

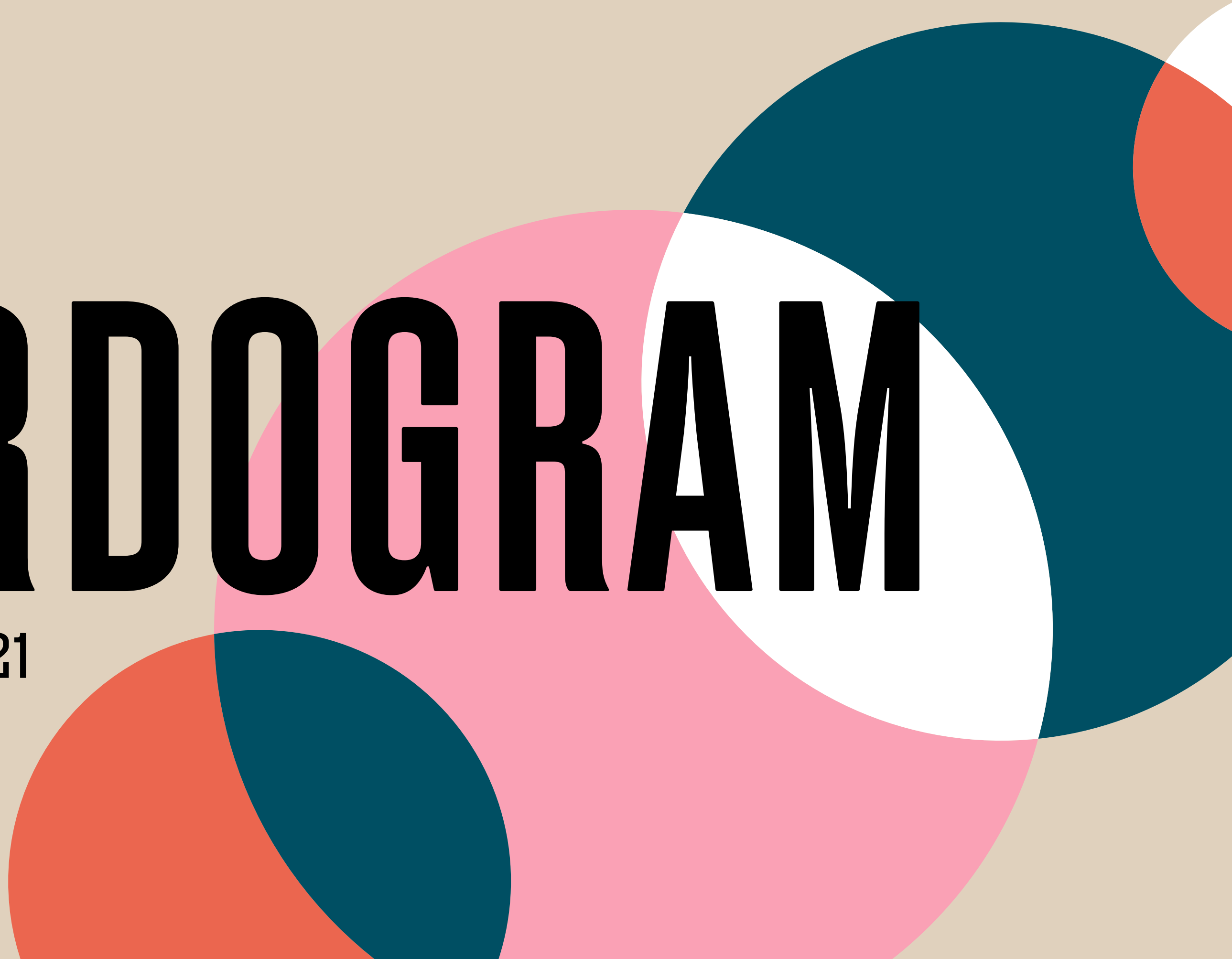
THE
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NERDOGRAM

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ENGINE
mhp *mischief*



THE NETWORKED AGED NERDOGRAM

Welcome to the fourth The Networked Age Nerdogram, a new monthly email that gathers insights and trends, to help communicators navigate a connected world that's increasingly tribal, activist and polarised.

Much of this tribalism and polarisation is built on fear. Fear of the threats posed by the outgroup their attitudes, behaviour and lifestyle - makes us draw closer as an ingroup, as our partners at The Depolarization Project stress in their new book [Poles Apart](#). Irrational fear can be dangerous, and because of this, last month I spent time sharing evidence about what to do to make audiences less worried, and maybe less polarised.

But sometimes, despite the social risks, we do need or want to worry people. This month I wanted to share some insight about what works (and what doesn't) when you want people to be more worried, and importantly, to act on these worries. From vaccination to the environment, we can all name situations where we wish more concern would drive more action.

At MHP one rule we live by is that arguments are never won, outcomes are. This Nerdogram is designed to help you with some tools to win those outcomes.

As ever, I'd love to chat, debate or co-create. Do reach out.



Kate Gomes, Head of Strategy, ENGINE MHP

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NEED TO KNOWS

FEAR ITSELF

Fear works, sometimes, for some people

Communicators, behavioural scientists and psychologists – among others – have long debated the role of fear in human behaviour.

One meta-analysis published in the Psychology Bulletin sought to better understand if and how fear works. They found that it does work, but works best when:

- The messenger was told their personal susceptibility and the potential severity of risk were high
- One-time only (rather than repeated) responses were requested
- Women were the target audience

For communicators, the impact of one time only asks is particularly notable and emphasises the potential role of the fear message in an activity such as vaccination, rather than others, such as climate change.

However, this is a well-studied, and far from simple space, and the following data sets point to other ways fear messaging can be used effectively to drive behaviour change.

THE DREADED DEADLINE

Deadlines increase both our threat perception and personal and political desire to act on the threat

It seems natural that deadlines – particularly those in the not-too-distant future – apply pressure, making us feel a looming sense of threat.

But recent research, published in [Environmental Communication](#), shows that not only do they inspire fear, but they also inspire action. The study tested the impact of a “12 years to save the climate message” versus a control and found that those who read the deadline message felt more empowered to act than their counterparts.

As communicators we have been told that deadlines make people feel hopeless, reducing their desire to act. This research counters that, and suggests the return of the deadline, used sparingly, to drive action on important issues.

IMAGES WITHOUT IMPACT

Health warning images may not have the intended impact

We are all familiar with the scary images on tobacco packs. And intuitively I (a non-smoker) – and many policy makers – assume these will be effective.

However, a study by the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign voices an opposite perspective. For smokers, these images induce anger, making them feel manipulated and uncomfortable that their freedom is being impinged upon. The authors suggest these emotions may drive smokers to consume more, rather than fewer, cigarettes.

As communicators this reminds of the importance of stepping into our audience's shoes and understanding how communications can make them feel and act, rather than resting on our own, automatic, assumptions.

THE FEAR / ACTION NEXUS

Be clear on the action you want in response to fear

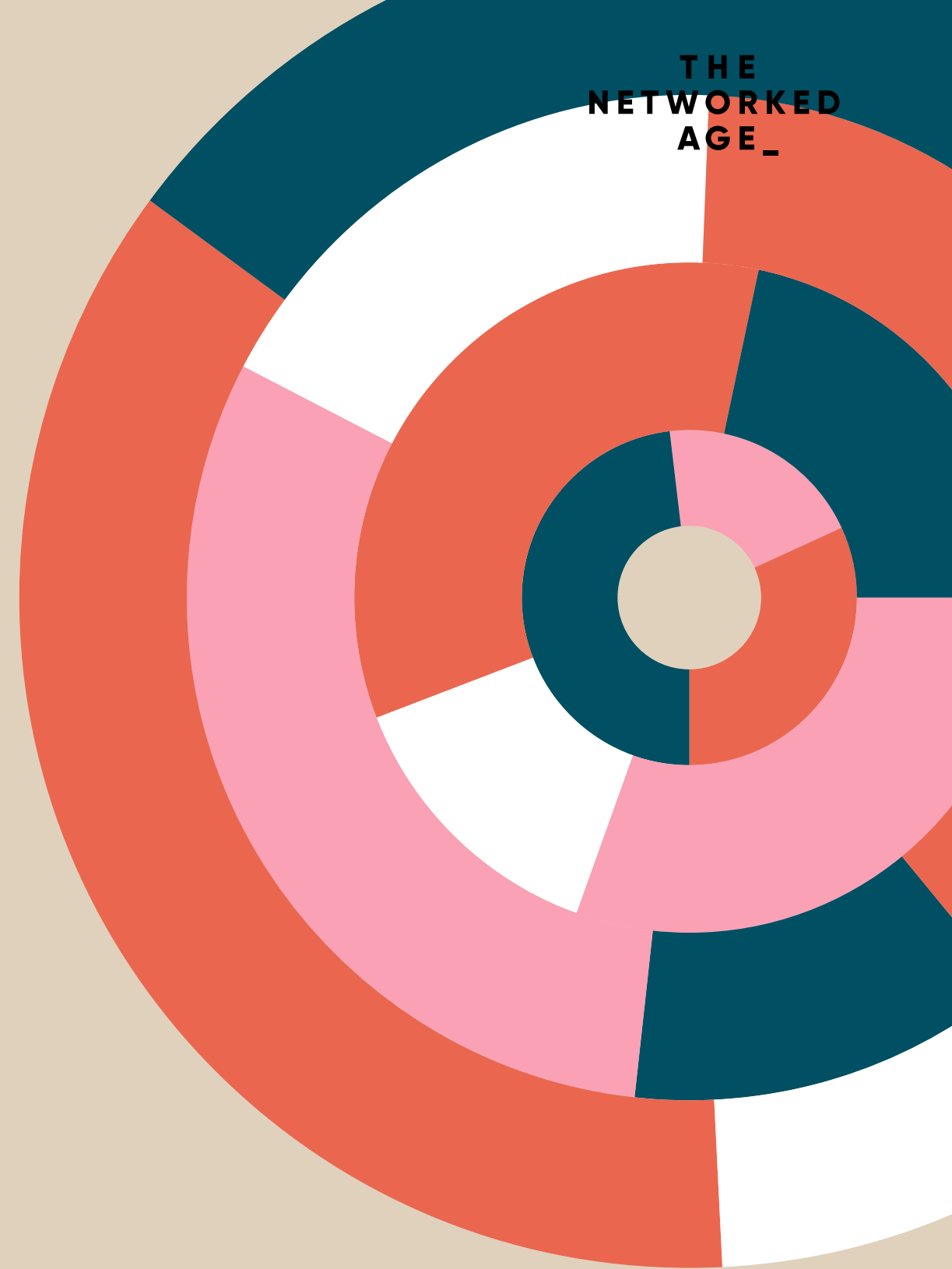
Studies frequently note that fear communications can lead to paralysis, rather than action. One piece in the Journal of Experimental Political Science notes that fear messaging emphasises potential loss to be avoided, which can reduce the change of personal mobilisation.

In response to this challenge, an important study in the Journal of Personality and Social Psychology emphasises the powerful impact of fear combined with a specific plan for action. This combination made participants more open to engaging with and acting on recommendation.

Others have built on this, arguing that the message is even more powerful when participants are convinced they can carry out the necessary action, with impact.

This serves as an important reminder for communicators that fear messaging itself is not enough and may have adverse effects. Instead, fear and action plan is a much more powerful driver of behaviour change.

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DIMINISHING RETURNS

The fear effect doesn't last

The impact of fear messaging is reliant on shock. And a study in Psychology and Marketing emphasises that this cannot be sustained in the real world, so fear based marketing has inevitable diminished returns.

The piece notes that experiments often over-emphasise the impact of fear as a marketing tool, as participants are in a high-attention environment, receiving the message for the first time. It argues in real life repetition leads to habituation or frustration, rather than action.

For communicators, this is a useful reminder about the “one and done” power of shock messaging, and the need to mix messaging formats to drive real change.

THE RULES OF INFLUENCE

At MHP+Mischief, we apply three simple Rules of Influence - developed with Dr Tali Sharot and UCL's Affective Brain Lab - to think through every challenge. As we go along, we'll show how the Rules play out in the real world. But before we begin, let's quickly recap on what they are:

RULE ONE:

Who you are is as important as what you do.

Audiences are tribal and united around shared narratives and values. To engage people, organisations must show they (and the people who run them) share the same values.

RULE TWO:

Influencers and passions spread ideas

People follow people like themselves and they respond to passionate voices. Passionate storytellers and emotional stories are more effective.

RULE THREE:

Arguments are never won, outcomes are

People will reject challenging arguments, even if they are supported by facts. To persuade people, you can't tell them they're wrong, you have to change the conversation.

SOME HELPFULL LINKS

To learn more about communicating in a polarised world, download our Guide [here](#).

If you want to know more about any of the insights in this email – or talk to us more about how we think about audiences, please email me at kate.gomes@mhpc.com

And don't forget to check out our Networked Age library, including our Guides to 'The New Rules of Influence' and 'Communicating in a Polarised World'.

You can find everything here, including the Nerdogram:
mhpc.com/NetworkedAge

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