Humanistic communication professionals: dialogue and listening skills as core competencies of humanistic communication professionals in the Netherlands

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Abstract

Purpose – Many organisations wrestle with how to develop value-oriented businesses and societies. A humanistic communication approach that promotes understanding and dialogue amongst stakeholders can contribute to a solution. Communication professionals play a pivotal role in achieving a humanistic communication process. This paper aims to determine the significance of humanistic communication professionals and their characteristics.

Design/methodology/approach – A literature review was conducted to identify the characteristics of humanistic communication professionals. Thereafter, the extent to which such characteristics have been implemented in competency models in the Netherlands was investigated. This country's strong tradition of developing competencies for communication professionals has resulted in competency models that serve as standards for professional development.

Findings – The literature review shows that a humanistic approach to communication is characterised by dialogic engagement and social listening to build and maintain trust, foster transparency and create engagement with stakeholders. Communication professionals can act as "cultural interpreters", "organisational listeners" and "stewards of meaning". The human element plays a key factor in the competency standards for communication professionals in the Netherlands, although the extent to which they are embedded varies. The analysis shows a shift from passing on a message towards dialogue and engagement.

Originality/value – Most studies of communication professionals' competencies have been based on roles or tasks they perform. Little scholarly attention has been paid to competencies that add to developing value-oriented businesses and societies. This paper focuses specifically on how communication professionals can contribute to creating humanistic organisations.

Keywords Humanistic communication, Competencies, Education, Professionalisation

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

In line with society's increasing demand for responsible business practices, communication professionals face the challenge of helping organisations realise the triple bottom line concept. This requires companies to look beyond their sales and profit and consider the long-term equilibrium between the state of the environment, economic well-being and equality between members of society. This challenge has been intensified by the rise of Industry 4.0 [1], also known as the fourth industrial revolution. It is characterised by "the increasing digitalization of the entire value chain and the resulting interconnection of people, objects and systems through real time data exchange both inside and beyond the organization boundaries" (Bissola and Imperatori, 2020, p. Xiv). These new ways of "producing and delivering goods and services involve stakeholders more actively and enlarge the number of actors who directly participate in the business activities" (Bissola and Imperatori, 2020, p. Xiv).

Thus, many organisations now face the challenge of managing interconnectivity between stakeholders to create the triple bottom line equilibrium, a process that prioritises creating transparency and engagement with stakeholders. An alignment between internal and external stakeholders' interests is required to bring about responsible business practices (Weller, 2017). Such an alignment can be achieved only when there is a certain level of engagement between stakeholders based on mutual trust. Transparency can help an organisation improve relations and outcomes for all its stakeholders. According to Parris *et al.* (2016) "transparency should serve as a foundational tool for addressing stakeholder distrust and improving responsible management practices of organizations" (p. 223).

Communication professionals can help foster engagement and create transparency. In fact, building and maintaining trust, dealing with sustainable development and social responsibility, and coping with the demand for more transparency and an active audience are part of the European Communication Monitor's list [2] of most important strategic issues for communication management until 2024 (Zerfass *et al.*, 2019, p. 54, 2020, p. 74, 2021, p. 72). Studies of corporate social responsibility have demonstrated the importance of communication in developing and implementing such programmes (e.g. Dawkins, 2005; Morsing and Schultz, 2006; Schultz *et al.*, 2013; Seele and Lock, 2014).

We need communication professionals who can help organisations achieve triple bottom line equilibrium in the context of Industry 4.0. We call such professionals "humanistic communication professionals". At its core, a humanistic approach to communication proposes communication as a form of human practice and the process that produces understanding. While a body of literature discusses the value and characteristics of humanistic communication, to our knowledge there is no study that specifically investigates the communication professional's role in achieving a humanistic communication approach and the qualifications needed to perform such a role in corporate communication. When considering the communication professional's strategic role in helping organisations achieve triple bottom line equilibrium, it is important to pay attention to their qualifications.

This paper investigates the characteristics of humanistic communication professionals and identifies their scope and roles. Several frameworks define these scope and roles. In Europe, the European Communication Professionals Skills and Innovation (ECOPSI) [3] framework proposes a matrix that contains six general competencies for four types of communication professionals (i.e. social media manager, crisis communication manager, IC manager and chief communication officer) (Tench *et al.*, 2013). The Global Alliance publishes another well-known international framework for communication professionals: the Global Capability Framework for Public Relations and Communication Management [4]. It consists of 11 statements which, taken as a whole, describe the profession's scope and role.

Two concepts are commonly used when identifying communication professionals' scope and roles: "competencies" and "capabilities". While these terms are often used interchangeably, some scholars identify differences between them. The ECOPSI framework defines competency as "the mix of skills and knowledge held by a practitioner, which combine with personal attributes to produce effective professional behaviours" (Tench *et al.*, 2015, p. 44). The Global Capability Framework uses the concept of capability, which it defines as "an open model, supporting continuous development: there is a spectrum of capability as opposed to either a threshold of "capable or not capable" or a neat scale of progressively increasing capacity" (Gregory and Fawkes, 2019, p. 3). This paper uses the concept of "competency" to analyse the scope and role of humanistic communication professionals because it aligns better with the instrumental aim of the standards for communication professionals in the Netherlands that this research investigates.

Most studies of communication professionals' competencies have been based on the roles or tasks they perform (Welch, 2013; Hendrawan *et al.*, 2020; Tench *et al.*, 2013). Little scholarly

attention has been paid to the competencies they apply in developing value-oriented businesses and societies to create triple bottom line equilibrium. This paper investigates the development of competencies for communication professionals in the Netherlands with a specific focus on how they can contribute to triple bottom line equilibrium. The Netherlands has a strong tradition of developing competencies for communication professionals that has resulted in various competency models. For instance, the ECOPSI framework (Tench *et al.*, 2013) used the communication profession model developed by Logeion (the Dutch association of communication professionals) as a starting point for designing the ECOPSIE research project.

This paper will begin by discussing the literature on humanistic communication to identify the characteristics of humanistic communication professionals. The discussion will be followed by a methodological section that explains the study design and a section that lays out findings and conclusions. Recommendations for further research will be made in the final section.

Literature review: defining the characteristics of humanistic communication professionals
Humanistic communication has been discussed in contexts ranging from technical communication (e.g. Dombrowski, 2020, 1995; Ranade and Swarts, 2019) to health communication (e.g. Werder, 2017; Kunneman *et al.*, 2019). While the humanistic approach to communication has been developed in different academic contexts, it is seen as a necessity to improve the quality of professional practices associated with different fields. For instance, in their analysis of interactions between medical professionals and patients during the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, Amin *et al.* (2021) argue that:

> Humanistic communication should be emphasized as a necessity, not an option, for clinical practice, at all times, not solely for implementation during a global health pandemic due to increased physical distance, addition of barriers for infectious control, and scarcity of resources.' (p. 4).

In technical communication, a broad field that includes communicating about specialised or technical topics, technological applications and instructions, scholars have acknowledged that a humanistic approach can help to broaden the social relevance of technical communication practices (e.g. Sullivan, 1990; Dombrowski, 1995). Technical communication literature defines humanistic communication as a form of communication that champions humanistic values such as dialogue, listening and ethical considerations to reach understanding between participants in the communication process. "Understanding the influence of environment on reception and on delivery of the content" is another important aspect of humanistic communication (Ranade and Zwarts, 2019, p. 25).

According to Werder (2017), "a humanistic model offers a focus on human communication as a dialogical process between equals [. . .] rather than a one-directional instructional statement that appears not to ask for feedback other than behavioural compliance" (p. 5). Dialogue is important because it involves participants in conversation and decision-making. Hence, "dialogue is considered one of the most ethical forms of communication" (Werder, 2017, p. 5).

The value of dialogue for organisations has been widely acknowledged. According to Taylor and Kent (2014), "dialogue as an established theory of ethics, says that organizations should engage with stakeholders and publics to make things happen, to help make better decisions, to keep citizens informed, and to strengthen organizations and society" (p. 388). Capizzo (2018) emphasises the role of dialogue in the interplay of communication and relationships among multiple organisations and publics. He writes, "dialogic theory should help organizations look beyond dyadic organization-public relationships to more holistic

understandings of their relationships with multiple others" (p. 27). This emphasis on holistic understanding requires openness and transparency from all stakeholders involved in the conversation. This leads to a process that Taylor and Kent (2014, p. 391) call "dialogic engagement", in which organisations and stakeholders interact, "fostering understanding, goodwill, and a shared view of reality".

The realisation of dialogical process as the core of the humanistic model of communication requires "listening" to be an integral part of the process. Listening (i.e. an organisation's interaction process) is a significant step towards dialogue (Capizzo, 2018). Macnamara (2016) describes the concept of organisational listening:

> Unlike interpersonal listening, which is paradigmatically direct, face-to-face, and synchronous, organizational listening requires and depends on policies, systems, structures, resources, and a range of processes, technologies, and specialist skills to enable and facilitate delegated, mediated, large-scale listening. (p. 3)

According to Macnamara (2016), listening at the organisational level requires "an architecture of listening", which is characterised by an organisational culture that is open to listening and by policies, systems, technologies and resources that support listening. At a personal level, skills for listening and articulation of stakeholders' and publics' voices are required. These characteristics foreground the importance of creating a listening culture in an organisation and using media technologies to facilitate the listening process. This mediated listening process is often defined as "social listening", which offers opportunities for organisations to engage with internal and external stakeholders. Humanistic organisations are thus engaging in dialogue and actively listening. As Capizzo (2018) argues, a genuine commitment to organisational listening requires that organisations follow many dialogic preparation principles:

> [This] includes commitment to ethical communication, organizational transparency, and a willingness to change future actions. In this way, organizations can better understand the multitude of voices in their communities, becoming more aware of the networks and societies in which they operate. (p. 27)

The roles of humanistic communication professionals

Communication professionals play a pivotal role in achieving the humanistic communication process. Ideally, they should not only be able to apply a humanistic communication approach in their daily activities, but they should also help organisations design communication strategies that help bring about humanistic communication. Dialogic engagement and social listening foster transparency and create engagement with stakeholders, contributing to an organisation's humanistic efforts.

To fulfil such a role, communication professionals first need a good understanding of dialogical and listening approaches to communication. Scholars in public relations have formulated specific roles communication professionals can play to foster the humanistic organisation. Capizzo (2018), for instance, identified three key roles for public relations professionals in achieving the dialogical process of communication:

(1) As cultural interpreters, communication professionals constantly manage translation inside organisations themselves and from inside organisations to the outside world: from management to employees, from business to customer, or from corporation to community. Importantly, they must be able to use technologies that enable active listening in Industry 4.0. Analysis skills, including working with big data, are crucial to supporting dialogic engagement and organisational listening. Importantly, this translation process takes place both inside-out and outside-in. Thus, communication

professionals act as what Edwards and Hodges (2011) call "cultural intermediaries" and are crucial to producing and transforming humanistic communication for the organisation.

(2) As organisational listeners, practitioners know the critical, meaning-rich context for conversations that serves as a significant step toward dialogue. It is vitally important that communication professionals understand the external contexts in which the organisation is operating. Listening is "a necessary skill that must be developed by individuals and organizations for dialogue to occur and as part of empathy and "supportiveness" that practitioners must show to publics" (Capizzo, 2018, p. 27).

(3) As stewards of meaning, public relations practitioners craft language to facilitate communication among organisational publics. Communication craftmanship is a requirement for every communication professional.

Taylor and Kent (2014) propose characteristics of dialogic communicators that include open-mindedness, empathy, patience and the ability "to design their communication interactions with other people to facilitate interaction, self-discovery, and cocreation of reality" (p. 389). A dialogic communicator should be able to establish interactions based on the best interests of their own organisation and stakeholders. This is important to developing trust, which is the foundation of dialogue between stakeholders. In this respect, dealing with multiple and possibly competing interests constitutes a challenge for the communication professional. However, as Taylor and Kent argue, "individual or organizational goals are secondary to achieving understanding and being open to new possibilities" (p. 389).

In this section key aspects of humanistic communication and the roles of communication professionals in realising these aspects in an organisational context have been identified. This literature review shows that a humanistic approach to communication is characterised by dialogic engagement and social listening to build and maintain trust, foster transparency and create engagement with stakeholders. In such an approach, communication professionals can act as "cultural interpreters", "organisational listeners" and "stewards of meaning". So far, these key aspects have been discussed on a theoretical level. In this paper, the discussion is extended by investigating practices in the Netherlands to scrutinise how humanistic elements are embedded in developing competencies for communication professionals. Therefore, the following research questions have been formulated:

RQ. To what extent are humanistic communication elements integrated in the competency models for communication professionals in the Netherlands?

RQ1. Are dialogic engagement and social listening embedded in the models and, if so, how?

RQ2. Are the concepts "cultural interpreters", "organisational listeners" and "stewards of meaning" embedded in the models and, if so, how?

Methodology
To answer the research questions, two important competency models for communication professionals developed in the Netherlands by LOCO and Logeion have been analysed (Figure 1). These standards were chosen because they play a vital role in defining competencies for communication professionals in this country. LOCO (Landelijk Overleg Communicatie Opleidingen) is a national platform for 19 communication bachelor's programmes at 14 universities of applied sciences. LOCO has formulated a fixed set of competencies that define the bachelor's level and serve as a framework and guideline for developing education. Logeion, with more than 4,000 members, is the largest professional
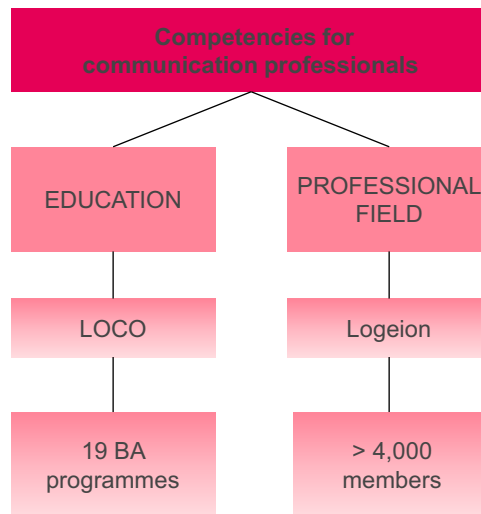
body for communication in the Netherlands. They have defined competencies by means of standards for practitioners that are meant to serve as a compass for professional development. Logeion's competencies are meant to be a foundation for further training, setting up a job profile, job evaluations and (re)establishing communication departments.

A deductive analysis approach (Harding, 2018) has been used to investigate the extent to which humanistic communication elements are embedded in these competency models. Following Harding (2019), a deductive approach is a qualitative data analysis method in which the existing theory and literature serve as the starting point. Data collection and analysis are then planned to answer specific research questions arising from the literature (p. 222).

First, key aspects of humanistic communication professionals have been developed and research questions have been formulated, as explained in the literature review section. Then, these key aspects were used as thematic codes in analysing the latest standards issued by these bodies: (1) LOCO national qualifications for Bachelor in Communication (Simon *et al.*, 2019) and (2) Logeion's model (Logeion, 2015) to describe core tasks and levels of the communication professional, issued in 2012 and updated in 2015. These standards are available on the organisations' websites.

Following Scott (1990), quality of the documents was assessed. To enhance the documents' credibility and representativeness, four semi-structured interviews with representatives from LOCO and Logeion were held to understand the rationales behind the standards and underpin the findings. The interviewees were chosen based on their expertise and involvement with developing the standards. However, these interviews are only meant to increase understanding of the standards; the analysis is mainly based on the standards as issued by these two organisations.

In the analysis, following Bryman and Bell's (2015) deductive thematic analysis procedures, three roles of humanistic communication professionals were used as thematic codes: "cultural interpreters", "organisational listeners" and "stewards of meaning". In analysing the LOCO and Logeion competency models, specific attention was paid to whether the standards mention these key aspects and how these aspects are explained in the standards and in their introductions, which elaborate on the vision of the profession, trends in

the professional field and starting points. Similarities and differences between the literature-based definition of the three aspects of humanistic communication professionals and the explanation in the two Dutch communication competencies standards were critically analysed.

Analysis and discussion
This section presents the results of the analysis of the LOCO and Logeion competency models. The extent to which humanistic communication elements are embedded in each model was scrutinised. First, RQ1 which asks whether and how dialogic engagement and social listening are embedded in the models was addressed. Then, the focus was on answering the second question: are the concepts "cultural interpreters", "organisational listeners" and "stewards of meaning" embedded in the models and, if so, how (RQ2). It was found that the Logeion model only reflects humanistic communication in a limited way because it focuses on developing persuasion skills instead of the dialogic aspect of communication. In contrast, the LOCO model is better aligned with the humanistic communication professional model and illustrates the outline of such professionals.

Analysis of Logeion qualifications
The professional body for communication professionals, Logeion, defined their competencies for practitioners after discussions with experts from education and the communication field (Table 1).

The model was developed in 2012 and updated in 2015, and it is meant to serve as a compass for the practitioner's professional development. It starts by describing the communication profession based on six core tasks (Analysing, Advising, Integrating, Creating, Coaching, Organising) performed at six levels (supporting, instructing, task, results, planning, master). It uses tasks and profiles rather than job profiles to reflect "the diversity of the profession" (Logeion, 2015) in which no two job profiles are alike and job titles are not strictly defined. Core tasks and levels are shown in Table 1.

For every core task at every level, the model describes what the communication professional does (process), how it is done (behaviour) and what the results should be (output and outcome). The six core tasks and levels are enveloped within six communication and development competencies with which communication professionals can distinguish themselves and continuously develop: aligning communication to organisational goals; being sensitive to surroundings and the organisation; connecting; writing, depicting/visualising, presenting; coping with a dynamic context; and building development competence (Logeion, 2015). Logeion recently started revising the standard.

Embedding dialogic engagement and social listening
The analysis shows that the Logeion model weakly reflects aspects of the humanistic communication professional. While the Logeion standards acknowledges the importance of dialogue in connecting stakeholders, they put more emphasis on persuading and influencing than on understanding and goodwill, which are the key aspects of dialogic engagement. For example as stated in the description of core task Advising, level 5: "I [the communication professional] use multiple negotiation and influencing methods to effectively influence others in order to incite others to decide on (new) communicative behaviour and/or activities" (p. 25). Another description states that: "Organising is coming up with, planning and organising live meetings aimed at achieving an event that has the desired communicative effect on the target group (shift of opinion, desired behaviour by means of knowledge transfer, inspiration, connecting)" (p. 15).

Core tasks	
All professional activities of communication professionals can be listed under the six core tasks	
Analysing	Mapping issues: analysis in order to determine trends, interests, opinions and behaviour of target groups
Advising	Making organisations more communicative: advice aims to reach (organisational) goals using communication
Integrating	Planning, aligning and implementing communication processes: planning consistent communication policy and arranging, realising and controlling this integral communication process
Creating	Creating communication tools: communication tools are a way to establish or maintain contact between the organisation and its stakeholders
Organising	Providing encounters: designing, planning and organising live meetings aimed at making an experience that has a desired effect on the target group (change in opinions, desired behaviour by means of knowledge transfer, inspiration, connection)
Coaching	Making people more communicative: within the context of the organisation or collaboration. Establishing desired communication behaviour or self-reflection to others by means of (didactic) teaching methods, sharing feedback, insights, tips and tools
Levels	
A higher level indicates amongst others an increase in responsibility, autonomy and bigger and more important communication problems	
6. Master level	Pushing boundaries
5. Planning level	Guiding
4. Results level	Determining solutions
3. Task level	Realising solutions
2. Instructing level	Executing within given frameworks
1. Supporting level	Executing while being guided
Core competencies	
Relevant for each level or specialism, regardless core tasks that are executed, enabling the communication professional to professionally distinguish himself and to continuously develop	
1. Aligning communication to organisational goals	
2. Sensitivity towards environment and organisation	
3. Connecting	
4. Craft of writing – depicting/visualising – presenting	
5. Coping with a dynamic context	
6. Development competence	
Source(s): Logeion (2015)	

Table 1.
Core tasks, levels and competencies in the Logeion qualifications

In Logeion's standard, the main purpose of dialogue seems to be influencing and convincing others rather than invigorating understanding. The Logeion representatives that were interviewed acknowledge this weakness. They stated that the updated standard will have a strong focus on the professional's connecting role. One representative said:

> Influence of other professional fields like behavioural science and psychology were insufficiently incorporated [in Logeion's current standards]. All core tasks reflected communication within the context of your own part of the organisation and now you can see that the communication profession is increasingly developing as a connecting element within the organisation. Therefore, [communication professionals] should know about other competencies and other professional fields present within the organisation.

This quote confirms that the new standard is likely to emphasise soft skills, behavioural science and the need to establish interaction and connection. It also confirms that the concept of the dialogic communicator is likely to be embedded in the new standard.

While the Logeion standard stresses the significance of analysing stakeholder's trends, interests, views and behaviour (p. 14), it does not address how communication professionals should employ dialogue and listening in the context of Industry 4.0. Discussions about this issue in the interviews with Logeion representatives revealed that this is a shortcoming of the current model, and the updated version will address digital developments. A Logeion representative addressed the importance of using data by giving an example of crisis communication during the COVID-19 pandemic:

What we missed [in the current standard] is the digital developments in the communication profession (. . .) How do you use data to let your communication be effective? When defining campaigns or activities, now more than ever one can use baseline measurements, quick polls. (. . .) I talked to the core team for coronavirus crisis communication, and they said we use quick polls every day to see what the sentiment is and what images work.

Furthermore, the interview revealed the importance of analysing data to have knowledge and skills, analysing big data and being able to give advice based on these data. In their whitepaper that explains trends for 2020–2021, Logeion described the importance of establishing alignment and harmony with the environment, and the pivotal role of technology. However, although Logeion underlines the fact that "people's need for genuine personal contact in this digital world remains essential" (Logeion, 2020, p. 1), the implications for the communication professional are more focussed on gaining up-to-date knowledge of technology and social dilemmas (e.g. privacy) and using new technologies and available data than on creating dialogic engagement.

Embedding humanistic communication professional roles

All three roles of humanistic communication professionals – cultural interpreter, organisational listener and steward of meaning – are mentioned and elaborated on in Logeion's model.

Cultural interpreter. Logeion's Sensitivity criterion addresses the roles of cultural interpreter and organisational listener. Practitioners are expected to perform as cultural interpreters. A practitioner in a support function (level 1) (see Table 1) is not expected to be aware of the external environment, but more experienced professionals should fulfil the role as stated in the standard: "I signal developments and relationships/interactions inside and outside the organisation. I realise how my behaviour influences this (and vice versa) and act in support of the organisation, relevant stakeholders and myself" (Level 4, p. 7). A communication professional should be able to analyse the issue at hand and place it "in a broader framework of organisation, political, social-cultural and societal environmental and in a (new) conceptual framework, thus defining a broader and deepened insight" (Analysing task, Level 5; p. 20).

With regard to the role of cultural interpreter, the Logeion standard is narrowly limited to translation. Deploying technologies that enable active listening is not (yet) part of the standard.

Organisational listener. In the Logeion standard, organisational listening is crucial for the communication practitioner. The core task Advising indicates the significance of listening, although it does not declare that a shared view of reality is the ultimate goal. The standard states: "I listen actively and am committed, I display an understanding of the opinions and sensitivities of others, and I take them into account in my recommendations in order to connect with my discussion partner" (p. 22).

Steward of meaning. Creating communication tools is one of the six core tasks Logeion describes. They define tools as "means to establish and/or maintain communication between an organisation and its stakeholders" (p. 15). This aligns with Capizzo's view of stewards of meaning. It is linked to the core area Integrating (planning, aligning and implementing

communication processes). In the Logeion standard, this role encompasses creating new and updating existing offline and online tools and developing new concepts.

Apart from these three roles, the analysis reveals another role of a communication professional that is in line with the concept of humanistic communication professional: the role of coach. The current standard defines the coaching role as "the connecting, intermediating role of the communication professional (for instance as mediator) in interactions between various stakeholders" (p. 15). To a certain extent, this role is captured in "the stewards of meaning" role; however, in the Logeion model, the role includes helping members of organisations become more communicative. So, in a way, this role extends the definition of stewards of meaning. It is further elaborated on in the LOCO model.

Analysis of LOCO qualifications
Following rapid developments in the discipline, the 2011 national LOCO qualifications were brought up to date in 2019 (Simon *et al.*, 2019). The competencies were defined by a committee of four LOCO representatives, one of whom was a member of Logeion's educational committee. Each participating university consulted their own professional advisory committee.

The new model involves six core areas within which communication professionals practice their profession (Table 2). The model focuses on the skills of the professional: inquisitiveness, innovative power, collaboration, reflective capabilities, empathic capabilities,

Context and strategy	The communication professional should understand the strategy of an organisation and the broader (international) environment within which organisation are active. He/she has a clear overview of the developments within his/her own organisation, discipline and media landscape in general, to develop communication strategies that are integrated within the goals of the organisation
Target group and behaviour	The communication professional is concerned with assimilating (listening, discussing, monitoring) and analysing (online) data regarding the communication target audience. He/she understands the behaviour and the needs, motives and choices of the target audience and ensures that the effectiveness of the communication strategies are clearly defined in response to these
Concept and creation	The communication professional can develop, frame and activate communication products, services and experiences conceptually by using creating, meaningful content and design. This concerns connecting desirable aspects and target audiences, organisation targets and media/technology on a strategic basis
Planning and organisation	The communication professional can, by means of project-based planning and within a determined budget, realise previous goals that are clearly formulated. He/she organises and coordinates the process between different disciplines/departments and fulfils a pivotal function for the benefit of media productions, media planning and event. He/she works according to agile guidelines in order to anticipate needs in an environment that is constantly changing
Persuasion and commitment	The communication professional communicates the message of the organisation to inform and/or advise internal and external communication target groups, with the aim of realising organisational and communication goals. He/she knows how to eliminate resistance to ensure commitment, consensus and/or support
Connection and facilitation	The communication professional maps the network within and throughout the organisation and involves new networks where necessary. He/she helps employees to translate (company)values into their communicative tasks in an effort to increase the effective communication of the employees and their teams and ensure the organisation is more communicative

Table 2. Core areas in the LOCO qualifications

Source(s): Simon *et al.* (2019)

ethical beliefs and agility. The LOCO descriptions of these skills can be found in Table 3. With the body of knowledge, these skills are "necessary for the practice of the activities within the six core areas" (Simon *et al.*, 2019, p. 20).

The analysis reveals that the LOCO model not only reflects the humanistic communication professional model, but it adds new dimensions that are not yet addressed in the literature.

Embedding dialogic engagement and social listening
The preface to the LOCO standard (2019) starts by indicating that there is a great need for communication professionals who know how to move others, create engagement and shape dialogue in line with the idea of the human-centred communication professional. It states:

> The communication profession influences all major contemporary challenges and issues. As a result, there is a pressing need for communication professionals who can mobilise people and ensure that relevant dialogue is stimulated, not only online with customers or residents, but also via personal dialogue with critical stakeholders about sensitive topics. (p. 2)

Dialogue is a key task of a communication professional: creating the conditions for dialogue and ensuring that all stakeholders are connected should form a basis for mutual trust. According to LOCO, an important new task will be coaching specific dialogue trajectories (p. 38). In line with dialogic engagement, the goal is to increase employees' communication capacities and, more importantly, to make the organisation more communicative (p. 24). LOCO standards view creating dialogue and exchanging knowledge as a basis for mutual trust that should lead to bringing people together.

To improve dialogue, LOCO stresses the importance of knowing about psychological and sociological processes and having skills such as empathy and listening. Compared to the 2011 LOCO competencies (updated in 2016), the new standard for communication education

Professional skills	Definition LOCO (pp. 28-29)
Inquisitive skills	The communication professional has a critical investigative attitude and being able to conduct (practical) research in relation to a recommendation/product
Innovative power	The communication professional is curious, creative and strives to improve or innovate in order to contribute to the innovation of an organisation, service or product. They can recognise opportunities, generate ideas, develop ideas, seek support and implement an idea
Collaborating	The communication professional works together with other (communication) professionals to jointly make an active contribution to the realisation of the objectives of the organisation or client and thereby collaborates (in a multidisciplinary manner) across the boundaries of their own field. They dare to look beyond communication alone and work well with other disciplines
Reflective capabilities	The communication professional reflects on his own functioning and the functioning of others (person, process and product). He actively seeks personal feedback and demonstrates real insight into his own strengths and weaknesses
Empathic capabilities	The communication professional is willing and able to empathise with the experience, prior knowledge, needs, views, preferences, skills and situation of target groups and discussion partners
Ethical beliefs	The communication professional is an intermediary between society, stakeholders, and the organisation and makes a positive contribution to the business ethics and/or corporate social responsibility of an organisation or client
Agility	The communication professional can anticipate to changes. He can reflect and evaluate processes and can adjust accordingly. He can proactively respond to future scenarios that are relevant to the organisation or client

Source(s): Simon *et al.* (2019)

Table 3.
Professional skills in
the LOCO
qualifications

shifted towards a stronger emphasis on the communication professional as a person and their own personal attributes. Professional skills such as inquisitiveness, reflectiveness and empathic capabilities (Table 3) are at the core of the new model, which indicates that the idea of the dialogic communicator is applied in the model. And two of the six core areas – Persuasion and Commitment, and Connection and Facilitation – centre around the human aspect. This was confirmed by one interviewee from LOCO:

> The personal aspect in communication had become increasingly important and by personal I mean personal performance (. . .) The professional skills related to the profession can be found at the core of the model [LOCO standard], and this is mainly what it is about. In particular, the core areas Persuasion and Commitment and Connection and Facilitation are also very much about the personal component, your personal input as a person in a particular process.

LOCO indicates how communication professionals should employ dialogue and listening in the context of Industry 4.0. The standard acknowledges the significant role of the communication professional who functions as a guide and helps clarify the overflow of information by analysing context and creating scenarios. The pivotal importance of this role was endorsed in the interview with one LOCO member. When referring to this, he stated that the communication professional's skills as an interpreter and connector come forward in this role:

> And I really think this is of paramount importance (. . .) If you want to interpret and connect as a communication professional, you need to be able to listen extremely well, to connect people extremely well, to understand things well, and to understand contexts very well.

The standard stresses the fact that communication is increasingly based on analysed data about stakeholders that provides insight into the customer journey or sentiments, while big data predicts customer behaviour (p. 26). In this respect, online monitoring is part of an environmental analysis. Consequently, inquisitive skills are crucial and are the first of seven skills mentioned as key skills for communication professionals. According to LOCO, providing (visual) insights into the customer journey helps one become acquainted with the target groups, which enables you to "respond to the key points of these journeys" (p. 27). LOCO points out that responding to these journeys should not only involve analysing data but also starting conversations and connecting with the communication target group (p. 27). In this respect, LOCO focuses on analysing and interpreting data and understanding the target group's behaviour and motivation as a starting point for creating communication policy and dialogue. Interestingly, in contrast to the rest of the standard, in this section true dialogue and connecting with target groups coexist with persuasion and influencing a target group's behaviour.

Embedding humanistic communication professional roles
The LOCO model shows outlines of different roles of humanistic communication professionals and highlights the integration of these roles into the frameworks used by communication educators in the Netherlands.

Cultural interpreter. Capizzo's idea of the cultural interpreter in which the communication professional interprets various stakeholders' values to create understanding can be seen in LOCO's core area Context and Strategy. This requires the communication professional to understand the strategy and broader environment in which the organisation operates. It requires them to have a "clear overview of the developments within his/her organization, discipline and media landscape in general, to develop communication strategies that are integrated within the goals of the organisation" (p. 23). This concept is also addressed in LOCO's core area Target Group and Behaviour. It states that the communication professional should understand target groups' behaviour, needs, motives and choices and should be able

to provide insights about communication strategies to respond adequately. This is not limited to the present; the communication professional should also be able to predict future (client) behaviour based on analysing big data (p. 26).

Organisational listener. Furthermore, LOCO stresses the importance of organisational listening when stating that "the communication professional signals internal and external developments that are relevant to the strategy of an organisation" (p. 24). According to this definition, communication professionals are organisationally sensitive and able to structure and manage internal and external stakeholders. In the LOCO standard, the concept of listening in an organisation is limited to the contexts of collecting data (p. 26) and empathising (p. 36). It is not linked to the context of creating a listening culture in the organisation, although doing so may be a precondition for helping employees develop dialogic engagement. Interestingly, listening is not one of the professional skills identified as profession specific.

Stewards of meaning. According to LOCO, communication professionals act as stewards of meaning and storytellers to provide content and facilitate communication by visualising specific data related to the target group. They also increase knowledge about target groups within the organisation through "creative, meaningful content and design". This is seen in the context of connecting "target audiences, organisational targets and media/technology based on strategy" (p. 29). LOCO stresses the importance of design and creativity to help the organisation or clients solve issues (p. 29). LOCO regards the concept of stewards of meaning in a broader sense, fiercely embracing practitioners' craftmanship and thereby including storytelling, writing for online media and the importance of visuals, whereas Capizzo merely focusses on language as such.

Both Logeion and LOCO acknowledge the significance of a humanistic approach in communication. Table 4 shows the humanistic aspects identified in both standards.

Interestingly, LOCO specifically mentions the enabler role in the context of a dialogue-driven organisation. This role is rarely addressed in international literature. In line with the "coaching role" mentioned in the Logeion model (p. 15), as an enabler the communication professional prepares, supports and equips others in their communications, thereby strengthening their communicative power (Involve, 2017, p. 10, 2019). In this sense, communication professionals help other employees develop their dialogic engagement and equip them to interact and create understanding in dialogue with others. The enabler role was outlined in one interview, in which an interviewee said that in the professional field it is "really the case that you are a personal coach to others, a coach, an adviser, that you help people communicate better."

Conclusions
This paper set out to determine the significance of humanistic communication professionals and their characteristics. It has argued that such communication professionals can play a role in helping organisations create transparency and engage with stakeholders through dialogic engagement and social listening. The analysis of the standards for communication professionals' competencies from two professional bodies in the Netherlands (LOCO and Logeion) shows that humanistic communication elements are already embedded there, although the extent varies. Aside from being a cultural interpreter, organisational listener and steward of meaning, the models in the Netherlands show that humanistic communication professionals can play an important role (i.e. enabler/coach) in helping organisations achieve triple bottom equilibrium.

From the analysis, it is apparent that the competencies for education and the professional field both acknowledge the importance of the humanistic approach. The human aspect in exercising the profession is a recurring theme, as shown in Table 4.

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	LOCO qualifications — 2019	Logeion qualifications — 2015
Dialogue skills	– Coaching of dialogue trajectories, role of enabler – Importance of knowledge about psychological and sociological processes, personal attributes and skills	– Coaching – Dialogue, not always dialogical engagement, also a strong focus on persuading
Cultural interpreter	– Insights to develop communication strategies that help the organisation	– Insights and sensitivity regarding environment and organisation
Organisational listening	– Listening and understanding the implications within the organisation's policies	– Organisational listening is key for the practitioner
Stewards of meaning	– Design and creativity are key	– Link with core planning, aligning and implementing communication processes

Table 4.
A comparison of the human aspect in competencies

The LOCO standard underlines the pivotal role practitioners play in achieving a humanistic communication process by performing this approach and by designing communication strategies that help facilitate the humanistic communication characterised by dialogic engagement and social listening. The LOCO standard indicates how the human element can be put into action in Industry 4.0. However, it offers no clearly defined guidelines for how dialogic engagement and social listening should be operationalised in the interconnectedness of Industry 4.0. The transformation from big data analysis to dialogue is not extensively elaborated on, although the importance of both aspects is clearly stated.

That dialogical engagement in the context of Industry 4.0 is already being addressed in the LOCO model can partly be explained by its goal. The model was developed as a framework for communication studies programmes at Dutch universities of applied sciences. At this type of university, courses are updated frequently and cooperation with the professional field is deliberately sought in a continuous dialogue.

Furthermore, the analysis reveals the Logeion model's weaknesses in integrating the characteristics of a humanistic communication professional. That model barely addresses the concept of true dialogic engagement and does not address how to do this in the context of Industry 4.0. However, Logeion representatives stated their intention to update the competencies to acknowledge the rapid technological developments that influence the communication profession.

In his study on dialogic theory, Kent (2017) points out that:

> The dialogic approach essentially represents a shift away from the individualist, mass communication, orientation of public relations, which involved one-way and two-way messaging to stakeholders and publics (. . .) to an interpersonal, relational, public centered, rhetorical approach to public relations, seen in the scholarship on engagement. (p. 2)

The analysis of the Logeion and LOCO models in this paper show this shift from conveying a message to dialogue and engagement. The LOCO model, which was developed after the Logeion model, embodies the idea of dialogic engagement. The interviews with the Logeion representative reveal that the organisation is also moving towards the dialogic paradigm in their new competence model.

How to put the human element in action?
The analysis shows that in current practice, personal attributes and skills (e.g. listening and empathy) already play an essential role in the competency standards for Dutch communication professionals. A characteristic of such a role is the importance of analysing and interpreting big data in the context of Industry 4.0 to understand the target's group behaviour and motivation. That is a starting point for creating dialogue with the target group, and connection is vital to that effort. In this respect, a deepened knowledge of disciplines such as behavioural science and psychology is the foundation to build on.

Although the competencies needed to develop characteristics of humanistic communication professionals are present in the standards published by Logeion and LOCO, the challenge is learning how to put the abstract notion of humanistic communication in practice in professionals' daily activities. And for education, how can programmes develop curriculum content based on a solid foundation in which dialogue skills, listening, and the ability to facilitate interaction and develop trust challenge all students to further develop their skills? Lecturers play a pivotal role and should coach their students along this path.

Although LOCO and Logeion are separate bodies, their relationship is quite strong. Nevertheless, both Bachelor's programmes and professional bodies have their own standards and follow their own paths for developing competencies. Competencies for education in the Netherlands are linked to, but not embedded in, the competencies set out by Logeion. This is

because qualifications for Bachelor's programmes serve an educational purpose, whereas qualifications for the professional field aim to guide practitioners' professional development. Nevertheless, implementing and further developing the human element could greatly benefit from increased synergy between these two bodies.

Further research

This paper concerns the standards used to develop communication professional competencies, so it focuses on the institutional level. Further work is required to investigate how communication practitioners regard and value the humanistic element in their current and future activities. There is also a need for insights into the public's perception of communication practices and the perceived reality of the humanistic approach in communication.

LOCO's standard serves as a framework and guideline for developing education. A further study could identify how these humanistic standards are actually implemented in communication studies curricula. Furthermore, this study focusses on the specific situation in the Netherlands. A comparative study of competency development in other countries would provide more comprehensive insight that could be used to further develop the idea of humanistic communication professionals.

Notes

1. The term "Industry 4.0" was coined by the German government in their development plan for the country's manufacturing industry as a function of the digital revolution. Common synonyms are "digital revolution" and "the fourth industrial revolution" (Celaschi, 2017, p. 97).

2. The European Communication Monitor 2020 is based on responses from 2,324 communication professionals in 44 countries. This survey was conducted by the European Public Relations Education and Research Association (EUPRERA) and the European Association for Communication Directors (EACD). The ECM 2020 was organised by the European Public Relations Education and Research Association (EUPRERA) and the European Association of Communication Directors (EACD).

3. The European Communication Professionals Skills and Innovation (ECOPSI) programme was a two-year research project funded by the European Union (2011–2013).

4. A confederation of the world's major PR and communication management associations and institutions, representing over 300,000 practitioners and academics around the world. For more information: https://www.globalalliancepr.org/who-we-are

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