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The Duality of Social Media: Structuration and Socialization through Organizational Communication

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on Habermas' theory of communicative action, this conceptual paper proposes the Organizational Social Media Lifeworld (OSML) as a useful model for disentangling the complex use of social media in organizations and its enabling role for organizational communication. Based on the OSML model, we show how social media are intrinsic to each of these four elements—actors, action, entity and culture—and how it enables the two overarching organizational processes of structuration and socialization. Herefrom we delineate a set of communication archetypes for making sense of the plethora of social media activities in organizational contexts, which can further guide research and practice. In order to illustrate the OSML model, we provide seven illustrative vignettes of the use of Facebook Pages for organizational communication pertaining to the various foundational actions and processes within an organization that are supported through four functional material properties. Finally, we provide implications for future research.

Keywords

Organizational Social Media Lifeworld (OSML), Organizational Communication, Communicative Action, Structuration, Socialization, Facebook.

INTRODUCTION

Social media can affect not only how organizational actors communicate and with what effects, but also the what, when, and why of organizational communication. Yet, in spite of a growing awareness that social media technologies have the potential to radically transform all facets of organizational communication, research in the area of social media and organizations is still in its infancy. Furthermore, the embryonic literature on social media in organizations has hitherto focused exclusively on understanding social media as a tool for marketing communications, thereby largely ignoring other intra- and inter-organizational communicative actions that potentially involve the use of social media artifacts.

Yet, as the adoption and use of social media continue to proliferate, it seems likely that organizations will use these technologies beyond the context of marketing to

increasingly support all three forms of organizational communications, including management, marketing and employee communication. Hence, there is a strong need for research to understand the role of social media for supporting a variety of organizational actors in performing a range of organizational communicative actions.

In order to fill this void in the literature and advance the research agenda for social media enabled organizational communications, this conceptual paper draws upon Habermas' (1984, 1987) theory of communicative action to develop an Organizational Social Media Lifeworld (OSML) model as a pragmatic lens for disentangling how social media co-evolve with these three forms of organizational communications within a particular goal-oriented organizational context. More specifically, the development of this OSML model allows us to address the two related research questions underlying this study, namely (1) what is the contextual use of social media in organizations and (2) what forms of organizational communications are enabled by social media?

Habermas' theory of communicative action is a useful lens for addressing these research questions and therewith providing a more general understanding social media enabled communication in organizations for three reasons. First of all, instead of viewing communication as an isolated activity, it offers a rich contextualized view of organizational communication as situated within a hierarchical structure of action-related goals and resources as well as a cultural context of norms and values. Second, although traditionally the theory aims to understand communicative action (i.e. behavior) in relation to three societal factors, namely society, culture and persons; the model can be easily modified to account for organizational communication by analyzing organizational actions in relation to organizational entities (i.e. structure), culture and actors. Third, and more importantly, Habermas' theory of collective action accounts for the ways in which rules and resources operate as important mediators of communicative (inter-)actions, hence, the theoretical model can be adapted so as to account for the ways in which social media artifacts act as mediators of these (inter-)actions (Ngwenyama and Lyytinen 1997).

After proposing this OSML model of organizational communicative action, we zoom in on each factor of the model to illustrate how social media has the potential to radically transform how various organizational *actors*—managers, employees and external stakeholders—perform a range of organizational *actions*, pursue a range of organizational *goals*, as well as leverage and access different forms of *capital (resources)*, both internally and externally. Furthermore, the model shows how social media can enable organizational *entities* in developing, maintaining or modifying organizational *structure* as well as in communicating, reinforcing or changing organizational *culture* by affecting processes of structuration and socialization respectively.

In order to illustrate the usefulness of the OSML model, in general, and the role of OSM in enabling a range of organizational actions and processes, we provide three illustrative vignettes of the organizational communicative actions of two organizational entities—MSU Alumni Association (MSUAA) and MSU Spartans—through the use of Facebook Pages. These vignettes provide a concrete illustration, rather than a thorough verification, of how the use of Facebook can support processes of structuration and socialization by reinforcing existing structural schemas and a strong cultural identity. Furthermore, these vignettes reveal four basic functional material properties of social media that reflect ascending levels of cognitive and emotional involvement and therefore interact in different ways with the two processes of structuration and socialization.

THE ORGANIZATIONAL SOCIAL MEDIA LIFEWORLD (OSML)

Habermas' original model of communicative action has little connection with the material aspects of communication—the communication medium (i.e. the artifact) (Ngwenyama and Lyytinen, 1997). Yet, in the context of a discussion of the relations between social media and processes of communication in organizations, integrating the social media artifact and its affordances into the model is indispensable.

As aforementioned, given Habermas' appreciation of the role of rules and resources as mediators of communicative (inter-)actions, the theory of communicative action can be easily adapted to account for the ways in which social media act as mediators of these (inter-)actions (Ngwenyama and Lyytinen 1997). However, before we discuss the constitutive entanglement of organizational communicative action with social media, let us first provide a working definition for organizational social media.

In providing a working definition of organizational social media, we build on Kroenke's (2008) definition of Information Systems (IS), who argues that IS in a broad sense refers to the interaction between people, processes and technology. In other words, IS does not merely involve Information and Communication Technology

(ICT), but also the ways in which people interact with the ICTs in support of performing processes in a particular goal-oriented context.

In a similar vein, we argue that social media, like IS, involves the interaction between an actor—any social media user—action—those actor's broad range of activities and processes involving communication—and artifact—any ICT used in order to complete these activities. Hence, based on the integration of these three components, we derive the following definition of social media:

“Social media are technology artifacts, both material and virtual, that support various actors in a multiplicity of communication activities for producing user-generated content, developing and maintaining social relationships, or enabling other computer-mediated interactions and collaborations”.

Appropriating this definition to the context of organizations, we can subsequently conclude that:

“Organizational Social Media are technology artifacts, both material and virtual, that support various intra- and extra-organizational actors—including management, employees and external stakeholders—in a multiplicity of organizational communication activities for producing user-generated content, developing and maintaining social relationships, or enabling other computer-mediated interactions and collaborations in a specific goal-oriented context.”

Having provided a working definition of social media, in general, and organizational social media, in specific, it is important to shift our attention to the specific roles social media can play within organizational communicative acts.

Within the communication literature, two streams of prior research exist which have examined the relationship between communication media and organizational communication. The first stream of research focuses on the conditions that influence media choice, therefore, positing the communication medium as a dependent variable. Thus, choice for and use of a particular medium within an organizational context is examined in the light of a set of technical, economic, psychological, and/or social antecedents, including social presence, cost minimization, and media richness (Short, Williams, and Christie 1976; Reinsch and Beswick 1990; Daft, Lengel, and Trevino 1987; Trevino, Lengel, and Daft 1987; Kraut, Steinfield, Chan, Butler, and Hoag 1998; Hooff, Agterberg and Huysman 2007).

Alternatively, the second stream of research focuses on the communication effects of using a particular medium, therefore, positing the communication medium as the independent (or mediating) variable. Thus structure, process and outcomes of organizational communication are examined in the light of the use of a specific medium (Culnan and Markus 1987; DeSanctis and Monge 1998), e.g., by analyzing the cues, social context and social

presence associated with different forms of communication (Trevino et al. 1990; Sproull and Kiesler 1986; Rice 1984; Short et al. 1976; Siegel, Dubrovsky, Kiesler, and McGuire 1986; Weisenfeld, Raghuram and Garud 1998; Waldvogel 2007).

Notwithstanding the many relevant insights these two existing streams of research have provided into the relationship between media and organizational communication, these models have failed to examine how the medium and its materiality—physical or virtual (Leonardi 2010)—are intrinsic to communicative acts in the context of organizations by presuming that the medium artifact and organizational communication are self-contained, independent units. Therefore, in this study, we aim to overcome this separation by shifting our focus to the constitutive entanglement of social media and organizational communication.

Hereto, we place the social media artifact at the center of the OSML model to illustrate that social media can be simultaneously the cause, mediator and/or effect (e.g. choice to use social media) vis-à-vis the four factors of the model, namely the organizational actor, action, entity, and culture (see Figure 3). Hence, social media are intrinsic to all dimensions of organizational communication, including the organizational actors goal-driven actions, the organizational entity (primarily its structure), as well as organizational culture.

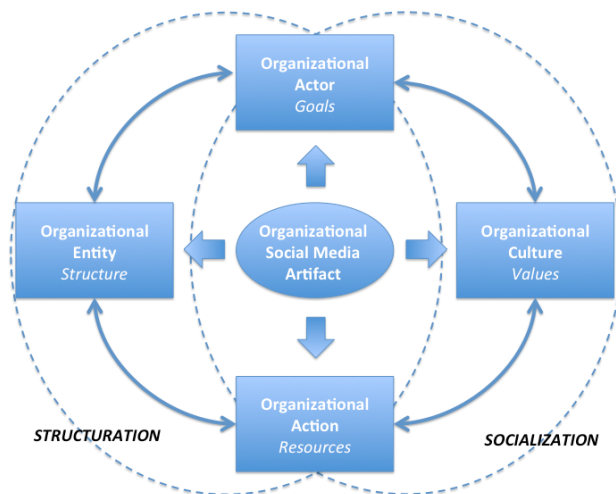


Figure 3. Organizational Social Media Lifeworld

Actors and Goals

Social media enable all three organizational actors—managers, employees, and external stakeholders—in pursuing one or more of the following goals. First, social media can aid organizational actors in establishing a (virtual) *identity*, managing their reputation and

continuously improving their own image and the organization's brand equity. Second, social media can help the managing of *relationships*, which includes initiating, creating, preserving, strengthening, and severing relationships (Te'eni 2001), with other actors, both internal and external to the organization.

Third, social media can assist various organizational actors in *sharing* and exchanging *resources*, including information, knowledge and ideas. These acts of sharing and exchanging resources may be isolated (Habermas 1984, 1987; Te'eni 2001) or an integral part of a broader problem-solving or decision-making process. Fourth, social media can support employees in *coordinating* collective activities or managers in controlling organizational processes.

Thus in short, social media can support managers, employees and external stakeholders in pursuing their various goals related to the management of identity, relationship, and resources as well as issues of coordination.

Actions and Resources

Furthermore, social media can support the abovementioned organizational actors in performing four broad forms of action, namely instrumental, communicative, normative or dramaturgical action (Habermas 1984), which correspond to four forms of capital (Bourdieu 1986), namely economic, social, cultural, and symbolic capital. *Instrumental action* is goal-oriented, thus, strategic behavior, and typically associated with *economic capital* (e.g. cash, assets) through the influencing of other actors' behaviors (Johnson 1991).

Communicative action is directed at obtaining shared interpretations of a situation and therefore involves perspective making—the ability of an actor to develop and communicate his or her views and attitudes—and perspective taking—the ability to consider the views and attitudes of other actors involved in the communicative action (Te'eni 2001; Boland and Tenkasi 1995). Communicative action therefore is typically associated with *social capital* (e.g. group membership, networks of influence and support).

Normative action involves actor's conformance with socially expected modes of behavior (Johnson 1991) and is typically associated with *cultural capital* (e.g. knowledge, skills, education). Finally, *dramaturgical action* involves the presentation of self (Goffman 1959) to other actors that constitute audiences and is typically associated with *symbolic capital* (e.g. honor, prestige, recognition).

Thus, in short, social media can support the enactment of instrumental, communicative, normative and dramaturgical action, both directly and indirectly, by providing access to as well as helping actors to leverage

and exchange economic, social, cultural, and dramaturgical capital respectively.

Entity and Structure

Social media can enable both the reinforcement and change of organizational structure. On the one hand, it supports the maintenance of existing structures by communicating and reifying organizational rules. On the other hand, by changing the nature of space and time, social media can support the incremental and localized change of social relations and practices, therefore, structure (Giddens 1986). Additionally, management can employ social media as a means for planned and centralized structural change by the use of social media for communicating, implementing and enforcing novel schemas, rules, resources and routines.

Culture and Values

Social media can enable both the reinforcement and change of organizational culture. On the one hand, it supports the maintenance of existing values, beliefs and attitudes by communicating and strengthening a variety of cultural artifacts (Schein 1992), including rituals, myths, sagas, heroes, organizational stories, jargon, humor, and physical arrangements (Martin 2002). On the other hand, by enabling people to express and amplify divergent values and norms as well as by opening up the organization to external values and norms, social media can also enable and support incremental and localized cultural change. Additionally, management can employ social media as a means for planned and centralized cultural change by communicating, implementing and enforcing novel espoused values.

The Organizational Social Media Artifact

Social media can further enable the reinforcement of both organizational structure and culture by communicating and strengthening existing rules and routines as well as cultural expressions and forms respectively. Alternatively, by changing social relations and practices as well as values and norms, social media can also enable the change of both organizational structure and culture. Yet, given the macro-level and aggregate nature of organizational structure and culture, the role and impact of social media with respect to organizational entities is relatively gradual and continuous.

In aiming to understand how a particular social media artifact supports these various organizational actions—instrumental, communicative, normative, and dramaturgical—as well as these dual organizational processes—structuration and socialization, it is important to realize that its affordances are only established in the interaction of an actor with the artifact (Gibson 1977; Van Osch and Mendelson 2011), i.e. in the “imbrication” of people and technology (Leonardi 2011). That is, the functional material properties of social media artifacts emerge from the reconciliation of actor and artifact in a

particular goal-driven context resulting in a crystallization of materiality that is consequential for these various organizational actions and processes (Aakhus et al. 2011; Van Osch and Mendelson 2011).

Action—in any of these four forms; instrumental, communicative, normative and dramaturgical—has the potential to disrupt materiality and therewith change the structural schemes and normative values that constitute organizational structure and culture. It when people’s activities become misaligned with the technology’s material functionality in the course of these four actions that disruptions of or unintended improvisations with the materiality at hand can result in destabilizations of structure and culture and therewith shift existing processes of structuration and socialization respectively.

Given this far-reaching potential of social media in and for organizations, the following will present three illustrative vignettes in order to demonstrate how the material properties of social media artifacts interact with the abilities of different organizational actors in the pursuit of their goal-oriented actions (Gibson 1977) and against the backdrop of structuration and socialization processes.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

To conclude, our OSML model takes into account the inherently situated and dynamic nature of processes of organizational communication. Adapting Habermas’ original theory of communicative action from an organizational perspective and integrating it to social media artifacts, our model displays organizational communication not as a result of isolated, rational actions, but as part of an embedded lifeworld that—in recursive interactions with social media artifacts—over time produces, reproduces, and changes structural schemas and cultural values that guide the various organizational actions of a range of organizational actors. While the ideas and research directions identified in this paper necessitate a more in-depth empirical assessment, the OSML model that we presented takes a first critical step towards enriching our understanding of the ways in which social media affect not only the how of organizational communication, but also the what, when, and why of organizational communication. Consequently, we hope that the OSML model proposed in this paper will inform practices of social media enabled communication in organizations as well as the design of social media tools for organizational communication and will motivate further empirical research on social media.

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