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Believable.

Communication in the 21st century, from promise to proof

belief system

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To be believed rather than heard

On February 14, 2024, a tribunal in British Columbia ruled on a dispute in which Air Canada had defended a position few companies would dare to state out loud. Jake Moffatt, who had just lost a family member, had asked the airline's chatbot for help. The machine told him he could apply for the reduced bereavement fare after the fact, within 90 days of his ticket being issued. Air Canada's written policy specifically excluded requests made after travel. When the customer claimed what he was owed, the airline argued that the chatbot was a separate legal entity, responsible for its own actions[1].

The tribunal swept the argument aside. A company is responsible for all the information on its website, whether a sentence was written by a lawyer, an intern or a language model. Air Canada was ordered, for negligent misrepresentation, to pay about 650 Canadian dollars in damages, plus interest and fees[1]. The sum is trivial. The principle is not: there is no longer such a thing as a corporate statement that no one answers for.

That scene contains the whole book. For decades, organizations treated communication as a problem of reach: how to get a message heard, by how many people, how many times. That question has not gone away. It has stopped being the most important one. An organization can now be perfectly visible and not believed at all. The challenge of the twenty-first century is not to be heard. It is to be believed.

What "believe" means

The word asks more than it seems to. The Office québécois de la langue française, in an entry from its artificial intelligence vocabulary, defines a belief system as a set of assertions supported by evidence, reinforced by individual motivations, that make it possible to reason from incomplete or inconsistent data[2]. Everything is there. We do not believe an organization because it

has spoken, but because what it says rests on something. We also believe it because we have reasons to want to: an interest, a habit, a past experience. And above all we believe it when we do not know everything, which is to say almost always.

Belief System, the firm this book comes from, carries that name as a program. A solid collective belief is not one that is shielded from scrutiny. It is one that withstands it. That holds for a brand, for a leader, for a public policy. It now holds for the answers that machines formulate on our behalf.

Five forces that changed the rules

Trust is retreating. The Edelman Trust Barometer published in January 2026 is based on nearly 34,000 respondents in 28 countries. It describes a society that has moved from grievance to insularity: about 70% of respondents are hesitant or unwilling to trust people whose values, background or sources of information differ from their own[3]. Richard Edelman sums up the shift as a move from *we* to *me*. For a company, the consequence is stark. There is no longer a general public to win over with a single message. There are audiences who check, each with its own sources.

News is coming apart. According to the Reuters Institute's Digital News Report 2026, which covers 48 markets and 97,520 people, trust in news has fallen to 37%, its lowest level since these measurements began in 2015[4]. The same report finds that 10% of respondents get news from an AI chatbot every week. Newsrooms, which used to act as filter and guarantor, are weakened themselves: traffic from Google search to more than 2,500 news sites fell by 33% between November 2024 and November 2025[4].

Machines answer for you. In February 2024, Gartner predicted a 25% drop in traditional search engine volume by 2026, in favor

of conversational assistants[5]. The Pew Research Center measured what that changes. In March 2025, in a panel of 900 American adults, users shown an AI-generated summary at the top of a Google page clicked on a traditional result in only 8% of visits, compared with 15% when there was no summary. They clicked on a link cited in the summary in 1% of visits[6]. Readers therefore form an opinion of your organization without ever coming to you. What an AI says about you becomes part of who you are.

The law demands proof. On October 23, 2025, the Paris judicial court found that TotalEnergies' communications about its ambition to reach carbon neutrality by 2050, and about its role as a "major player in the energy transition," were misleading, because they failed to mention its continued investment in oil and gas[7]. Since September 27, 2026, European Directive 2024/825 has prohibited generic environmental claims that do not rest on recognized excellent environmental performance, as well as claims that a product has a neutral, reduced or positive impact on the environment thanks to emissions offsetting[8]. On the other side of the Atlantic, the SEC sanctioned two firms as early as March 2024 for exaggerating their use of artificial intelligence[9]. A promise has become a legally verifiable statement.

Fakes are becoming indistinguishable. In January 2024, an employee at Arup's Hong Kong office joined a video conference with the company's chief financial officer and several colleagues. None of them was real. Convinced by what he saw and heard, he made fifteen transfers totaling about 25.6 million dollars[10]. When an executive's face and voice can be fabricated, trust can no longer rest on appearances. It has to rest on procedures and proof.

Three ways not to be believed

These forces produce a new kind of failure. It has nothing to do with a clumsy slogan.

The first is a failure of promise. TotalEnergies was not found liable for falsifying a figure, but for implying more than its decisions could support. The gap between what an organization says and what it does has become measurable, and therefore actionable.

The second is a failure of delegation. Air Canada thought it could hand its voice to a machine without owning the machine's sentences. Deloitte delivered a 237-page report to Australia's Department of Employment, published in July 2025 and billed at 440,000 Australian dollars; a University of Sydney researcher found references to nonexistent studies and a fabricated court quotation in it. A corrected version was published, and the firm agreed to refund part of the fee[11]. In both cases, the tool is not the culprit. The culprit is the absence of anyone who signs.

The third is a failure of verification. Arup was not the victim of a cyberattack: the company stated that none of its internal systems had been compromised[10]. It was the victim of a process in which visual conviction was enough to commit millions. Communication is not only what an organization says to the outside world. It is also how an organization decides to believe what it is told.

What this book proposes

Faced with these failures, there are two temptations. Some respond with escalation: more content, more channels, more slogans. Others choose silence, hoping that discretion will protect them. Both strategies fail for the same reason: they treat a credibility problem as a volume problem.

This book argues for another path. The communications department is no longer the workshop that packages decisions made elsewhere. It becomes the place where an organization checks that a decision can be explained, that a promise can be kept, that an uncertainty can be stated without leaving a vacuum. It advises before it produces. Sometimes it says no.

The method has four stages, the ones Belief System applies to every engagement: listen and qualify, put choices up for discussion, organize action, measure in order to decide. Human judgment sets the course, data informs the diagnosis, and AI supports work that remains under control[12].

The book moves in five parts. The first shows why communication must take part in a decision before it is made. The second sets out the demand for proof, from innovation claims to climate commitments. The third deals with public voice: thought leadership, media relations, responding to criticism and manipulation, the role of the leader. The fourth opens new territory: how organizations are represented in the answers of artificial intelligence. The fifth tests the method against crises, local communities and geopolitics.

Each chapter opens with a real case, dated and sourced. This is not an affectation. A book that argues for proof has to apply its own rule to itself.

How to read this book

Every chapter follows the same structure, so that each can be read on its own. It begins with one or more real cases, dated and sourced, chosen because they reveal a mechanism, not for their anecdotal value. Then comes a thesis, stated plainly. The following sections turn it into a method. A scenario, always labeled as fictional, shows the method at work in an ordinary organization. A tool, whether a grid, a register or a matrix, makes

it possible to apply it the next day. Each chapter closes with three key takeaways and three questions to put to the executive committee, because an idea that leads to no question has not finished its work.

The book can be read in order. It can also be read along a thread. A newly appointed head of communications will start with Part I. A leader about to speak publicly will read Chapter 12 first, then Chapters 9 and 10. A team preparing for a crisis will go to Part V, without skipping Chapter 7. A team wondering how its organization appears in the answers of artificial intelligence will find in Part IV ground that is still largely uncharted.

This book holds itself to the rule it defends. Every dated fact, every figure and every quotation refers to a note, and every note to a source the reader can consult. The sources were checked one by one as of October 13, 2026; a web page may change after that date, which is precisely why every note is dated. Belief System's analyses are cited as such, with their address. Scenarios invented to illustrate a method are presented as fictional, without exception. When a case is still being argued, the book reports the established facts and the parties' positions, without attributing intent to anyone or ruling in place of the judges.

This book is not a manual of techniques. It offers no formula for "managing" a controversy, no trick for appearing in search engine answers, no recipe for making a bad decision acceptable. Nor does it replace the advice of a lawyer, a regulator or a technical expert, whose role it often recalls. It offers something else: a way of working that makes credibility a discipline rather than an effect.

NOTES

Notes to the introduction

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10 CNN, "British engineering giant Arup revealed as $25 million deepfake scam victim", May 16, 2024.
edition.cnn.com/2024/05/16/tech/arup-deepfake-scam-loss-hong-kong-intl-hnk

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fastcompany.com/91417492/deloitte-ai-report-australian-government

12 Belief System, Notre approche (Our approach), in French.
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