

# Trustless strategic communication: a theoretical framework for reliance in low-trust environments

Aviv Barnoy<sup>1,\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of Media and Communication, Erasmus Research Institute for Media, Culture, History & Society (ERMeCHS), Erasmus University Rotterdam, Postbus 1738 3000 DR Rotterdam, the Netherlands

\*Corresponding author: Department of Media and Communication, Erasmus Research Institute for Media, Culture, History & Society (ERMeCHS), Erasmus University Rotterdam, Postbus 1738 3000 DR Rotterdam, the Netherlands. E-mail: barnoy@eshcc.eur.nl barnoy@eshcc.eur.nl

## Abstract

Strategic communication has long treated trust as both a prerequisite for success and a goal in itself. This article challenges that assumption by introducing Trustless Strategic Communication: a framework for achieving reliance when strategic trust is low or contested. Drawing on blockchain-inspired design and philosophical distinctions between trust and reliance, the article specifies core constructs, theoretical propositions, and a mechanism logic. Trust is treated as graded, and “trustlessness” as an ideal type. The framework explains how communicators can reduce trust-dependence through three routes: epistemic, structural, and procedural. A theory-guided qualitative demonstration (seven semi-structured interviews) shows how these mechanisms appear in practice, often in combination, and highlights boundary conditions and ethical risks. Rather than rejecting trust altogether, the “trustless” approach reframes strategic trust as one tool among others. This framework expands the theoretical boundaries of strategic communication and offers guidance for a variety of communication activities in environments shaped by skepticism.

## Introduction

Trust has long been recognized as a fundamental ingredient in social relationships and communication. Empirical and theoretical work across disciplines affirms that trust underpins democratic stability, economic exchanges, and social cohesion (Barnoy & Reich, 2022; Mayer et al., 1995; Taylor et al., 2023).

In strategic communication contexts, trust is often perceived as playing a dual role as both a means and an end: it functions as an essential intermediary for persuasion and stakeholder relationship-building, and it is also seen as a primary goal (Blöbaum, 2021). Through trusted communication, organizations and leaders can influence stakeholders’ attitudes and behaviors in desirable ways (Weibel et al., 2025). However, scholarly attempts to define trust have yielded a proliferation of perspectives (Barnoy & Reich, 2022; Bolton, 2024) “ranging from a belief, to an expectation, to an attitude, to an intention, to a behaviour, and to a personality trait” (Bolton, 2024, p. 4).

Regardless of the definition, in recent years, public trust in institutions—from governments, to corporations, media, and NGOs—has been declining significantly (Flew, 2021; van der Meer, 2017). This erosion of trust, particularly in digital and organizational contexts, has been linked to significant negative consequences, including reduced cooperation, heightened skepticism, and diminished organizational effectiveness (Bachmann & Inkpen, 2011; Edelman, 2023). Such trends pose specific acute challenges for strategic communicators. Organizations today face formidable hurdles in gaining

cooperation amid skepticism (Bélanger & Crossler, 2011; Blöbaum, 2021; Taylor et al., 2023).

Though these challenges also existed in some realms even before these recent developments, adjusting to the reality raises us to explore not only how trust can be saved, but also how can strategic communication succeed in encouraging action when trust in the communicating actor is low, and in cases where rebuilding such trust is not a viable option. To address this puzzle, article proposes to explore the alternative framework we call “Trustless Strategic Communication.”

Two primary interdisciplinary frameworks inspired the new concept. First, philosophers and critical scholars have been cautioning against the naïve idolization of trust for some time (Baier, 1986; Bolton, 2024), while also developing the concept of “reliance without trust” (Goldberg, 2020). Second, more recently, new models of trust alternatives have emerged in blockchain and cryptocurrency contexts (Zetsche et al., 2018). These models challenge traditional trust assumptions, specifically the view of trust as an unqualified good.

Consider the following (true) scenario as an illustration. A municipality built a new school near high-voltage power lines. After approving the project, officials assured residents that all relevant regulations were met. A skeptical parent, however, re-measured the distance and discovered that it was only 45 meters, rather than the 65 meters indicated in the official plans. The discovery triggered widespread concern, and many parents

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announced that they would not enroll their children in the school. Although the municipality acknowledged the error and introduced additional safety measures, parents remained unwilling to act based on the municipality's statements and enroll their children. At the same time, the municipality faced a pressing constraint: enrolment had to take place within a few months for the school to open as planned, leaving little room for trust to be rebuilt through conventional means.

Rather than trying to convince parents that they are worthy of trust, the municipality adopted a different approach. It invited the government regulator to install a radiation sensor at the school and made the live measurements publicly accessible online, allowing residents to independently verify safety conditions. An automated system was introduced to alert parents and suspend school operations if radiation levels exceeded established thresholds. In addition, an independent expert, selected in agreement with representatives of the parents, was granted formal authority to require further mitigation measures if needed. Within a few weeks, sufficient numbers of parents enrolled their children at the school, while continuing to insist they do not trust the municipality or the mayor.

In the sections that follow, we develop a theoretical framework for understanding strategic communication under conditions in which trust cannot be assumed. We begin by reviewing foundational concepts of trust and strategic communication to establish a shared conceptual ground. Building on this diagnosis, we then introduce our theoretical move: we draw on interdisciplinary insights from philosophical discussions of so-called "reliance without trust" and from conceptual work on systems in blockchain research. We then spell out the theory itself by articulating its core constructs, the relationships it posits between them, and the expected mechanisms.

To further explore the framework in action, we conduct interview-based analysis, demonstrating how communicative practices can appear when examined with the proposed theoretical lens. We conclude by summarizing the theoretical contribution, discussing implications for strategic communication research and practice, outlining ethical and conceptual limitations, and identifying directions for future research.

## What do we mean by trust?

To evaluate when and how communication can operate without promoting trust, we must first understand what trust is—and how it differs from related concepts like reliance or confidence.

Trust is a multifaceted concept that has been studied across disciplines such as psychology, sociology, economics, and communication (Blöbaum, 2021; Hawley, 2014). While it is defined in many different ways across disciplines and contexts, there are some commonalities that point to underlying agreed-upon components. Two related components that are of the most widely shared are: (1) risk/vulnerability (specifically, a willingness to accept it); and (2) uncertainty. Johnson-George and Swap (1982) already argued that one of the only commonalities of trust definition is the willingness to take risk. Mayer et al. (1995), in one of the most cited definitions of trust, summarizes it as "willingness of a party to be *vulnerable* to the actions of another party based on the *expectation* that the other will perform a particular action important to the trustor, irrespective of the ability to monitor or

control that other part" (p. 712). While vulnerability is explicitly mentioned, that manifests in the lack of ability to monitor or control.

Baier (1986) similarly emphasizes "accepted vulnerability" to another's *possible* (though not expected) ill will. Typological work on trust explicitly treats uncertainty and vulnerability as central "trust conditions," underscoring that trust is invoked when dependence is real and risk cannot be fully eliminated (Li, 2007). As Hawley (2014) stresses, trust only becomes relevant where meaningful uncertainty remains and where one's interests are exposed to another's discretion.

Throughout this article, we treat trustworthiness, uncertainty, and vulnerability first and foremost as perceptions that actors hold about a situation and about one another. Empirical research typically measures trust and related conditions in perceptual terms (for example, perceived trustworthiness, perceived uncertainty, perceived vulnerability), rather than as direct access to "objective" states. In strategic communication contexts, this also holds for communicators, who select approaches based on their perceptions of stakeholders' trust and risk perceptions (Mayer et al., 1995; Uslaner, 2016).

Beyond the definition, we make three important clarifications regarding our perception of trust, in regard to this theory. First, although the above-mentioned definitions can read as if trust were binary (either present or absent), both uncertainty and vulnerability are graded in practice, which makes trust itself inherently non-binary. Across domains, researchers therefore conceptualize trust in terms of degrees, levels, or positions on a continuum rather than as a simple dichotomy (Cho et al., 2015; Demolombe, 2004; Fox et al., 2025; Johnson-George & Swap, 1982; Trench, 2025; Tsftati & Barnoy, 2025). In public health, for instance, Fox et al. explicitly frame trust "as falling along a continuum ranging from extreme distrust to blind trust" (Fox et al., 2025, p. 2). Likewise, recent work in trust research emphasizes moving "beyond the binary" of trust versus mistrust, foregrounding gradations, mixed orientations, and the possibility that people may combine selective trust with ongoing skepticism (Trench, 2025). In media and political communication too, trust is routinely operationalized as a variable that varies in intensity even when it is later also categorized (Tsftati & Barnoy, 2025).

Second, we build on Uslaner's (2016) distinction between strategic and moralistic trust. Strategic is directed at particular actors in relation to particular actions, as opposed to moralistic (generalized) trust, which reflects a broader, value-like orientation, is learned early in life and is relatively stable. In Uslaner's account, strategic trust is essentially *A trusts B to do X*: it is contingent, experience-sensitive, and closely bound to concrete decisions under uncertainty (Uslaner, 2016). This is the form of trust most directly implicated when organizations seek stakeholder cooperation in specific contexts. Accordingly, the theoretical framework developed in this article is specifically designed to address this strategic dimension of trust.

Thirdly, we adopt the stance that trust should not be conceptually conflated with the action it may help produce. This is not to deny that trust is often a strong predictor of cooperation and compliance; rather, it is to avoid collapsing trust into behavior itself. Trust is variously conceptualized as belief, expectation, attitude, intention, or even trait across literatures (Bolton, 2024). Yet behavior is underdetermined by trust: the same cooperative act can be generated by multiple pathways, such that action

alone cannot serve as decisive evidence of trust (Hawley, 2014). For example, stakeholders may act under strong external assurance or perceived certainty, act when incentives or sanctions dominate, or act under constraint when there is no viable alternative.

A final clarification concerns the difference between trust and confidence. Confidence denotes expectations grounded more strongly in experience, knowledge, or predictable procedures, and is typically experienced as involving *less* felt risk or vulnerability than trust does (De Filippi et al., 2020). The relations between the two are complex, as confidence can relate to trust in two ways: it may operate as a platform for trust—when higher-order assurances make it easier to enter trust relationships. But it may also reduce the need for trust by diminishing the perceived vulnerability and uncertainty that make trust necessary in the first place (Barnoy & Reich, 2022; De Filippi et al., 2020).

To summarize, for the sake of this theory we define trust by adapting Mayer et al.'s definition as follows: (strategic) trust is the degree to which A is willing to accept vulnerability under meaningful uncertainty by depending on B to do X. Specifically, trust is higher when this willingness persists despite residual uncertainty and vulnerability: when A cannot fully monitor, control, or otherwise secure B's performance, and when outcomes are not fully guaranteed by knowledge, procedures, or enforceable constraints.

## What do we mean by strategic communication?

Unlike trust, which is contested across disciplines and operationalized in many divergent ways, *strategic communication* is comparatively straightforward to define for the purposes of this article. Hallahan et al. (2007) defines it as “the purposeful use of communication by an organization to fulfill its mission” (p. 3). Some scholars use the term narrowly to refer only to communication that serves strategic organizational purposes (rather than tactical communication), whereas others use it as an umbrella concept encompassing multiple communication disciplines, from public relations and advertising to internal messaging (Argenti et al., 2005; Hallahan et al., 2007; Zerfass et al., 2018). For the purposes of this article, we adopt this wider, inclusive definition.

## Trust and strategic communication

Strategic communication is commonly understood as stakeholder-centered, in the sense that organizations must communicate across multiple stakeholder groups (e.g., customers, employees, investors, regulators, communities) whose interests and expectations shape organizational success (Weibel et al., 2025; Zerfass et al., 2018). Some scholarship assesses the success of this relationship through outcomes such as legitimacy, reputation, or relationship quality with said stakeholders.

However, in much of the adjacent empirical literature, trust is typically modeled as an antecedent (sometimes also as a mediator or moderator) of behavioral intentions and behavior, rather than as an outcome of communication (Jeyaraj et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2022). This is partly substantive and partly practical: behavioral outcomes are often difficult to observe directly, so

studies frequently operationalize action via behavioral intentions. For strategic communication in particular, we therefore adopt an action-oriented lens and evaluate success in terms of whether communication elicits desired stakeholder responses (Zerfass et al., 2018). This does not deny the importance of legitimacy, reputation, or relationship quality; rather, in many organizational contexts these outcomes are valued because they are expected to shape concrete stakeholder actions; purchasing products, voting, registering for services, or otherwise engaging with organizational offerings or ideas.

Within this action-focused lens, trust still remains a central and efficient mechanism: when stakeholders perceive a communicator as trustworthy, they are typically more willing to accept vulnerability and act on persuasive messages (Hooda et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2022). However, trust is not always available, sufficient or repairable. Following crises and organizational failures for example, stakeholders may resist further trust appeals and require substantial proof before cooperating (Benoit, 2004). In polarized contexts, audiences may discount messages from perceived opponents regardless of any attempt to convey competence, benevolence or integrity (Benoit, 2004; Citrin & Stoker, 2018). Consider again the example mentioned above—the elected municipality head, who also has political rivals, and was caught promoting a school with maps that included false information, needs to encourage registration, with trust restoration out of reach within the relevant time horizon.

## The theoretical move: conceptual and pragmatic sources

### Trust vs. mere reliance—a conceptual distinction

The conceptual point that action does not map neatly onto trust can be sharpened through what philosophers describe as “reliance without trust,” or “mere reliance”; cases in which actors proceed by depending on others even though they do not adopt a trusting stance toward them (Goldberg, 2020; Hawley, 2014). In everyday language, trust and reliance are often used interchangeably, but philosophical accounts typically treat trust as more than the behavioral act of depending on someone or something (Baier, 1986; Blöbaum, 2021; Govier, 1997; Hawley, 2014; Jones, 1996). While trust often leads to reliance, reliance can also be driven by factors that do not entail trust.

Different philosophical traditions draw the boundary in slightly different places. Some accounts emphasize the distinctively normative dimension of trust: trusting someone can involve a special vulnerability to betrayal, because the trustor expects the trustee to be responsive to the fact that they are being counted on (Baier, 1986; O'Neill, 2002). Others, such as Hardin's “encapsulated interest” view, treat trust as a rational assessment that the other has incentives to take one's interests into account—an approach that, in this view, can make trust appear closer to sophisticated reliance (Hardin, 2002). Read together, these debates support a minimal but crucial implication for the present argument: it is conceptually coherent for actors to proceed with reliance even when trust is weak, withheld, or normatively unavailable, especially where reliance is stabilized

by external constraints, verification practices, or institutional arrangements (Hawley, 2014).

Beyond these theoretical distinctions, an example of a research that already documented the dynamic of “reliance without trust” in practice, is Barnoy’s (2022) study about the paradoxical relationship between journalists and public relations (PR) professionals. Journalists often express low trust in PR sources, viewing them as biased or non-credible. Yet, paradoxically, they continue to rely heavily on information provided by PR sources. Barnoy (2022) describes this relationship as based on reliability rather than trust. Reporters consider information from professional PR outlets to be delivered in a consistent, organized manner—which reduces risk of publication, even if things turn out to be inaccurate. While they believe this would allow them to deflect criticism towards the source, they remain wary of PR’s trustworthiness.

## Blockchain as an operational “trustless by design” architecture

In the wake of the 2008 financial crisis and a broader decline in public trust toward institutions (Flew, 2021), blockchain technology emerged as a proposed “trustless” alternative to traditional intermediaries (De Filippi et al., 2020, p. 1). Satoshi Nakamoto’s *Bitcoin White Paper* (2008) introduced a peer-to-peer electronic cash system “based on cryptographic proof *instead of trust*” (p. 1). The core idea was that users do not need to trust one central authority or individual participant; instead, they rely on the protocol’s rules and incentives to ensure transactions are valid.

However, while researchers and developers adopted the term trustless, it is important to clarify that blockchain does not eliminate trust entirely. As De Filippi et al. (2020) argue, blockchain is not devoid of trust but rather lowers the need for trust and shifts it from central agents to systems and codes—creating a “confidence machine” where reliance is based on transparency and immutability rather than interpersonal judgment. This trust-minimizing orientation is not unique to blockchain: recent systems of cybersecurity and even some AI models emphasize designing socio-technical arrangements that enable warranted reliance without encouraging users to place trust in a central agent or system (Freiman, 2023).

## Trustless as an ideal-type

As both the journalists—PR and Bitcoin cases suggests, “mere reliance” rarely occurs in a vacuum: even when actors reject a trusting stance toward a particular communicator, their reliance is typically stabilized by background expectations, routines, and third-party constraints. For that reason, and consistent with our earlier treatment of trust as graded, it is more accurate to treat “trustlessness” as an *ideal-type*: an analytical endpoint against which real-world cases can be compared, rather than the empirical claim that trust disappears entirely.

In Weberian methodology, ideal-types are deliberately simplified constructs that accentuate certain features in order to clarify mechanisms and enable sharper comparisons across messy empirical reality (Weber, 1949; Weinert, 1996). Trust research often works with similar idealizations: Norris (2022), for instance, juxtaposes the pathologies of credulous (or “blind”) trust and

corrosive cynicism, arguing that the desirable orientation lies in a more skeptical middle position—implicitly treating the extremes as limiting cases rather than typical social states. Likewise, Nurmi and Jaakola (2023) explicitly develop “ideal-type narratives” to distil recurring trajectories through which parents lose (and manage) trust in vaccination—showing how ideal-types can organize heterogeneous experiences without implying that any one case perfectly instantiates the model.

The ideal-type perspective may be experienced asymmetrically by trustees and trustors. For trustees, low trust can operate as a binding practical constraint, motivating efforts to enable reliance without first securing trust. For trustors, trust typically remains graded rather than absent and as the need for it diminishes, so does is the risk mitigated (Blöbaum, 2021; Mayer et al., 1995). Framed this way, the question becomes not whether reliance ever occurs with literally zero trust, but how can communicative strategies be designed with the intentional purpose of increasing reliance, regardless of the ability to increase trust.

## Theory building

We now make the proposed theory explicit in its internal structure (Heinonen & Gruen, 2024). At a minimum, theory formation benefits from specifying what the relevant components of the target system are, how they relate, and which processes/mechanisms plausibly generate the outcomes of interest (Fried, 2020; Heinonen & Gruen, 2024). Accordingly, the next section is organized into three subsections: Constructs, Propositions and Mechanisms.

## Theoretical constructs

To move beyond metaphorical comparisons, we must first provide definitions for the specific communicative and psychological building blocks of the theory. Beyond trust that was already defined above, the four core constructs that form the grammar of this framework include Perceived Risk, Confidence, Trust-Minimizing Strategies (TMS) and Reliance.

### Perceived risk (vulnerability and uncertainty)

Following Mayer et al. (1995) and Hawley (2014), we treat perceived risk as a core condition for trust to be analytically relevant. It consists of two sub-dimensions: Perceived uncertainty—the inability to predict the communicator’s future actions or the outcome of a proposition (Li, 2007). Perceived vulnerability—the willingness to expose one’s interests to the power or discretion of the communicator (Baier, 1986). In our framework, these are the “hinge” variables: low uncertainty and low vulnerability reduce the need for trust.

### Confidence

Distinct from trust in an actor, confidence refers to warranted reliance that is grounded in risk-reducing stabilizers rather than assumptions about the communicator’s intentions of abilities (De Filippi et al., 2020). While trust involves a leap regarding another’s will or responsiveness, confidence is based on the perceived predictability and constraint of mechanisms that bound discretion and reduce downside risk (De Filippi et al., 2020; Li, 2007). These stabilizers can include rules and procedures,

enforceable commitments, verification protocols, auditability, reputational incentives, and third-party oversight.

Confidence can be direct—in the stabilizer itself, but also derivative—confidence regarding a particular actor's claims or actions insofar as they are constrained, checkable, or sanctionable through stabilizers. In some cases, stakeholders may delegate trust toward a trusted regulator, auditor, or expert; however, in this framework the resulting confidence is understood as anchored in the verifiable constraints, procedures, or oversight arrangements that those third parties enable, monitor, or enforce—rather than in the focal communicator. This allows reliance to be grounded in warranted expectation even when strategic trust in the communicator remains low.

### Trust-minimizing strategies

This is the independent variable of our framework: the set of communicative acts and structural designs aimed at encouraging reliance while minimizing risk and maximizing confidence, thus mitigating the need for trust in the communicator. We define these as communicative strategies that replace claims of character (“Trust me, I am honest, I am capable”) with suggested verifiable evidence, constraints, or third-party guarantees.

Some of these arrangements minimize the need for trust directly, while others function by shifting the locus of reliance (De Filippi et al., 2020) away from the communicator's discretion and toward external agents (e.g., auditors, experts), transparent records, or enforceable commitments. But even so, such arrangements do more than reallocate trust; they reduce how much any actor must be trusted for reliance to be achieved by making outcomes less contingent on individual decision-making.

### Reliance

We conceptualize the outcome variable as reliance, distinct from the feeling of trust. Reliance is the behavioral manifestation of the acceptance of vulnerability: the decision to cooperate, comply, mobilize, or accept a proposition (Hawley, 2014). While some literature conflates trust and reliance (Cho et al., 2015), our framework treats them as separable: reliance can be achieved via trust (in the actor), but also via confidence, or other mechanisms. Accordingly, reliance is the central outcome through which this framework evaluates whether strategic communication “works” under conditions where strategic trust is limited or contested. However, empirically, actual reliance is often hard to measure, thus behavioral intentions can also serve as indicators for reliance.

### Propositions

The constructs above allow us to move from a general claim to a set of explicit relationships that structure the framework. The propositions below are not only hypotheses for statistical testing. Rather, they specify the patterned relationships the framework posits among trust, risk, confidence, TMS and reliance. As such, they can serve both for quantitative research, and to provide a basis for the comparative, qualitative studies, such as the demonstration that follows.

**P1—Trust-centered route to reliance.** In many strategic communication contexts, stakeholders' reliance is typically grounded in trust in the communicator: when stakeholders

expect the communicator to honor a commitment in a given context, they are more willing to proceed despite uncertainty and vulnerability.

**P2—Risk as the “demand” condition for trust.** The extent to which reliance depends on trust increases as perceived risk increases. Where uncertainty about outcomes is high, implications of trust betrayal are significant, and stakeholders experience meaningful vulnerability to the communicator's discretion, trust becomes a more central basis for proceeding.

**P3—Confidence as an alternative basis for reliance.** Reliance can also be grounded in confidence. That is, warranted expectation stabilized by risk-reducing mechanisms rather than by assumptions about the communicator's goodwill. In these cases, stakeholders may proceed even while holding trust in the communicator to be weak, contested, or normatively unavailable.

**P4—Trust-minimizing strategies increase confidence.** Communicative acts and structural designs that replace claims of character with risk-minimizing assurances (e.g., verifiable evidence, constraints, or third-party guarantees) tend to increase confidence by creating conditions under which warranted reliance is possible without depending primarily on the communicator's intentions.

**P5—Trust-minimizing strategies reduce the trust-dependency of reliance.** To the extent that TMS make outcomes less contingent on hidden intentions, reliance becomes less tightly coupled to strategic trust in the communicator. Put differently, the framework expects that TMS can “decouple” reliance from strategic trust by changing what stakeholders must take as given in order to proceed.

**P6—Trust-minimizing strategies operate by reconfiguring perceived risk.** A central way TMS can reduce trust-dependency is by reconfiguring the two components of perceived risk. When strategies render relevant facts easier to verify or make outcomes more predictable, they can reduce perceived uncertainty; when they limit discretion through enforceable commitments, oversight, or pre-specified triggers, they can reduce perceived vulnerability. Either route can lessen the demand for strategic trust as a basis for reliance.

**P7—Skepticism and distrust as interpretive moderators.** The effects of TMS are expected to depend on how stakeholders approach claims under low-trust conditions. Strategies that foreground verifiability and constraints can appeal to skeptical orientations (a suspension of judgment pending evidence) and, in some cases, may also help reduce entrenched distrust by altering what is at stake and what is checkable. However, where stakeholders reject or distrust the stabilizing mechanisms themselves (e.g., the regulator, audit process, or record), confidence may not be achieved and reliance may remain unlikely.

### Mechanisms

The following mechanism templates represent the functional “levers” through which TMSs reconfigure perceived risk by changing what is checkable, enforceable, and sanctionable. While presented as distinct categories for analytical clarity, in practice these mechanisms are often layered or bundled; a single strategic initiative may combine verifiability, oversight, and incentive alignment to secure reliance. For each template, we therefore also specify diagnostic indicators: illustrative features

that help identify how the mechanism is likely to manifest in communicative practice.

- 1) **Epistemic Route.** Instead of relying on the communicator's character to ground truth-claims, this template focuses on making specific, decision-relevant claims checkable by the stakeholder.

This is not a claim of "total transparency," which can overwhelm, distract, or mislead. Rather, it concerns bounded verifiability: providing the specific "receipts," raw data, or inspectable procedures required to validate a particular proposition. Verifiability can be direct (stakeholders check themselves) or delegated (verification is performed by an independent party but made visible and contestable to stakeholders). In this epistemic route, the focal point is the availability and quality of the evidence itself; the independent party functions primarily as an interpretive aid (a "magnifying glass") that helps stakeholders inspect decision-relevant facts more clearly.

- 2) **Structural Route.** This template reduces the stakeholder's exposure to the communicator's hidden intentions by bounding the communicator's future choices.

**Sub-mechanism A: Hard constraints/precommitment.** Establishing hard-to-reverse or "automatic" structures through which the communicator cannot easily renege or change course once reliance is granted (e.g., service guarantees with pre-specified triggers, binding commitments with automatic remedies, or fixed procedures that constrain what the communicator can later do).

**Sub-mechanism B: Incentive alignment.** Structuring the arrangement such that the communicator incurs a visible cost (e.g., penalty, forfeiture, reputational loss, or lost opportunity) if they fail to deliver. By tying non-compliance to losses that are salient to the communicator, the stakeholder's reliance becomes less dependent on trusting the communicator's internal intentions.

- 3) **Procedural Route.** This template shifts the locus of reliance away from the focal communicator by involving external agents, or stakeholders themselves, in the assurance process that underwrites reliance.

**Sub-mechanism A: Independent oversight/audit.** Shifting the "credibility check" to a third party (e.g., regulator, expert auditor, accreditation body) whose incentives and reputation are meaningfully independent of the focal communicator. The focal communicator's claims become more rely-worthy insofar as they are externally monitored, certified, or contestable through an actor whose authority does not depend on the communicator's goodwill. Unlike the epistemic route, where reliance is anchored in the inspect-ability of evidence, the procedural route anchors reliance in the third party's institutional independence and reputational stakes.

**Sub-mechanism B: Participatory design/inclusion.** Inviting stakeholders (or their representatives) to help design, calibrate, or govern the assurance mechanisms. For example, agreeing on what counts as acceptable evidence, what thresholds trigger action, or what forms of monitoring are legitimate. Here participation functions less as "proof" of substantive claims and more as a mechanism for ensuring that stabilizers are perceived as legitimate, fair, and non-manipulative, thereby reducing the likelihood that trust-minimizing arrangements are themselves dismissed as a new form of strategic control.

## Demonstrating the theory in practice

This section presents insights extracted from a series of semi-structured interviews conducted with communication professionals across diverse fields. The interviews were conducted during the broader theory-development process, but the purpose of the analysis presented here is demonstrative rather than confirmatory: rather than providing a comprehensive empirical test, we use interview material to illustrate how the framework functions as an interpretive tool for analyzing communicative practice under conditions where strategic trust may be limited or contested.

## Methodology and participant selection

Participants were selected through purposive sampling aimed at maximum variation across institutional settings and risk environments, including e-commerce, political communication, technology, healthcare, branding/entertainment, telecommunications, and architecture.

Recruitment was done through professional networks, including former students and contacts established during research collaborations. Interviews were conducted via video conferencing, lasted between 27 minutes and 1 hour and 53 minutes, and were recorded and transcribed for analysis. All interviews were conducted in English. All participants provided informed consent. Table 1 provides an overview of the interviewees. The participants are presented anonymously to protect confidentiality while allowing readers to assess the diversity of settings and roles.

The interview protocol was anchored in the core conceptual distinction between trust and reliance. Participants were introduced orally to the "trustless" idea and were invited to reflect on professional experiences. However, since the interviews took place during different stages of the theory development, they received different levels of detail about the theory. The interviews were designed as an analytical demonstration to extend the theory, rather than an open-ended field mapping: participants were encouraged to provide concrete examples, including instances where such strategies were difficult to implement or did not work as intended, in order to surface both the logics and the limits of the framework.

Analytically, we treated the three mechanism families developed above as sensitizing categories for a deductive, theory-guided reading of the transcripts. Segments were coded for: (a) epistemic strategies that make decision-relevant claims checkable (verifiability); (b) structural strategies that constrain discretion or align incentives (constraint and alignment); and (c) procedural strategies that shift the locus of assurance through independent oversight or stakeholder participation (delegation and participation). Because real-world initiatives frequently bundle routes, excerpts could be interpreted through more than one mechanism family; accordingly, the analysis is organized by mechanism families rather than by participants, and the same case may be discussed under more than one family when it illustrates distinct route logics.

We read excerpts through a two-lens comparison. First, we briefly articulate how a conventional, trust-centered

**Table 1.** Overview of interview participants (anonymized).

ID	Sector	Role	Region
P1	E-commerce	Marketing Manager	Asia
P2	Political Communication	Senior political communications	Europe
P3	Technology	PR & Marketing Specialist	Asia
P4	Healthcare	Communications Specialist	North America
P5	Branding & Entertainment	Brand Strategist Intern	Asia
P6	Telecommunications	Marketing Manager	Europe
P7	Architecture	Marketing Manager	Europe

interpretation would typically explain a practice (e.g., as trust building, trust repair, or credibility signaling). Second, we show how the trust-minimizing framework enables a different and often more diagnostic interpretation—by tracing how communicators describe attempts to encourage reliance via confidence-building stabilizers that reconfigure perceived risk (uncertainty and or vulnerability). The material is organized through the three mechanism families.

## Findings/mechanism demonstrations

In each subsection below, we use a small set of interview excerpts to demonstrate one-mechanism family. We follow a consistent mini-template: (a) a brief trust-centered interpretation; and (b) a trust-minimizing interpretation that explicitly applies the framework's constructs and links the excerpt to the propositions. Additional quote-level comparisons are summarized in Table 2.

### *Mechanism 1—epistemic route*

One interviewee, a communication professional described crisis communication as “trying to be as transparent as possible, as quickly as possible,” and specified what this transparency consists of: quickly informing stakeholders “what happened, what actions we are taking, and how we plan to prevent future incidents.” Read through a verifiability lens, the key point is not “transparency” in the abstract, but that these updates provide decision-relevant content that can be tracked against subsequent actions and outcomes (at least in part). They also immediately stressed that transparency is bounded: “We try to give as much information as we can, but this can be difficult to avoid assisting the attacker.”

A traditional (trust-centered) explanation can be read as a credibility and reassurance strategy: transparency and speed are used to maintain or rebuild trust by signaling competence and honesty during a sensitive event.

However, read through the trust-minimizing framework, the communicative act is a TMS insofar as it replaces “believe us” with decision-relevant content that is in principle checkable (Mechanism 1). This targets perceived risk primarily by reducing uncertainty: stakeholders are given a clearer basis for predicting what is going on (what happened), what will happen next (actions), and what is expected in the future (prevention).

In these terms, reliance becomes less dependent on trust in the actor's intentions (P5) and more grounded in confidence in bounded, decision-relevant information (P3–P4). At the same

time, the “assisting the attacker” constraint makes visible a key vulnerability trade-off: some details cannot be made publicly checkable, which helps specify when the verifiability route may stall or be contested (P7).

Instead of treating “transparency” as a generic trust cue, the framework lets you ask (and code): what exactly is being made checkable, by whom and when, and whether the strategy reduces uncertainty, vulnerability, or both—and where boundedness prevents full verification.

### *Mechanism 2—structural route*

One interviewee described a service policy designed to reduce customer exposure to service failure: “Service errors automatically trigger immediate customer compensation.”

A traditional (trust-centered) explanation can read this as a reputation and relationship strategy: by responding quickly and fairly when mistakes occur, the organization signals accountability and customer care, which may preserve trust after failure.

However, read through the framework, the relevant point is that the interviewee describes a structural stabilizer rather than (only) a character signal. Treated as a TMS, the policy functions as a precommitment that constrains discretion (Mechanism 2, especially 2A: hard constraints/precommitment): compensation is triggered by defined conditions rather than by a case-by-case decision to “do the right thing.”

In proposition terms, the arrangement can increase confidence in a stabilizer (P3–P4) and reduce the trust-dependency of reliance (P5) by reconfiguring perceived risk (P6)—in this case, by reducing vulnerability to organizational non-response or opportunistic delay when service failures occur. Reliance (e.g., continuing to use the service) becomes more warranted even under low strategic trust because the stakeholder's downside is partially bound by a predictable remedy.

The trust-minimizing lens enables a more diagnostic reading of what determines whether this stabilizer genuinely reduces risk: what counts as a “service error,” whether triggering is genuinely automatic or still discretionary, whether customers can verify eligibility, and whether the compensation is meaningful relative to the harm. These questions clarify when the structural route supports confidence, and when it may be contested or experienced as symbolic (P7).

### *Mechanism 3—procedural route*

A community management professional described a practice of shared monitoring and documentation: “we have Excel files for each client with feedback (...) shared with the client so they

Table 2. Quote-level comparisons of traditional vs. trustless analysis.

Quote	Traditional analysis	Mechanism	Propositions	Trustless framework
“When internal advisory trust failed, we engaged directly with the community instead.”	A trust repair move: direct engagement is used to restore legitimacy and rebuild trust after credibility breakdown.	(3) Delegation and participation—(3B) participatory design/inclusion	P4, P5, P6, P7	When trust in internal advice is normatively or strategically unavailable, reliance is pursued by shifting assurance toward stakeholder participation. The strategy aims to increase confidence by reducing uncertainty (through direct input) and reducing vulnerability (by increasing perceived legitimacy of the assurance process), even if trust remains low.
“No campaign is released unless it passes internal stakeholder validation.”	Internal alignment to protect credibility and prevent errors that could damage trust.	(2) Constraint and alignment—(2A) hard constraints/precommitment	P4, P5, P6	Validation functions as a gate that bounds discretion: it signals a pre-specified procedural constraint that reduces stakeholders’ exposure to hidden intentions or unilateral messaging. The reliance claim rests less on trust in the communicator and more on confidence that a stabilizer limits what can be released.
“We ensure every claim is backed by verifiable data—no need to take our word for it.”	Transparency as credibility signaling: evidence is used to appear honest and competent.	(1) Verifiability—epistemic route	P3, P4, P5, P6, P7	The strategy targets uncertainty by making decision-relevant propositions checkable. Reliance is invited on the basis of confidence in evidence (directly inspectable or delegable), rather than trust in intentions or character, which is especially relevant under skeptical orientations.
“Service errors automatically trigger immediate customer compensation.”	Trust repair via accountability: making amends after failure to regain trust.	(2) Constraint and alignment—(2A) hard constraints/precommitment	P3, P4, P5, P6	Automatic compensation reduces vulnerability by limiting discretion: the customer’s downside risk is capped through a pre-specified trigger, so reliance depends less on goodwill and more on confidence in a predictable remedy.
“We share risks and rewards clearly upfront to ensure mutual accountability.”	Relationship management: clarity and fairness are used to maintain trust and cooperation.	(2) Constraint and alignment—(2B) incentive alignment ( <i>boundary-sensitive</i> )	P4, P5, P6, P7	This becomes trust-minimizing to the extent that “shared risks/rewards” are tied to visible costs for non-compliance (or enforceable terms). Then it reduces uncertainty (what follows from what) and vulnerability (exposure to opportunism), increasing confidence in the arrangement rather than relying on benevolence.
“We quickly counter misinformation with clear, verifiable facts.”	Credibility defence: prompt corrections protect reputation and maintain trust.	(1) Verifiability—epistemic route	P4, P5, P6, P7	The trust-minimizing element is not speed alone but checkability: the strategy reduces uncertainty by replacing “believe us” with contestable facts, aiming to secure reliance even among skeptical or distrustful stakeholders.

(continued)

Table 2. (continued)

Quote	Traditional analysis	Mechanism	Propositions	Trustless framework
“Detailed product specifications are publicly available to ensure independent verification.”	Transparency to build trust in product quality and integrity.	(1) Verifiability—epistemic route	P3, P4, P5, P6	Public specifications reduce information asymmetry by enabling independent checking. The reliance claim is grounded in confidence created by inspectability, thus lowering uncertainty without requiring trust in the communicator’s intentions.
“We ensure our messages are accessible and understandable by everyone, bypassing traditional gatekeepers.”	Clarity and inclusivity: accessible messaging fosters trust and reduces misunderstanding.	Primarily (1) Verifiability ( <i>direct checking</i> ); often paired with (3B) inclusion	P4, P5, P6, (P7 when contested)	Accessibility functions as a trust-minimizing enabler when it makes verification feasible for broader publics (reducing dependence on intermediaries). It can reduce uncertainty (misinterpretation and information gaps) and weaken reliance on gatekeepers, shifting reliance toward confidence in directly available information.
“We favor expert-led, transparent communication rather than relying on influencers.”	Authority-based credibility: experts are perceived as more trustworthy than influencers.	(3) Delegation and participation—(3A) independent oversight/audit ( <i>only if independence is real</i> )	P3, P5, P7	This is a useful boundary case: it is trust-minimizing only when “experts” function as an <i>independent stabilizer</i> whose judgments are contestable and reputationally costly. Otherwise it is primarily trust shifting (from influencers to experts) and may fail under P7 if stakeholders distrust the expert institution.

have live access to it (...) [they] can just decide to check this document whenever.” They added that for “really negative feedback (...) together with the client, we discuss how to go about it.” The same interviewee also described a boundary condition: for “political” or similarly sensitive topics, “usually we don’t engage,” noting that clients often do not want to enter those conversations even when the interviewee believes engagement would help connect with the audience.

A traditional (trust-centered) read would imply a relationship management: responsiveness and feedback handling build trust with the client and (potentially) with the public by showing care, listening, and competence.

However, through a trustless lens, the shared log and joint handling of feedback are a TMS that shifts the assurance process away from the focal communicator’s unobserved discretion (Mechanism 3). The arrangement is procedural: it increases confidence by making the state of stakeholder feedback persistently visible and revisit-able (lowering uncertainty about “what is being said” and “what has been done about it”), and it reduces vulnerability to selective reporting or internal gatekeeping by giving the client ongoing access. Confidence here does not come from additional persuasive messaging, but from the client’s independent access to the same running record, making omissions and selective reporting harder to sustain.

In proposition terms, this exemplifies how reliance can be stabilized via confidence (P3–P4) and decoupled from strategic trust (P5) by reconfiguring perceived risk (P6). The “political topics” reluctance then illustrates P7: where issues are contested, the participation route may be withheld or treated as too risky, limiting whether confidence can be achieved through inclusion even when distrust is most salient.

The framework makes visible that “engagement” is not one thing. Some engagement is primarily relational; other engagement is procedural—designed to relocate assurance into shared monitoring, negotiated response, or stakeholder inclusion. Thus, changing the basis on which reliance can be warranted.

## Short summary of interview findings

Across the interviews, the procedural mechanism family (delegation and participation) was most visible when interviewees described shifting the basis of reliance away from the focal communicator and toward stabilizing arrangements—such as independent oversight, external validation, or stakeholder participation in monitoring and response processes. In contrast to the verifiability route, the analytic emphasis here is not primarily on whether decision-relevant evidence is available, but on who is positioned to underwrite assurance and how that assurance is governed: whether the oversight actor or process is plausibly independent, has reputational or institutional stakes, and is perceived as legitimate by the relevant stakeholders.

Overall, the interviews also show that communicative practice rarely relies on a single route in isolation. Participants often described combinations: making claims checkable while simultaneously pointing to procedures or roles that constrain discretion; pairing transparency with remedies or pre-specified commitments; and using inclusive or participatory elements to strengthen the perceived legitimacy of what counts as

acceptable evidence or action thresholds. Read through the framework, these bundled accounts can be treated as layered TMS: they aim to increase confidence by reconfiguring perceived risk, reducing uncertainty (through checkability and clearer expectations) and or reducing vulnerability (through constrained discretion, oversight, or predictable remedies). They thereby support reliance even in contexts where trust in the communicator is fragile, contested, or strategically insufficient.

## Discussion

This article introduced the concept of Trustless Strategic Communication, proposing an alternative framework to conventional trust-based approaches. We draw inspiration from blockchain technologies—systems designed to enable transactions while minimizing the need to trust a central agent, by shifting to reliance on transparent, verifiable, and automated processes (De Filippi et al., 2020; Werbach, 2018). We specify four core theoretical constructs, in addition to our definition of trust, advance a set of theoretical propositions about how TMS enable reliance under conditions of low strategic trust, and synthesize these claims into an overarching explanatory logic, organized around three mechanism families: verifiability (epistemic route), constraint and alignment (structural route), and delegation and participation (procedural route).

Importantly, “trustless” is used here as an ideal-type orientation rather than as an empirical claim that trust disappears altogether (Norris, 2022; Nurmi & Jaakola, 2023; Weber, 1949). The framework is therefore not a general theory of “trust” in all its forms, but is concerned with strategic trust in a focal communicator (Uslaner, 2016). In this sense, Trustless Strategic Communication is not offered as a replacement for trust-based approaches, nor does it deny that trust is often a powerful and efficient route to cooperation. Instead, it foregrounds the possibility that reliance, compliance, and collaboration can *sometimes* be obtained in alternative ways (Rawlins, 2008; Men & Tsai, 2016).

The interview material is presented as a theory-guided illustration of the framework, not as an independent mapping of how often these strategies occur in practice. Within this demonstration, trust-minimizing practice is most often described as layered rather than singular: communicators link checkability to commitments and remedies, pair transparency with oversight arrangements, and sometimes appeal to participatory elements to legitimate what counts as acceptable evidence or thresholds for action. The comparison further highlights why the procedural route cannot be reduced to “more evidence”: in these accounts, assurance is anchored not only in evidence availability, but also in the perceived independence, authority, and legitimacy of the validating actor or process.

## Implications for strategic communication theory and practice

The introduction of the Trustless Strategic Communication framework broadens traditional strategic communication theory, challenging the widely accepted premise that trust is a

fundamental prerequisite for persuasion and stakeholder cooperation. Communication scholars and professionals traditionally positioned trust as either an essential outcome or precondition for successful communication, highlighting its role in building legitimacy and facilitating collaboration (Hallahan et al., 2007; Löffler et al., 2021). The trustless approach complements this conventional view by suggesting that trust is better understood as a situational means rather than a universal goal or necessity—a perspective supported by both philosophical and technological scholarship (Hawley, 2014; Lewandowsky et al., 2017; O’Neill, 2002).

Rather than replacing trust-based accounts altogether, the framework refines them and adds new levels by distinguishing between strategic trust in the communicator, perceived risk (uncertainty and vulnerability), confidence as a risk-reducing basis for reliance, and reliance as the relevant action outcome. It also advances a set of theoretical propositions that specify how TMS are expected to operate through distinct mechanism families.

Trustless Strategic Communication can particularly complement conventional trust-based methods in high-stakes, high-risk, or highly polarized environments, where trust is fragile or has been eroded (Benoit, 2004; Citrin & Stoker, 2018). This matters given broader trends of declining institutional trust and intensifying audience skepticism, especially in digitally mediated contexts (Edelman, 2023; Flew, 2021; Lewandowsky et al., 2017).

This theoretical expansion invites practitioners and researchers to reconsider the assumption that trust must always precede compliance or collaboration. In our terms, the claim is not that trust is irrelevant, but that when strategic trust in the focal communicator is low and perceived risk is high, communicators may still secure reliance by deploying TMS that reduce the trust-dependency of reliance—re-routing warranted expectation through confidence-generating stabilizers that operate via three routes: the epistemic route (verifiability) that reduces uncertainty by making decision-relevant claims checkable; the structural route (constraint and alignment) that reduces vulnerability by bounding discretion and attaching enforceable commitments; and the procedural route (delegation and participation) that shifts the locus of reliance to independent oversight or stakeholder-inclusive validation. This route-based specification also makes it possible to code communicative practice more critically: it distinguishes trust-building cues from mechanisms that genuinely constrain discretion, enable independent checking, or relocate assurance to independent oversight or participatory validation.

Moreover, this route-based logic has implications beyond strategic communication, offering new analytical leverage for journalism, negotiation, education, and public engagement. Journalism, for instance, can be conceptualized through the epistemic route when credibility is pursued via auditability and public checkability of evidence rather than appeals to source trust—an orientation that becomes especially salient in misinformation-prone environments (Lewandowsky et al., 2017). Likewise, negotiations and other coordination problems can be interpreted through the structural route when parties reduce vulnerability to opportunism via enforceable commitments

or incentive alignment, and through the procedural route when reliance is anchored in independent oversight, certification, or participatory design that legitimizes what counts as acceptable evidence (De Filippi et al., 2020; Werbach, 2018).

By treating “trustlessness” as an ideal-type endpoint rather than an empirical claim that trust disappears, the framework positions trust as contingent and variable. Thus, it opens a program of comparative analysis across communication settings in which the routes can be mixed, layered, or substituted depending on the configuration of perceived uncertainty and vulnerability.

A further open question concerns the time horizon of TMS. In some settings, they may function as a durable substitute for strategic trust, while in other settings they may operate as a temporary scaffold that can support subsequent trust repair. Which trajectory occurs is an empirical question, but it also connects directly to normative debates about the moral status of trust and the risks of treating trust as an unqualified good, especially in power-imbalanced contexts (Baier, 1986; Bolton, 2024)—as we now discuss.

## Ethical implications

Ethical considerations cannot be overlooked. TMS—especially those relying on enforcement, incentives, or third-party oversight—can slide into manipulation or coercion in power-imbalanced contexts, even when they reduce uncertainty or vulnerability. Each mechanism family carries distinctive ethical risks: verifiability can become “transparency theater” (selective disclosure that overwhelms, distracts, or obscures), constraint/alignment can operate as covert compulsion (making “reliance” effectively the only viable option), and delegation/participation can be compromised by non-independent oversight or procedurally “participatory” designs that do not grant stakeholders meaningful influence.

More broadly, philosophers such as Baier (1986) caution against blind trust, but the same caution applies to arrangements that bypass trust while potentially weakening accountability. Because these strategies aim to make reliance reasonable without depending on the communicator’s goodwill, they also raise the question of who defines what counts as “reliable” evidence, who controls the stabilizers, and who bears the residual risks when the system fails. Thus, the need for ethical guidelines, transparency about power, and credible oversight is clear.

## Limitations and open questions

Despite its promise, Trustless Strategic Communication has clear limitations. Firstly, it is context-dependent; many situations or audiences may still respond better to trust-based strategies, though this remains an empirical question. Furthermore, some stakeholders may perceive overly structured or automated communication as impersonal or alienating. Furthermore, the practical feasibility of TMS varies by route: verifiability presupposes stakeholder access and capacity to inspect evidence, constraint/alignment can be experienced as overly legalistic or adversarial, and delegation/participation

depends on whether third parties or participatory procedures are perceived as independent and legitimate.

Secondly, the integration of artificial intelligence (AI) in communication practices presents both an opportunity and a critical limitation that were not discussed in this article. AI systems are already transforming strategic communication through automation, personalization, and predictive analytics. AI might enhance trustless approaches by enabling more sophisticated automated enforcement, better traceability, and increased message precision. Yet, the implications of AI-driven Trustless Strategic Communication remain largely unexplored. Potential pitfalls, such as algorithmic bias, data privacy concerns, and the erosion of genuine human interactions, must be carefully considered in future research.

Finally, the empirical support for the framework's propositions remains preliminary. Because participants were introduced to the framework and prompted to recall relevant experiences, the interviews should be read as a theory-guided demonstration of analytical fit rather than as an independent mapping of how frequently such strategies occur in practice.

## Future research agenda

A rigorous empirical testing agenda must follow this theoretical exploration. Future research should systematically evaluate the effectiveness and ethical implications of Trustless Strategic Communication strategies across various contexts. Proposed studies could include:

- 1) Comparative analyses of stakeholder reactions to trustless versus trust-based communication in diverse cultural settings to assess context-specific efficacy.
- 2) Experimental studies examining the differential impact of automated and predictable enforcement strategies compared to conventional persuasive messaging across various professional and public health scenarios.
- 3) Longitudinal research evaluating the long-term effects of traceable and observable communication strategies in maintaining organizational credibility following trust breaches.
- 4) Cross-sector studies testing Trustless Strategic Communication in other fields such as journalism and interpersonal communication.
- 5) Qualitative and mixed-method research on communicators' diagnostic practices, examining how they infer stakeholders' trust and risk perceptions (and when they miscalibrate them), and how these inferences shape the selection, layering, and timing of TMSs.
- 6) Qualitative research exploring audience perceptions of Trustless Strategic Communication mechanisms to better understand potential emotional or relational trade-offs.
- 7) Measurement development studies that distinguish strategic trust in the communicator from confidence in risk-reducing stabilizers (e.g., oversight, enforceable commitments, verifiability), and that separately operationalize perceived uncertainty, perceived vulnerability, and reliance as outcomes.

The Trustless Strategic Communication framework represents a shift in understanding how stakeholder reliance and cooperation can be achieved in trust-deficient environments. The practical implementation demonstrated in the interviews reinforces the framework's relevance, while clearly outlining avenues for further investigation. The trustless approach marks a promising and necessary evolution in both theory and practice, positioning itself as a complementary and innovative solution in an increasingly complex communicative landscape.

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