Community, Culture, and Affordances in Social Collaboration and Communication

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Over the past decade, most large organizations have adopted enterprise social networking platforms (also known by terms such as internal social media, Enterprise 2.0, and collaborative software platforms). These platforms have been adopted with the promise of more open, transparent, and collaborative communication across all levels of organizations (Bughin, 2008; Bughin, Chui, & Miller, 2009; Cardon & Marshall, 2015; Chui et al., 2012; Huy & Shipilov, 2012; Leonardi, Huysman, & Steinfield, 2013; McAfee, 2009; Stieger, Matzler, Chatterjee, & Ladstaetter-Fussenegger, 2012; Turban, Liang, & Wu, 2011; Wu, 20014). In practice, some organizations have experienced dramatic success in improving communication and collaboration while most organizations have experienced little or no change.

One reason for lackluster results in many organizations is that most implementations have been viewed as technological solutions. Emerging research seems to indicate that successful use of these platforms is most often linked to positive organizational culture and communication (Cardon & Marshall, 2015; Huy & Shipilov, 2012). The purpose of this special issue about social collaboration and communication is to provide current research about how social media tools and platforms are used in organizations. The articles in this special issue show that the transformative potential of these platforms depends on a communication perspective.

Overview of Articles

This special issue contains four articles about social collaboration and communication that explore and extend research in this area. In the first article, "Crowdsourcing Strategizing: Communication Technology Affordances and the Communicative Constitution of Organizational Strategy," Aten and Thomas (2016) provide a case

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analysis of strategizing in the U.S. Navy. They examined Cycles 1 and 2 of strategy generation at the Naval Air Warfare Center Aircraft Division. Extending over a 5-year period (between 2010 and 2015), this case analysis is particularly intriguing because Cycle 1 involved traditional strategizing and Cycle 2 involved strategizing via a crowdsourcing collaboration platform. As a result, they are well positioned to compare the unique advantages and disadvantages of traditional strategizing versus online, crowdsourced strategizing.

In the second article, "Social Collaboration in Intranets: The Impact of Social Exchange and Group Norms on Internal Communication," Uysal (2016) examines how a social networking platform on Southwest Airlines' intranet affects group norms and a sense of community. By surveying employees about their use of the company's social networking platform, Uysal identifies the extent to which elements of social exchange, including giving and observing support, impact group norms and ultimately sense of virtual community.

In the third article, "Constructing Organizational Identity on Internal Social Media: A Case Study of Coworker Communication in Jyske Bank," Madsen (2016) explores how employees use online forums to construct organizational identity. She examined 3 months of online discussions on a Danish's banks internal social media platform and then interviewed employees at the bank to enrich understanding of the various online discussions. She shows the many ways that online discussions contribute to how employees at the bank challenge, affirm, negotiate, and construct organizational identity.

In the final article, "Team Communication Platforms and Emergent Social Collaboration Practices," Anders (2016) investigates the experiences of early adopters of an emerging form of technology: team communication platforms (TCPs). These TCPs combine social networking features, IM, and specialized information and communication technologies to create platforms particularly conducive to virtual teamwork. Anders identifies the affordances of these new platforms that are distinct from prior communication platforms and channels. He also explores the potential for team multicommunication in a manner that effectively addresses attention allocation.

Contributions and Future Directions for Social Collaboration and Communication

These articles significantly improve understanding of the use of social tools for internal communication and team communication. This is the first collection of its kind to explore enterprise social tools entirely from a communication perspective. Collectively, these articles demonstrate the critical roles of culture, community, and affordances in understanding these new and emerging social tools in the workplace.

In each article, organizational culture is identified as a key factor in driving transformative and productive use of social platforms. Two sets of researchers (Aten & Thomas, 2016; Madsen, 2016) employ the communicative constitution of organizations framework (Cooren, Kuhn, Cornelissen, & Clark, 2011; McPhee & Iverson, 2009; Putnam & McPhee; 2009; Putnam, Nicotera, & McPhee, 2009; Schoeneborn et al., 2014). For example, Aten and Thomas (2016) use McPhee and Zaug's (2009)

framework to show how crowdsourced strategizing involves organization-membership negotiations, reflexive self-structuring, organizational activity coordination, and institutional positioning. Madsen (2016) shows how employees co-construct organizational identities that have implications for shared norms and values. Likewise, Uysal (2016) emphasizes that posting and observation of supportive comments on a social networking platforms influences group norms. In addition to shared group values and norms, a major focus in organizational culture in recent years has been employee empowerment. Each article emphasizes the more egalitarian, participative, and, as a result, empowered roles that employees can gain from social platforms. As Madsen (2016) suggests, employees "become actors in their own stories."

Closely connected to the idea of culture, emerging social platforms allow individuals to gain a sense of community. Research about online community groups (Blanchard, 2008; Blanchard & Markus, 2004; Reich, 2010) is not new; however, little research exists with that focuses on sense of community on enterprise social networking platforms. Uysal (2016) highlights the importance of sense of virtual community on a social intranet. Her research shows that employees develop a higher sense of community by posting to the company's social networking platform and by observing posts to the company's social networking platform. In fact, most employees were characterized as lurkers, those individuals who observe or consume content on the platform but rarely contribute posts or other content. This demonstrates the potential for a sense of community to reach far more than those who are directly involved in communicating on these platforms. Similarly, Madsen (2016) found that online discussions on social networking platforms were often elaborated in informal office interactions, heightening a sense of community. Likewise, Anders (2016) uses Leonardi's (2014) communication visibility theory to explore team communication platforms. In many of the ways that Uysal (2016) and Madsen (2016) demonstrate the far-reaching impacts of visibility on a sense of community, Anders (2016) also finds that visibility produces a variety of community-level affordances, including social engagement and social cohesion.

Together, these articles help initiate a more productive research agenda around the features of technology, focusing on the communicative affordances of these technologies. Increasingly, existing media richness theories are inadequate for new social media tools for two primary reasons. First, media richness theories tend to focus on channels rather than platforms (Baltes, Dickson, Sherman, Bauer, & LaGanke, 2002; Carlson & Zmud, 1999; Daft & Lengel, 1986; Dennis, Fuller, & Valacich, 2008; Maruping & Agarwal, 2004; Pentland, 2012; Webster & Hackley, 1997). More recent research has started to incorporate the affordances of social media (Anandarajan, Zaman, Dai, & Arinze, 2010; Cao, Vogel, Guo, Liu, & Gu, 2012; El Ouirdi, El Ouirdi, Segers, & Henderickx, 2014; Faraj & Azad, 2012; Gibbs, Rozaidi, & Eisenberg, 2013; Kaplan, 2011; Leonardi, 2014; Majchrzak, Faraj, Kane, & Azad, 2013; Nardon, Aten, & Gulanowski, 2015; Treem & Leonardi, 2012). Anders (2016) and Aten and Thomas (2016) build on this recent work to more explicitly show that these new forms of social technology do not operate as channels but rather as platforms. As platforms, they

contain a variety of tools, each of which has individual and collective affordances. This platform view avoids an isolationist view of communication channels that more often than not leads to viewing these tools as technological solutions rather than communication and collaboration solutions.

Also, traditional media richness theories fail to capture the many communicative affordances that are critical to understanding how professionals use these platforms in the workplace over extended periods of time in teams and in projects. The communicative perspective of researchers in this special issue identifies these affordances in a way that better explains the roles these platforms play in the workplace. For example, Aten and Thomas (2016) identify the following individual affordances: visibility; persistence; anonymous participation; systematic reward, player control of participation; and questioning, opposition, and expansion as unique affordances of collaboration platforms. Furthermore, they identify the following collective affordances: multivoice strategizing, egalitarian strategizing, divergent strategizing, and inclusive strategizing. Anders (2016) evaluates roughly a dozen affordances of TCPs in the broad areas of knowledge sharing, social, collaboration, and attention allocation. He also theorizes how to expand multicommunication (Reinsch & Turner, 2006; Reinsch, Turner, & Tinsley, 2008), a model developed primarily with IM for small groups in mind, into a more robust model involving team communication platforms. With a communicative perspective of affordances, a more nuanced view of how professionals work together is provided. For example, the underlying premise in media richness theories that face-to-face communication is richer and preferable is viewed as simplistic. In fact, Aten and Thomas (2016) conclude that crowdsourcing technology affords many actions not possible in face-to-face meetings: "These actions constituted the practice of crowdsourced strategy as multivoice, divergent, egalitarian, and inclusive as compared to traditional [face-to-face] strategizing, which is usually constituted as elite, funneled and transmitted, formal and hierarchical, and exclusive and bounded."

As scholars continue to explore new and emerging social tools that foster online collaboration and communication, the articles in this issue can serve an important role in guiding future research. With a focus on culture, community, and affordances from a communicative perspective, future research can provide a better understanding of how employees use (or do not use) social platforms. This communicative approach will also yield more valuable insights to business practitioners about how to employ social platforms to meet organizational goals.

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