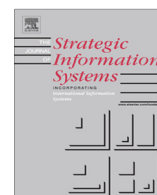


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Communicational ambidexterity as a new capability to manage social media communication within organizations

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ABSTRACT

Central to our inquiry is how organizations manage and accommodate conflicting demands in managing internal communication when they adopt social media that allows for more open and distributed communication. Drawing on ambidexterity theory we investigate and analyze the tensions and capabilities necessary to effectively manage two distinct types of internal communication (1) organizationally produced content and (2) user-generated content. We propose and unpack the concept of *communicational ambidexterity* to theorize the capability that enables organizations to accommodate and efficiently manage these two potentially conflicting modes of communication within organizations.

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Introduction

Rapid diffusion of social media is (re)shaping the landscape of communication in contemporary society, with deep impact in markets and the functioning of businesses (Boudreau and Lakhani, 2013; Hanna et al., 2011; Pitt and Berthon, 2010). While prior studies have demonstrated various benefits, such as fostering user engagement, participation, knowledge reuse and collective innovation (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010; Majchrzak et al., 2013; Skågeby, 2010), understanding social media's impacts and potential implications of their adoption for organizations remains a fertile research ground for IS researchers (Jarvenpaa and Majchrzak, 2010).

In particular, the growing research on social media has highlighted two key areas that are still relatively under-theorized. Firstly, although more attention is being paid to the potential negative and unanticipated consequences of social media (e.g. Champoux et al., 2012; Hildebrand et al., 2013) and its role in social change (Mohajerani et al., 2015), we still often see social media as a technological panacea for addressing communication and social interaction problems (Cook, 2008; Goh et al., 2013; Granados and Gupta, 2013). Conceptualizing the dyadic nature and potential of social media in unleashing both positive and negative effects is still under-explored (Baptista et al., 2010). Secondly, studies examining social media-related phenomena primarily take a view from the community or society levels (e.g. Miller and Tucker, 2013; Oh et al., 2013) considering for example how organizations interact with customers (Aral et al., 2013) and other external stakeholders (e.g. Fournier and Avery, 2011; Oestreicher-Singer and Zalmanson, 2013). However, the effects of social media within an organization, when adopted to support and replace other internal forms of communication and interaction, is a growing and important area of research (Leonardi et al., 2013; Leonardi, 2014; Treem and Leonardi, 2012; Vaast and Kaganer, 2013), but still relatively under-theorized (Majchrzak et al., 2013).

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To enrich our understanding and address both of these issues, we conduct an exploratory, in-depth, longitudinal case study at a multi-national company, which we call Tudor Rose Telecommunications (TRT). We study TRT as the company was gradually introducing social media alongside a move to increase mobile work practices. Social media is significant in this context because it allows users to stay connected and “be present” even when physically dispersed (McGriff, 2012; Subramaniam et al., 2013) ultimately contributing to a greater sense of belonging among mobile workers (Haslam et al., 2003). However, social media also has the potential to produce conflicting views and opinions that might over-shadow the message the organization wants to convey to all its employees. This raises an interesting theoretical question – how does an organization accommodate conflicting demands in a more open communication environment, preserving a sense of coherency in internal communication while allowing different (and potentially divergent) voices to be heard? In order to address this research question, we consider the role that social media plays in increasing the visibility of conflicting perspectives and we consider what capabilities and mechanisms surrounding social media can help to address the tension of allowing many voices while still retaining a coherent organizational message.

Our findings demonstrate that social media can be effectively used in a way that reconciles these conflicting demands in internal communication. In conceptualizing our findings, we draw on the theory of ambidexterity (Cao et al., 2009; Gibson and Birkinshaw, 2004) to show how a distinctive capability, which we call “*communicational ambidexterity*”, was developed in the studied case organization. Our contributions are threefold. In addition to enriching our understanding of how social media has the potential to surface conflicting viewpoints while at the same time retain coherency and integrity in internal organizational communication, we extend the existing intellectual landscape by theorizing a new type of ambidexterity and its enabling mechanisms. In doing this, we make our third contribution, which is to conceptualize communicational ambidexterity as a new organizational capability that naturally develops as organizations learn to accommodate social media as a new way of communicating, sharing and participating in organizational conversations.

The paper is structured as follows. We first introduce the current debates and perspectives that are fundamental in investigating and theorizing communicational ambidexterity. Second, we outline our methodological considerations and research processes that depict the rationale behind our research design and data analysis processes. Third, to illustrate our case findings, we present a narrative, which outlines the modes of communication encountered by TRT and its journey in addressing them. Fourth, in the Analysis and Discussion section, we identify the key characteristics of communicational ambidexterity and outline how various enabling mechanisms function to support this capability. We conclude by identifying the theoretical implications of our findings and areas where future research efforts would be useful.

Current debates and perspectives

Central to the theoretical contribution of this paper is our proposed concept of “*communicational ambidexterity*”. We define communicational ambidexterity as the capability to simultaneously address different and often conflicting communication needs that exist in an organization’s internal communication, by achieving complementarity between different communication modes. This concept is developed based on a research process where we iterated between reflecting on relevant literature and our data analysis. Here we refer to communication modes not as distinct communication channels (as is sometimes used in the literature), but rather as distinct communication environments, being either “*univocal*” or “*multivocal*” (Balmer, 2001; Huang et al., 2013). Conventionally, the term *univocal* refers to having one single and unambiguous meaning, while the term *multivocal* represents the opposite, where meaning is manifold and ambiguous. We have extended the conventional use of *univocal* and *multivocal* to include the organizational context where communication takes place, while also capturing the new dynamics emergent from the use of social media in this context. Specifically, we use these two terms to capture the differences between (1) institutional, formal, centralized and mostly top-down mode of communication which we characterize as *univocal*, with (2) *multivocality* which we use to refer to a more user-centric, distributed, informal and inherently participative mode of communication (Huang et al., 2013).

In this section, we outline the key theoretical building blocks that we draw on, namely: conflicting communication modes; the capability of ambidexterity; and its enabling mechanisms.

Conflicting communication modes

To unpack the above research question, it is essential to understand the tensions associated with communication content from potentially conflicting communication modes. This is inevitable when an organization introduces participative media to support a more open internal communication environment. The use of social media to support internal communication widens participation (Denyer et al., 2011) and interactive dialogue (Miles and Mangold, 2014), which then increases the multivocality of the internal communication environment. However, a more multivocal communication environment also means that sources and content are more diverse. So instead of being controlled and formally published by the organization as expected in a univocal environment, multivocality supports and encourages user-generated content. Despite the potential gains of a multivocal environment in development of social identity (Haslam et al., 2003) and encouraging participation and diversity (McGriff, 2012) there are real challenges in managing this mode of communication concurrently with univocality. This is because, while univocality is based on promoting a single organizational voice, multivocality allows for different voices that might therefore clash with the prevailing voice from central teams. This suggests that multivocality and

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