its point of difference into culture. The simplicity and wit behind the execution ensured it spread socially and sparked conversations beyond the beach.

The lesson? Marketers must rethink the goal: not just to be seen, but to be felt. In a world full of copy-paste, boldness isn't optional. It's the new benchmark.

Brands that embrace bold ideas, originality and human truths won't just be seen, they'll be felt. The future belongs to those who move beyond formula and create experiences that spark emotion, build belonging and shape culture.

Michael Ozard,
 Group Brand Experience
 Director, HAVAS Red Australia



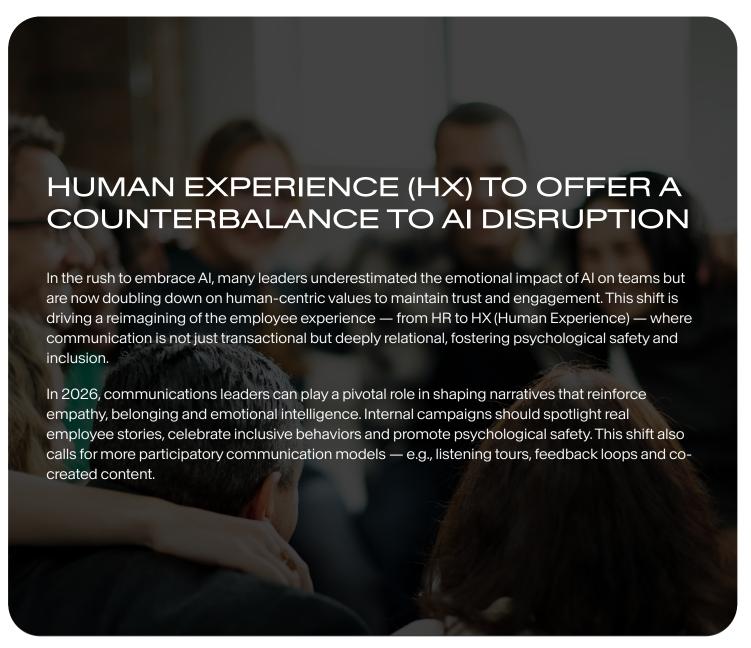
NO PAIN, NO GAIN

Communicators will adapt to a new era where machines outperform humans at certain tasks and free them to redefine what only people can do.

The conversation around AI in the workplace has shifted from if it will take jobs to how it will transform them. Thanks to AI, new roles will emerge — think directors of ethics, AI governance officers or even "machine morality" specialists. The titles may sound futuristic, but the need is immediate.

Of course, the transition isn't frictionless. Much is being written about Al's hidden costs — from exploitation in digital sweatshops to environmental strain to the deskilling of creative talent. Our own Group CEO, James Wright, recently told PRWeek, "Al has democratized mediocrity."

These debates won't go away, but they won't stop the momentum either. Instead, they're a reminder that the communications industry has a responsibility to build ethical guardrails into how it deploys AI, ensuring scale doesn't come at the expense of human value.





GENAI-OPTIMIZED REPUTATION

To stay discoverable, brands will pivot from search engine optimization (SEO) to generative engine optimization (GEO).

The new front door to brand discovery?
Generative Al. Zero-click content and Al-driven overviews are fundamentally changing how people find answers — and drastically reducing clicks to websites in the process. Publishing is now more often about feeding systems that decide whether your brand appears in the answer box or vanishes from it. Beyond chasing clicks, brands must focus on becoming the trusted citations that Al answers surface. This requires brands to think of themselves as knowledge graph entities, not just websites.

Fueling the responses that AI turns up is the raw material of earned and owned media: Articles, blogs, forums and video transcripts become the training data that defines a brand's reputation in an AI-mediated world. That means engineering for relevancy so AI bots can understand their content, creating citation-worthy assets rooted in proprietary data and expert voices, reinforcing authority through earned media in credible outlets, and optimizing the platforms that AI heavily leans on. And because hallucinations and misattributions are a real risk, always-on monitoring of AI Share of Voice and citation frequency is becoming essential.

Traditional media is caught in this shift, too. With Al reducing reliance on headlines and front pages, news outlets must evolve to be recognized by algorithms as authoritative sources, or risk irrelevance. Brands face the same challenge: Become citation-worthy, rooted in proprietary data, expert voices and authoritative storytelling — or disappear from the machine layer of discovery altogether.

REDDIT REWRITING THE AI SEARCH PLAYBOOK

In 2026, brands will reassess Reddit's role in their comms ecosystems — not just as a community hub but as a place that shapes how Al understands, surfaces and contextualizes their content. No longer just a fringe platform in the social media mix, Reddit now accounts for 40.1% of all citations in large language model (LLM)-related searches — outranking Wikipedia, YouTube and even Google itself.

The interplay between Reddit content and Al search/citation mechanics will force brands to think differently about where they appear — not just what they say, but whose voices (forums, subreddits or user-generated content, for example) are helping define their signals in the Al knowledge graph.

If your brand wants to stay visible in the Al-search era, you need to prioritize being cited (well) in Reddit threads, engage authentically in subreddits that matter to your category, track how your brand is surfaced via Al tools, and ensure presence and accuracy there. In practice, that means allocating resources to monitor Reddit-based sentiment and content, creating content or feedback loops that generate useful UGC, and ensuring your owned content is structured, answer-ready and aligns with the kinds of questions Al is likely to pull from Reddit or similar sources.



THE RISE OF INTENTIONAL INFLUENCE

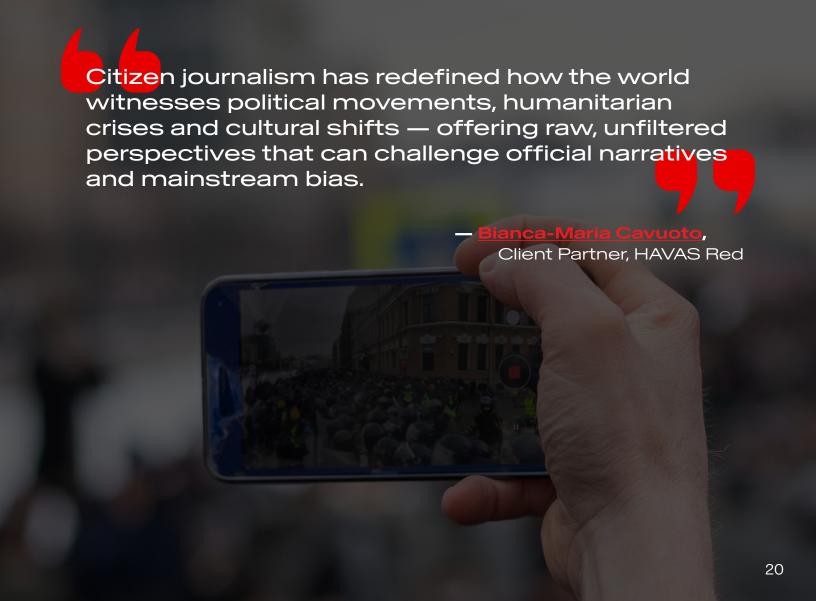
By 2026, news and influence will be crafted by podcasters, Substack writers and niche creators who sit shoulder-to-shoulder with legacy media in shaping what we believe and buy.

The old macro-influencer playbook is being retired. The signs are everywhere. Journalists are ditching mastheads for Substack and LinkedIn, and in the process, are cultivating audiences who trust them more than traditional outlets.

Meanwhile, a new breed of influencers known as "newsfluencers" is emerging. These hybrid creators or citizen journalists blend journalistic integrity

with the reach and relatability of social media. Empowered by mobile technology and social platforms, newsfluencers are redefining how the world witnesses political movements, humanitarian crises and cultural shifts — offering raw, unfiltered perspectives that can challenge official narratives and mainstream bias.

For communicators, this shift demands a strategic pivot. Influence is now more about resonance than reach. Partnerships should feel more like co-design than paid placements, and building authentic relationships with nichefluencers and newsfluencers will be essential to ensure credible storytelling, audience engagement and brand relevance in a fragmented media landscape.





CLOSED COMMUNITIES > PUBLIC FEEDS

For brands, influence will have less to do with follower counts and more to do with earning entry into the private digital rooms of fan communities.

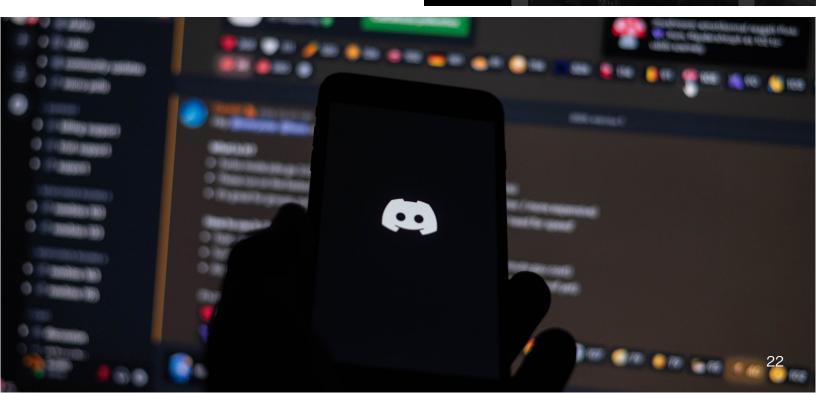
As cultural shifts and privacy concerns drive people into tighter online spaces, influence in 2026 will increasingly be measured by loyalty built not with viral content served up by an algorithm but with intimacy earned behind closed doors.

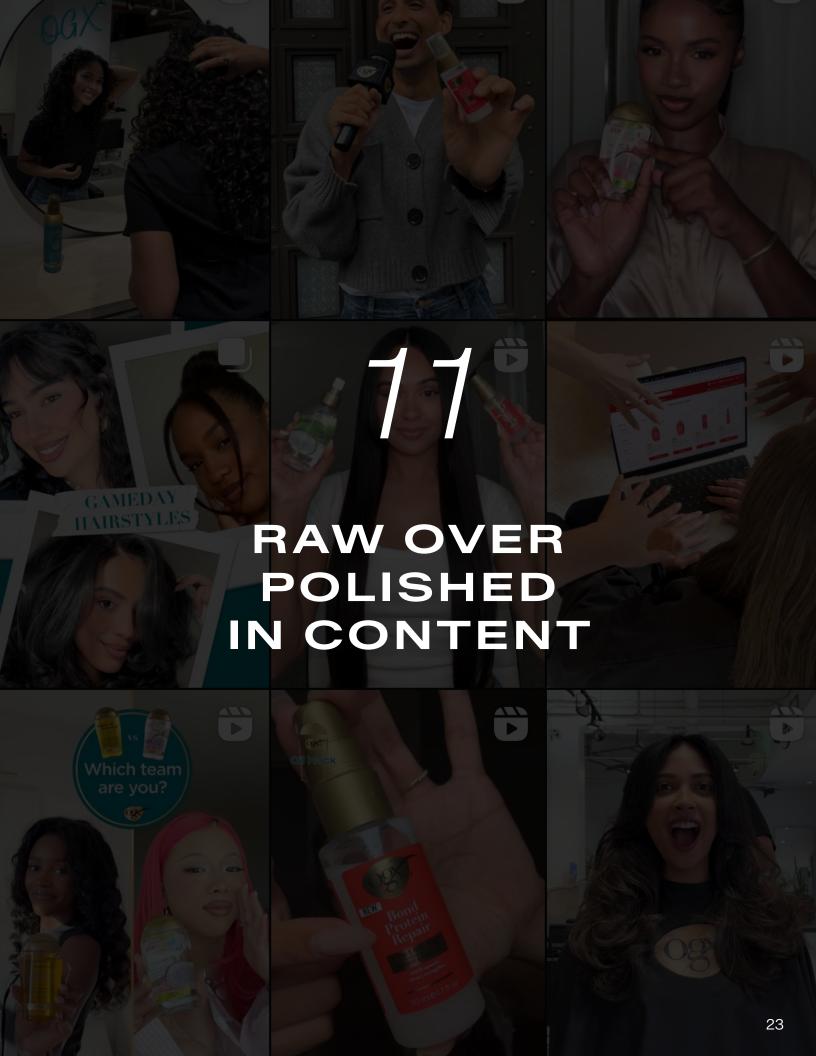
Mass posting will feel performative, while small-group sharing will feel real, especially if brands are able to gain entry into "fandoms." It's a good idea for brands to invest in strategies that earn entry into closed micro-communities on Discord, Telegram or other private groups, where fandoms stretch across music, entertainment, lifestyle subcultures, sports and tech, and beyond. These aren't just hobbyists or casual followers. They're passionate, highly engaged communities built on shared meaning, emotion and ritual. What they all have in common is emotional intensity and a deep sense of belonging. When brands enter these spaces as authentic participants, not as outsiders looking to sell, they earn trust and long-term relevance.

A NEW AGE OF INFLUENCE: NAVIGATING THE NEWS YOU DON'T CHOOSE

Where once a few trusted broadcasters shaped the day's headlines, today's audiences curate their own newsfeeds, swiping through a swirl of breaking alerts, influencer posts, algorithmic recommendations and Al-generated summaries. News no longer simply finds us; it fights for our attention.

HAVAS Red's 2025 white paper, A New Age of Influence, explores how choice does not always equal clarity. As algorithms prioritize speed and engagement over depth and credibility, the lines between journalism, commentary and misinformation are blurring. Newsrooms are shrinking. Trust is eroding. And the traditional rules of influence — who shapes narratives, who holds power, who gets heard — are shifting faster than ever.





RAW OVER POLISHED IN CONTENT

The allure of algorithm-chasing and Al-generated fluff will give way to cravings for bold, human storytelling that's raw and resonant.

Brand content is undergoing a reckoning. Now, when something isn't written by a robot, it stands apart, practically sparkling and crackling with all its realness. Enter the era where lo-fi formats and creator-led narratives reign supreme.

The big opportunity? Prioritize lo-fi, personal, creator-led storytelling over polished brand assets. Embrace conversational SEO, community-led narratives and UGC as the new drivers of discoverability. 2026 belongs to brands that dare to be human, think like creators and build with meaning.

DIALECT-FIRST SOCIAL MEDIA

By 2026, social platforms will amplify regional dialects from niche communities to global culture. Early signals are already visible: Yorùbá content in Nigeria is thriving on Facebook and YouTube; Bhojpuri creators in India are generating hundreds of millions of YouTube views; Neapolitan humor is trending on Italian TikTok; Bavarian dialect content is resonating with German Gen Z; and in the Philippines, Cebuano and Ilocano hashtags are drawing millions on TikTok. With rising cultural pride and rapid advances in Al subtitling, dialect-first content is poised to become a dominant force in virality.

lily

I freaking love it, so pleased you made a product that women can get easily and effectively. I started this journey one week after it hit the shelves. Thank you so much!!

Katrina

Been taking his since ast year. Works great Thank you for making a birth control I don't need a prescription to get.

IN COMES COMMENT SECTION CONTENT

is the best birth control I've ever taken. 🙌 🤍

Skylar

I've been using Opill for about a year now.
I love it!!!!

Nornestrel tablets 0.075mg

Rebecca

My favorite birth control!! It's the only one that's truly worked for me

IN COMES COMMENT SECTION CONTENT

For communicators in 2026, the mandate will be clear: Treat every comment as content, and every comment thread as a laboratory.

In 2026, the comment section is no longer a reactionary space — it's social media's go-to place for driving community growth and supercharging brand engagement. The smartest brands have pro-active community engagement strategies and systems in place, treating comments as microcontent opportunities.

From witty, timely and brand-aligned replies that spark conversation and boost visibility, to surprise-and-delight product seeding opportunities, many brands, with the help of Al-powered social intelligence tools, are seeing stronger engagement and follower growth as a result of these organic efforts compared to owned social content. Brands are also investing heavily in reputation recovery as soon as they see even a small number of negative comments affect their online "ratings."



the cute brand colors!

That I don't need to go to m doctor to get Opill Va

The comment section is more strategically and creatively important than it ever has been — with social media marketing coming full circle back to community as the primary focus after going through its pay-to-play stage in recent years. These days, if you as a brand don't have a workstream dedicated to earned pro-active community engagement vs. community management/social CSR only, you're missing out on the opportunity to organically unlock visibility, engagement and consideration.

— Davitha Tiller,

Head of Social and Integrated Communication, HAVAS Red and HH&Y

That Opill prevents an unwanted pregnancy



MANAGERS AS FRONTLINE COMMUNICATORS

In 2026, your frontline managers will be more than just team leads. They'll be the real comms MVPs.

Big news to share? Skip the corporate email blast. Instead, empower managers to deliver updates directly to their crews in ways that feel authentic and two-way. Why? Because employees consistently rank their managers as their most trusted source of information.

Smart organizations will double down on this by arming managers with toolkits, training and templates that help them communicate with clarity, empathy and purpose. When every update ties back to company values, culture stops being a slide deck and starts being a lived experience.

The result: stronger trust, tighter alignment and comms that feel less like "corporate speak" and more like real talk.

PURPOSE REIMAGINED: ENDURING VALUES FOR LASTING IMPACT

Today's employees want to work for organizations that live their values — not just list them. HAVAS Red's latest white paper, *Purpose Reimagined*, finds that purpose must now function as a system, not a slogan: it should inform how companies make decisions, empower their people, and show progress with transparency and humility.

When purpose is embedded into culture — through leaders, behaviors and everyday choices — it becomes the most credible expression of brand trust. The organizations that thrive will be those whose employees don't just understand the purpose, but feel it.



THE FAST LANE OF INTERNAL COMMS

THE FAST LANE OF INTERNAL COMMS

In 2026, internal communications will prioritize the speed, clarity and impact of communication over traditional open rates or participation metrics.

Volatile markets, hybrid work and digital overload are making speed and focus critical competitive advantages. Traditional engagement metrics fail to capture how communication accelerates execution or aligns teams to strategy.

In 2026, success will be measured by how quickly messages drive action, reduce decision-making lag and create alignment across distributed teams.

To achieve this, companies will simplify communication ecosystems, automate message routing by urgency and audience and eliminate redundant tools. The result: communications that are not only faster but more purposeful — transforming internal comms from a function that informs to one that actively propels organizational responsiveness, adaptability and performance.



Employees decide every day whether to carry a company's purpose into their customer interactions — which makes internal activation just as critical as external storytelling. True purpose comes to life through two-way dialogue, equitable leadership and autonomy with accountability — when teams are empowered to act on values in real time.

Linda Descano, CFA°,
 Global Chief Integration &
 Marketing Officer, HAVAS
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