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Participatory communication on internal social media - a dream or reality?

Findings from two exploratory studies of coworkers as communicators

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Abstract

Purpose: The purpose of the paper is to explore whether internal social media (ISM) introduces a new kind of participatory communication within organizations that is capable of influencing and moving the organization.

Design/methodology/approach: The paper is based on two exploratory studies: a multiple case study in ten Danish organizations, and a single case study in a Danish bank.

Findings: The paper finds that different types of communication on ISM develop in different types of organizations. Participatory communication capable of changing the organization only develops when coworkers perceive that they have a license to critique. The paper therefore proposes to distinguish between three different types of communication arenas created by ISM: a quiet arena, a knowledge-sharing arena, and a participatory communication arena.

Research limitations/implications: The research is exploratory and based on two Danish case studies and the perceptions of coworkers and social media coordinators. A deeper, summative analysis of ISM across more and various organizations in multiple countries has to confirm the findings.

Originality/value: The paper conceptualizes internal social media as an interactive and dynamic communication arena, and proposes that participatory communication on ISM is a co-constructed process among coworkers, middle managers and top managers.

Keywords: Internal social media, ISM, coworker, social intranet, internal communication, participatory communication, employee participation, enterprise social media, organizational communication

Paper Type: Exploratory study/Research paper

Introduction

Internal social media (ISM) provides members in organizations with an opportunity to share knowledge, voice an opinion and connect with fellow coworkers. This opportunity can potentially alter socialization, information sharing, and power processes within the organization (Miller, 2016; Treem and Leonardi, 2012) and has therefore been commended for its ability to flatten hierarchies and democratize organizations (Heide, 2015; Men and Bowen, 2016). This empowerment of coworkers is viewed as a key to employee engagement (Koch *et al.*, 2012; Mazzei, 2014; Parry and Solidoro, 2013; Ruck, 2015; Welch, 2012) which has been found to benefit an organization in several ways. The organization can enhance workplace productivity (Leftheriotis and Giannakos, 2014), provide better customer service (Men and Bowen, 2016; Ruck, 2015), cause coworkers to display organizational citizen behavior (Madsen and Verhoeven, 2016), and create a sense of community in the organization (Uysal, 2016).

However, organizations are slow to embrace social media in their internal communication (Madsen, 2016; Men and Hung-Baesecke, 2015; Sievert and Lipp, 2016), and the question is whether the communication on ISM turns into participatory communication, or whether ISM just becomes an additional channel in internal communication. Since the middle of the last century, symmetrical communication and the involvement of employees have been hailed as ideals in the academic literature on employee communication (Grunig and Hunt, 1984; Heron, 1942, Redding, 1972), but practice seems to have lagged behind (Ruck, 2015). Therefore, even if ISM makes democratic and participatory communication possible, this does not necessarily cause organizations to use it for that purpose. Intranets first entered organizations in the mid-1990s, and the systems included interactive features enabling the involvement of coworkers (Heide, 2015). However, only few organizations seem to have used the opportunity to develop interactive communication

among coworkers, and if so, they have mainly done so by using wikis for knowledge sharing in IT-departments while the intranet has mainly been used to communicate information to employees (Heide, 2015).

Developing the communication arena on the intranet seems to have become a more realistic option with the introduction of features from social media and the development of the social intranet. These systems are easier to use, and employees bring their habits and experience from social media into the organizations (Men and Bowen, 2016; Ruck, 2015). Thus, based on a study including 407 randomly selected Chinese employees, Men and Hung-Baesecke (2015) argue that employees have come to expect transparency and authenticity of their workplace. However, a survey of 500 organizations in Germany found that organizational culture, and especially the lack of trust, stopped organizations from fully integrating ISM in internal communication (Sievert and Lipp, 2016). In this context, a pressing question is therefore what the implications are of these new kinds of communication practices on ISM? Do they introduce a new kind of participatory communication within organizations? And is this kind of communication capable of radically changing the organization and its way of working, as suggested by practitioners and several researchers (e.g. Heide, 2015; Treem and Leonardi, 2012)?

So far, little is known about how communication on ISM actually develops when ISM is introduced into organizations, and several calls have been made to increase research in ISM and how the visibility and transparency of communication influence the organization (e.g. Heide, 2015; Men and Bowen, 2016; Ruck, 2015). This paper is an answer to this call. It proposes to conceptualize ISM as an interactive and dynamic communication arena, and to discuss whether communication on ISM can be perceived as participatory communication. The paper draws on two exploratory studies: a multiple case study conducted in ten Danish organizations, and a single case study in a Danish bank. Based on the findings, the paper proposes a theoretical model for understanding the different types of communication that can develop on ISM. The paper further outlines the implications of this model for organizations that

wish to develop participatory communication by using ISM. In so doing, it will provide new insights into how coworker communication on ISM influences the organization.

The article has five main sections. Section one reviews literature on challenges which might be encountered when introducing ISM, employee communication, employee participation and organizational citizen behavior before moving on to create a theoretical framework for the understanding of communication on ISM. Section two describes the research design. Section three presents the findings of the two studies on the type of communication that appeared in the ISM communication arena. Section four discusses the findings and proposes that a distinction be made between three different types of communication arenas on ISM. Finally, section five discusses the implications for the theory and practice of these three kinds of arenas.

1. Literature review and theoretical framework

Challenges with introducing ISM

Organizations often experience difficulties when introducing ISM (Madsen, 2017). These may stem from coworker interpretation of the technology (Cooren *et al.*, 2012; Fulk, 1993; Madsen, 2017), the dynamics of employee voice and silence (Morrison, 2014) or the organizations' perceived risks of introducing ISM (Sievert and Lipp, 2016). Another reason might be that organizations can have two different objectives for introducing ISM. They may understand employee participation as either employee *engagement* or employee *empowerment* (Johansson, 2015). Johansson (2015) claims that manager-driven participation aims to build employee engagement, while communicative leadership aims to empower employees, thereby changing the power situation within the organization. These two different approaches reflect two different perceptions of employee voice, e.g. *venting* as opposed to *constructive communication for the benefit of the organization*. In the first case, employees are given the opportunity to voice their opinion because this allows them to let off steam, thereby hopefully becoming more engaged. In the second case,

employee voice is seen as constructive communication, the objective being to provide a communication arena in which coworkers can contribute with their ideas and opinions.

Employee communication and participation

Internal communication or employee communication has received increasing attention both among practitioners and academics as a way of making employees more engaged and committed to the organization (Men and Bowen, 2016; Ruck, 2015). In this connection, employee participation has been seen as a special case of internal communication (Redding, 1972; Stohl and Cheney, 2001) aimed at improving decisions and the acceptance of decisions (Redding, 1972). The field has been studied from an industrial relations perspective, a HRM perspective, and an organizational communication perspective. Industrial relations studies have looked at the giving of rights to employees (Wilkinson *et al.*, 2013), while HRM studies have explored the involvement of employees in order to make them more engaged and thereby make the organization more effective (Parry and Solidoro, 2013). Organizational communication studies have explored participation as a way of improving decision-making, because employees are often very knowledgeable about their work, and organizations can become more effective by drawing on this knowledge (Redding, 1972).

Studies on employee participation have explored different aspects of this, and this paper will draw on studies of different levels of participation, the objectives of participation, and paradoxes in participation.

Wilkinson *et al.* (2013) look at different levels of participation and present an escalator of participation including five different levels of participation: information, communication, consultation, co-determination, and control in decision-making. A similar distinction between different kinds of employee participation is described in research on change communication in organizations, in which Lewis (2011, p. 69) presents a continuum from symbolic participation to resource participation. This continuum indicates that employee participation is not always a deeply felt wish in organizations: It may

only be a symbolic action in a change process. However, it is a unifying

conception of most of the different approaches to employee participation that

this is a manager-driven process. Several studies have questioned whether the

wish actually is to involve employees — a line of thought that is also found in

Stohl and Cheney's (2001) literature review of paradoxes in participation. Their

paper sketches four main categories of paradoxes: structure, agency, identity,

and power. These categories of paradoxes point out contradictions and tensions

in the organization that render any attempts to introduce participation fruitless

or merely symbolic because they are restricted by conditions inherent in the

organization. The literature on participation thus highlights that introducing a

participatory communication arena in an organizational context is likely to be

accompanied by many tensions and paradoxes.

Employees' willingness to contribute to the organization has

especially been studied from an employee perspective in knowledge

management literature (Vuori and Okkonen, 2012), which finds that an

alignment of personal and organizational goals need to be present before

employees are likely to share their knowledge. Furthermore, coworkers'

willingness to contribute has been perceived as an act of organizational citizen

behavior. According to Ridder (2004), internal communication can foster

support for the organization in two ways. The communication can create a

sense of commitment with the organization, or it can establish trust in

management. The quality in task-related communication is important in

creating commitment, while the quality of non-task-related communication is

vital in creating trust (Ridder, 2004). In this respect, an organization can

develop supportive behavior among coworkers when managers explain goals,

openly discuss problems in the organization, and provide coworkers with

opportunities to influence the organization.

The literature on internal communication, employee participation

and organizational citizen behavior thus seems to imply that a communication

arena on ISM with transparent and open communication among coworkers and

managers could be beneficial to organizations and create trust in management,

but that the intention can easily become trapped in the paradoxes of
participation. However, so far, little research has been conducted within the
communication on ISM, and therefore this paper sets out to explore the
following research question: **How does coworker communication develop**
when ISM has been introduced into an organization, and to what extent
does the media create a new kind of participatory organizational
communication?

A participatory communication perspective on ISM

This section will develop a communication constitutes organization (CCO)
understanding of the dynamics of communication on ISM, based on three sets
of theories. The three theories are employee voice and silence (Morrison,
2014); imagined audiences on social media (Marwick and boyd, 2011); and the
rhetorical arena model taken from crisis communication (Frandsen and
Johansen, 2010; 2016).

Theories about employee voice and silence shed light on the different
factors that influence whether coworkers voice their opinion or remain silent in
an organizational setting (Morrison, 2014). In the first place, to voice their
opinion coworkers need an opportunity, and ISM provides them with an
opportunity to communicate. The perceived efficacy and safety of voice will
also influence whether they will in fact voice their opinion or not. This means
that coworkers must perceive that they can contribute to the organization in a
positive way by voicing their opinion. If they have already tried to voice their
opinion before, and nobody listened, they are unlikely to voice their opinion
again. The same applies to safety of voice. Coworkers will only voice their
opinion if they feel it is safe to do so and that their jobs or reputation within the
organization will not be at risk. Moreover, the topic on which a coworker
voices an opinion is important. There is a difference between suggesting that
the organization should use a different brand of coffee and questioning its
values. The target of voice is also important. There is a difference between
voicing an opinion to a manager and a fellow coworker, and whether the
coworker has a good relationship with their manager (or not) is also relevant.

Finally, the likely outcome for both organization and coworker when voicing an opinion or remaining silent also plays a role (Morrison, 2014).

Theories of imagined audiences on social media are relevant to include as the target of voice significantly influences whether or not a coworker will voice an opinion (Morrison, 2014), and when communicating on ISM, it is difficult for coworkers to know who is actually listening. Especially if the organization is large. Coworkers will speak up and out to the organization (Liu *et al.*, 2010), and they will perceive the audience as both known and unknown; known because the organization sets the boundaries, unknown because coworkers do not know everyone in the organization and do not know who will be listening. The theory of imagined audiences suggests that on social media, different audiences collapse into one (Marwick and boyd, 2011), causing people to take cues from the social media environment to imagine who they are speaking to, and how this audience will respond to what they are saying. In other words, the imagined audiences are socially constructed by the choices made by coworkers about how and what to write. People communicating on social media experience a constant tension between revealing and concealing because they do not wish to reveal too much but are, at the same time, anxious to present an authentic image of themselves. According to Marwick and boyd (2011), people use two techniques to do this: self-censorship, and striking a balance between personal and professional content. In an organizational context, coworkers are likely to take cues both from ISM and from the organization about how and what to communicate. At the same time, they are likely to try to balance *organizational* and *personal* needs. Coworkers will try both to help the organization and at the same time to present a desirable self-image.

The rhetorical arena theory was developed in the field of crisis communication (Frandsen and Johansen, 2010; 2016). It may also cast light on the dynamics in the communication arena created by social media. Communication on ISM is to some extent unpredictable, perhaps even sometimes uncontrollable (Fägerstein, 2015), which also applies to crisis

communication (Frandsen and Johansen, 2016). The strength of the rhetorical arena theory is its multivocal approach (Coombs and Holladay, 2014), which suggests that when a crisis occurs, many voices act and communicate to, with, against, past, and about each other (Frandsen and Johansen, 2010; 2016). The theory helps to provide insights into how the organization can emerge from or be constituted in a multiplicity of voices. However, a difference exists between communication in a crisis situation and communication on ISM: The rhetorical arena emerges around a specific crisis, while communication on ISM is a string of ongoing conversations on different topics and issues.

Placing all of these three theories in the context of a CCO understanding of communication can help shed light on what happens in communication on ISM between members of the organization. Cooren (2004; 2012) distinguishes between text and conversation in communication. Text is the substance — the dominant reading or understanding — of concepts, values, or ways of doing things. It can be in writing, or it can be a shared perception. Conversations, on the other hand, are the lively, evolving, co-constructive sides of communication in which the text is questioned and negotiated before a new understanding of it is evolved. Communication on ISM is likely to include conversations that can negotiate texts about the organization, causing communication on ISM to be capable of constructing the organization (Fägerstein, 2015; Madsen, 2016).

The three theories and the CCO perspective can help us understand the dynamics at work in the ISM communication arena. Based on these theories, ISM can be conceptualized as follows (See Figure 1): ISM is an interactive and dynamic communication arena in which multiple voices act and communicate to, with, against, past, and about each other. The communication arena is perceived as being watched by imagined audiences. This influences the perceived risks of communicating and the strategies adopted by coworkers when communicating. Coworkers can then discuss and negotiate the organization's identity, and communication in the arena helps them make sense both of their work and of the organization.

INSERT FIGURE 1

2. Research design

Two exploratory case studies (Yin, 2014) were conducted to explore coworker communication on ISM. The first was a multiple case study based on interviews with ISM coordinators in ten Danish organizations. The coordinators were asked about their perceptions of coworker communication on ISM, of the sort of topics coworkers would discuss on ISM, and of whether coworkers dared to express criticism of the organization. The second study was a single case study conducted in a Danish bank. The focus of the case study was the topics discussed and the dynamics of communication on ISM, as well as coworkers' perceptions of communication. The aim was to gain an insight into actual communication on ISM.

The multiple case study

Ten organizations were selected using a snowballing sample strategy (Neergaard, 2007). The main criterion was that the organizations had introduced ISM for the purpose of generating internal communication. The organizations selected represented various sizes and industries in both private and public sectors, in order that not only variations but also shared patterns could be documented: Similarities are particularly interesting if they arise across great variation (Neergaard, 2007). The second criterion was that some communication was taking place on their ISM at the time of the interview. The organizations in the sample used a variety of platforms. As the purpose of the study was to look at ISM coordinators' perceptions of coworker communication on ISM, it was not important for organizations to be using the same types of platforms to be included in the sample. Treem and Leonardi (2012) use the same approach, looking at the communication afforded by social media rather than the technology itself. ISM coordinators were interviewed because they were assumed to be key informants (Neergaard, 2007), owing to their central role in relation to ISM. The term **"ISM coordinator"** was used to

cover a range of people and job functions responsible for ISM.

In the spring of 2014, the ISM coordinators were interviewed about their perceptions of coworker communication on ISM using semi-structured interviews lasting one to two hours. The interviews were conducted as part of another research project, and the interview guide included questions about the topics discussed by coworkers, whether they were airing opinions, proposals or constructive comments, and whether their voice was trivial, private, knowledge-sharing, or critical of the organization, expressing license to critique (Jagd, 2010). The final section in the interview guide included six critical incident questions (Downs and Adrian, 2004). The first two of these addressed the ISM coordinators' perceptions of successful and unsuccessful communication on ISM; the third and fourth asked the ISM coordinators to describe the pros and cons to the organizations of having ISM; and the last two questions addressed whether they perceived ISM as having a positive or negative effect on the relationship between coworkers and between coworkers and managers. During the interviews, the coordinators presented the researcher with examples of communication on ISM in their organizations in order to create an understanding of how coworkers communicated in their organizations.

The single case study

The Danish bank Jyske Bank has 4,000 employees in 110 locations. Jyske Bank was chosen because it was seen as a critical case (Flyvbjerg, 2006; Yin, 2014). Coworkers had since 2003 had access to a discussion forum "The Word is Free," and they had been discussing both trivial and strategic topics as well as sharing knowledge.

The study was conducted in two steps based on a netnographic approach. Coworker communication on ISM was studied for three months from September to November 2014, and again for another month in September 2015. In addition, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 24 coworkers. Of these, 17 were interviewed in December 2014 and January 2015, and seven in

October and November 2015. The coworkers were purposively selected (Neergaard, 2007) so as to represent a variety of communication behaviors and different types of coworkers based on job position and geographical location. They were interviewed about their communication behavior on ISM in terms of posting, commenting, and liking. They were also asked about their motivation for communicating, their perceptions of the communication on ISM, and how the communication affected not only the organization but also themselves. Finally, two critical incident questions (Downs and Adrian, 2004) were asked concerning their perceptions of good and bad examples of discussions on ISM.

Data analysis

The interviews with the ISM coordinators and the coworkers from the bank were transcribed. Subsequently, a thematic analysis was conducted using template analysis (King, 2012) and NVivo software. The interviews were analyzed in three steps to identify ISM coordinators' and coworkers' perception of communication on ISM. First, the interviews were coded for general themes. Second, the descriptions of communication and communication behavior on ISM were coded in more detail to identify different types of communication and participation on ISM. Third, the codes from the second step were clustered to develop descriptive categories to understand communication and communication behavior on ISM.

To illustrate the second and the third steps in the coding process, in the coding of the interviews with the ISM coordinators, ten different descriptions were found under the code "ISM coordinators' perception of ways of communicating on ISM": "professional work-related", "leisure", "monologue", "dialogue or multidirectional", "discussions", "horizontal", "vertical", "like Facebook", "coffee machine exchanges", "have something on one's mind". These descriptions were then clustered to produce descriptive categories to understand and define the communication occurring on ISM: "horizontal", "bottom-up", "top-down" and "bottom-up/horizontal". Only the last category was found to be perceived as participatory.

All screen shots of three months of communication on ISM in the bank in 2014 were read and coded to describe the different types of posts and comments. In this textual analysis, 40 discussions were found to be multidirectional and perhaps even participatory as they evolved around topics which were critical for the organization and received several if not many comments and likes. These 40 discussions were further analyzed and divided into four categories representing four different levels of discussion and participation.

3. Findings

Both studies set out to explore how coworker communication developed when ISM was introduced into an organization, and to what extent the ISM created a new kind of participatory organizational communication.

Challenges with introducing ISM

Participatory communication was found to be rare in the multiple case study. When asked about the type of communication taking place in the arena, four coordinators had experienced very little dialog and saw most of the communication as one-way communication from the IT, marketing, or communication department. In the other six organizations, coordinators perceived ISM as being used for multi-directional communication among coworkers. When asked in more detail about this multi-directional communication, however, the coordinators said most of it was knowledge-sharing or one-way communication. Only in two organizations could coordinators recall one or two incidents in which a coworker had raised an issue that was critical of the organization.

Participatory communication was found in the single case study in Jyske Bank. Observations of communication on ISM for three months from September to November 2014 identified 40 significant discussions which could be seen as multi-directional. Studied in more detail, these discussions were divided into four categories based on the themes discussed: customers and

products, working conditions, organizational issues, and ISM-specific issues. Some discussions would start in one category and end in another as they were developed. Generally, a discussion started with a concrete problem that developed into an organizational issue. 22 of the discussions could be perceived as discussions of organizational identity, thus making this the largest category. These discussions were further analyzed to understand the content of the discussions as well as how they evolved. The analysis found that when coworkers discussed the identity of the organization, they would challenge and negotiate this identity, not to damage but to improve the organization. The discussions then became conversations negotiating the texts of the organization. In some cases, new understandings were reached, creating new organizational texts.

Employee communication and participation on ISM

Comparing the two studies, it became clear that ISM communication was taken to a different level in Jyske Bank than in the ten organizations of the multiple case study. Over a three-month period in Jyske Bank, 22 discussions on ISM addressed organizational issues and organizational identity. This was experienced in just two of the ten organizations, and only rarely. Somehow, coworkers in Jyske Bank perceived that they had a license to critique (Jagd, 2010), which the coworkers in the ten organizations did not. In other words, based on the multiple case study, it can be argued that ISM does not facilitate participatory communication in all organizations. The media has the potential to facilitate this kind of communication — as found in Jyske Bank — but the multiple case study indicates that relatively few organizations will actually experience this kind of communication. This finding is supported by previous research indicating that management style (Baptista and Galliers, 2012;) and organizational culture (Martin *et al*., 2015; Vuori and Okkonen, 2012) influence communication on ISM.

The findings of both studies therefore indicate that coworker communication on ISM can develop very differently from one organization to

another. The media has the potential to create participatory communication, but only few organizations will develop this kind of communication.

4. Discussion: three types of communication arenas

Based on these two studies and on the argument put forward in the research literature on employee participation (Wilkinson *et al*., 2013; Lewis, 2011) that there are different levels of participation in organizations, this paper proposes that this also applies to participation on ISM (See Figure 2). Some organizations just have the technology without really using it. Several organizations originally considered for inclusion in the multiple case study reported that they had the technology but did not use it and were therefore excluded from the study on the grounds that they did not meet the criteria of having some ISM activity. In other organizations, ISM is used mainly for one-way communication, as found in four out of six organizations in the multiple case study and also in studies by other scholars (Baptista and Galliers, 2012; Denyer *et al*., 2011; Heide, 2015; Huang *et al*., 2013). Some organizations have two-way communication in terms of questions and answers (Morris *et al*., 2010), whereas some organizations have multi-directional communication, with coworkers sharing knowledge about products and customers, which can develop into so-called "knowledge conversations" (Majchrzak *et al*., 2013). This seemed to be taking place in six of the ten organizations in the multiple case study. Finally, an organization can have multivocal communication, whereby coworkers discuss both organizational issues and the organizational identity — in other words, they perceive themselves as having a license to critique (Jagd, 2010). This was the case in Jyske Bank, but, according to the ISM coordinators, not really in any of the ten organizations. Only communication discussing organizational issues and organizational identity could be called participatory communication, and it has been found in other organizations than Jyske Bank (Fägersten, 2015).

INSERT FIGURE 2

Based on the different levels of communication or participation on ISM illustrated in Figure 2, this paper argues that ISM can create three types of communication arenas (see Figure 3), dependent on a complex blend of organizational factors. There is the *quiet or empty arena* in which ISM is used primarily for one-way communication from one or more departments or not at all. This is illustrated by steps one, two, and perhaps even step three in Figure 2. Then there is the *knowledge-sharing arena* in which ISM is a multi-directional arena used primarily to share knowledge about tasks, products, and customers. In this arena, knowledge grows out of knowledge conversations (Majchrzak *et al.*, 2013), as is illustrated by step four. Finally, there is the *participatory communication arena* illustrated in step five, in which ISM constitute a multivocal communication arena for many different voices interacting and communicating not only about tasks, products, and customers, but also about organization strategy and identity, and in which coworkers perceive that they have a license to critique (Jagd, 2010).

INSERT FIGURE 3

The last two arenas make a distinction between multi-directional and multivocal communication. The author suggests that multi-directional communication is a kind of transactional communication enabling questions and answers to be voiced within the value framework of the organization. Multivocal communication, by contrast, is characterized by voices communicating to, with, against, past, and about each other. In this communication, coworkers are allowed or even encouraged to have opposing and conflicting views to those held by the organization. Thus, the purpose of the knowledge-sharing arena becomes to engage coworkers, whereas the purpose of the participatory arena is to empower coworkers. This distinction reflects that between engagement and empowerment (Johansson, 2015).

5. Limitations and implications

The proposal of a possible distinction between three types of ISM arenas is based on the perceptions of ISM coordinators in ten Danish organizations and a

single case study in a Danish bank. The study therefore has some limitations, and a deeper, summative analysis of ISM across several and various organizations in multiple countries should be conducted to confirm how widespread these three types of arenas are and to discover whether participatory communication on ISM is a rare occurence in Denmark (as this study indicates), and whether this is also the case in other countries. However, the study can be used to theorize that three types of communication arenas can develop when organizations introduce ISM. Furthermore, it can prompt a discussion as to why participatory communication on ISM is so rare in the organizations studied, and as to how participatory communication on ISM might benefit organizations.

The lack of participatory communication

Based on the two studies, the paper finds that when coworkers perceive that they have a "license to critique" (Jagd, 2010), ISM has the potential to create a new kind of participatory organizational communication. The question is, however, whether the introduction of ISM within organizations is likely to cause radical change in the workplace. Based on the multiple case study, it can be argued that organizations are not really prepared to listen to critical coworker voices, not even in the Scandinavian countries, where communicative leadership is practiced (Johansson, 2015). Organizations want engaged coworkers to share knowledge, acknowledging that this can result in better products and services, which will benefit the organization; however, they are not prepared to empower coworkers and give them license to critique their strategies, mission statements, and values. In exceptional organizations — such as Jyske Bank and the organization in Fägersten's case study (Fägersten, 2015) — ISM can encourage participatory communication that can help move, construct, and redefine the organization.

Several explanations spring to mind as to why participatory communication is so rare in the organizations studied. Interactivity has been possible since the first intranets were introduced in organizations in the mid-

1990s (Heide, 2015), employee participation has been discussed for more than 50 years in the academic literature (Ruck, 2015), and social media has brought new communication practices to organizational communication (Men and Bowen, 2016; Ruck, 2015). However, this paper and several other studies have found that organizations are slow to develop communication on ISM (Men and Hung-Baesecke, 2015; Sievert and Lipp, 2016), and that management style (Baptista and Galliers, 2012;) and organizational culture (Martin *et al*., 2015; Vuori and Okkonen, 2012) influence communication on ISM. In other words, conditions inherent in the organization prevent participatory communication on ISM from developing. This reflects that paradoxes in participation (Stohl and Cheney, 2001) are an issue, even if the technical setup and the mindset to develop participatory communication are present. Thus, participatory communication on ISM is a relational phenomenon constructed in social interactions between leaders, coworkers and the organizational contexts, and many different dynamics that interact can potentially prevent participatory communication from developing.

First, the organization — or rather, its managers — may fear losing control or might not wish to give coworkers real influence. The literature on participation distinguishes between different levels of participation (Lewis, 2011; Wilkinson *et al.,* 2013), and it might be argued that organizations are interested in making coworkers more engaged, but they are not really prepared to pay the price in terms of allowing coworkers control in decision-making (Johansson, 2015). The introduction of ISM therefore becomes a symbolic act (Lewis, 2011; Stohl and Cheney, 2001), reflecting the hope that ISM will improve innovation and knowledge sharing without any requirement to empower employees, which highlights the paradox of power in participation (Stohl and Cheney, 2001).

Second, managers might be prepared to empower coworkers, but the organizational context might prevent this from happening. Denyer *et al.* (2011) found that organizations with a competitive organizational culture had difficulties in developing communication on ISM. Coworkers must perceive

safety of voice before they will speak their mind (Morrison, 2014), and in many respects, trust therefore seems to be a prerequisite for participatory communication to develop on ISM. Managers must trust coworkers and their willingness to display organizational citizenship (Ridder, 2004), coworkers must trust that managers appreciate their inputs and comments, and coworkers must trust that other coworkers will react positively or at least constructively to their comments and knowledge sharing. The different risks influence coworkers, and self-censorship may prevent them from voicing their opinion if they perceive that the organizational context does not support their voice in a constructive manner (Madsen and Verhoeven, 2016).

Third, both managers and the organizational context might support employee voice, but coworkers might still not voice their opinion if they do not perceive efficacy of voice (Morrison, 2014). If the managers do not listen to coworker voices or find ways to accommodate their proposals and suggestions, coworkers will perceive their voices to be in vain. This could happen if organizations have not really considered their purpose for introducing ISM (Heide, 2015). On realizing how discussions can develop, the managers might, intentionally or unintentionally, prevent discussions from developing, as indicated by Stohl and Cheney (2001). In this line of thought, managers may not have considered using ISM as part of communicative leadership, or managers may not be fully equipped to engage in responsive communication behavior (Johansson, 2015).

The benefit of participatory communication

According to the study, organizations are reluctant to give coworkers a "license to critique" the organization on ISM, but the question is whether the advantages of doing so would outnumber the risks. Participatory communication on ISM involves coworkers in the negotiation and construction of organizational identity (Fägersten, 2015; Madsen, 2016), which is likely to not only engage but also empower coworkers (Johansson, 2015). The quality of non-task-related communication is vital in creating trust in management (Ridder, 2004), and

when critical and constructive communication is visible in the ISM arena, the organization will come across as authentic and transparent. In this respect, participatory communication is a way of building trust in the organization and of developing organizational ownership. Coworkers are much more prepared to display organizational citizen behavior when they trust the organization (Ridder, 2004), and organizations increasingly depend on coworkers acting as brand ambassadors on social media, which implies that organizations need to develop trust in the organization. At the same time, younger generations have come to expect transparency and authenticity of their workplace (Men and Hung-Baesecke, 2015), and participatory communication may be a way of attracting and retaining them.

Conclusion

ISM does not of its own accord give rise to participatory communication. The two exploratory case studies presented here found that different levels of communication were reached in different types of organizations. The article therefore proposes a distinction should be made between three different types of communication arenas on ISM: *a quiet arena, a knowledge-sharing arena,* and *a participatory communication arena.* The knowledge-sharing arena has the potential to *engage* coworkers, while the participatory arena also has the potential to *empower* coworkers. These two types of arenas overlap somewhat, but an important difference is found between them. Only when coworkers perceive that they have a license to critique will the organization actually develop participatory communication that is capable of moving, influencing, or even changing the organization.

Theoretical and Ppractical and theoretical implications

Participatory communication on ISM seems to develop from a complex blending of organizational factors and coworker trust in the organization, in management and in other coworkers. In this respect, participatory communication is not a managerial-driven process as previously described

(Lewis, 2011; Wilkinson *et al.*, 2013). This article finds that ISM is an interactive and dynamic communication arena, and that participatory communication on ISM is a co-constructed process among coworkers, middle managers and top managers. These findings are based on two qualitative studies, and large-scale, empirical studies of ISM across several and various organizations in multiple countries should be conducted to confirm the findings. Furthermore, further research should be conducted to provide insights into how interactions between coworkers, middle managers and top managers in the ISM communication arena can develop into participatory communication, and how, with its focus on managers' ability to listen (Johansen, 2015), communicative leadership can be used to develop this type of communication.

Organizations that wish to develop participatory communication on ISM have to be patient. It takes time to develop coworker trust (Ridder, 2004), and the lack of trust has been found to be one of the main reasons why organizations have not fully integrated ISM in their internal communication (Sievert and Lipp, 2016). The organization must therefore focus on developing their communication on ISM rather than considering the risks. Coworkers must perceive that they are able to speak freely. Communication on ISM will not develop in the same way as on public social media since coworker self-censorship influences coworkers to contribute in a constructive manner in an organizational context (Madsen and Verhoeven, 2016).

Organizations could benefit from developing communicative leadership on ISM. This might be a matter of allowing discussions on ISM to develop before the manager in charge of an issue answers, and to address all issues raised so that coworkers perceive efficacy of voice (Morrison, 2014). So far, research on communicative leadership has addressed the topic of ISM only vaguely (Johansen, 2015). Future research needs to explore how ISM can be used as part of communicative leadership, and how organizations can build the trust necessary to develop participatory communication.

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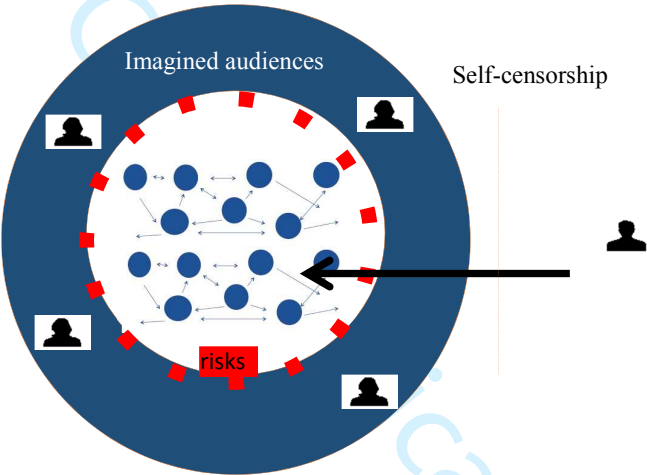**Figures for the article: Three types of communication on internal social media**
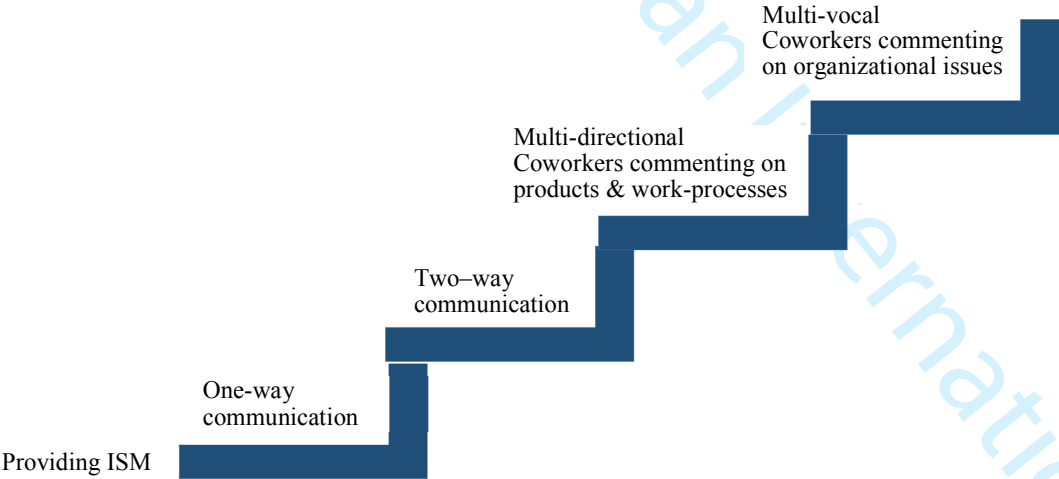

Figure 1: A communication perspective on ISM.

Figure 2: Different levels of participation on ISM (Inspired by Wilkinson et al., 2013; Lewis, 2011).

The quiet arena: ISM is primarily used for one-way communication from one or more departments.

The knowledge sharing arena: ISM is a multi-directional arena primarily used to share knowledge about tasks, products and customers, and knowledge grows out of knowledge conversations.

The participatory communication arena: ISM is a multi-vocal communication arena where many different voices interact and communicate about tasks, products and customers as well as about the organizations' strategy and identity.

Figure 3: Three types of communication arenas created by ISM.

Figures for the article: Three types of communication on internal social media

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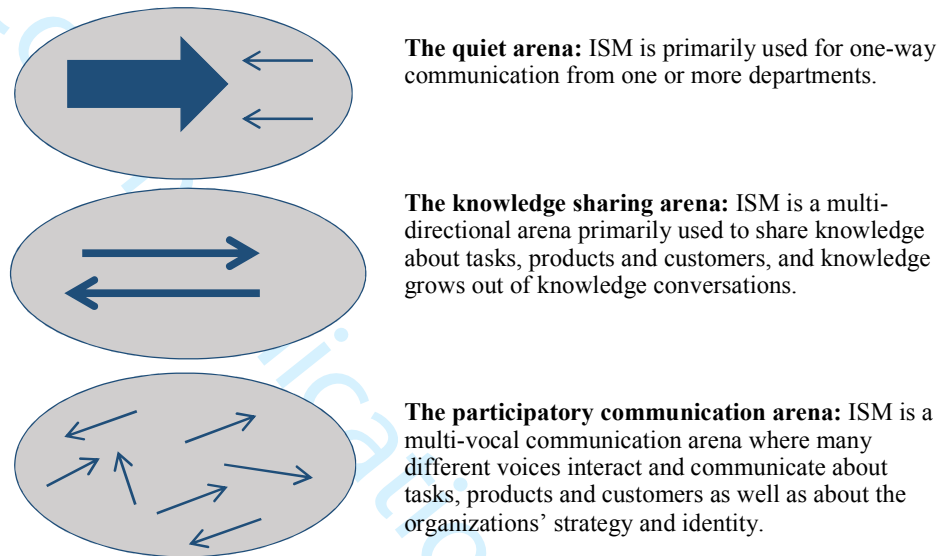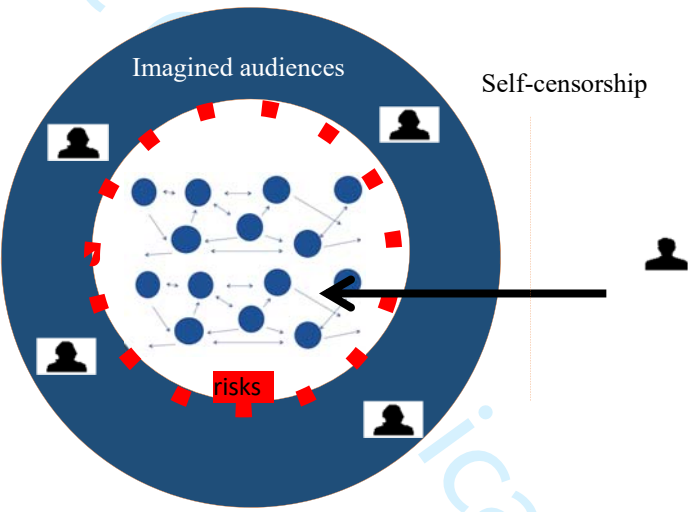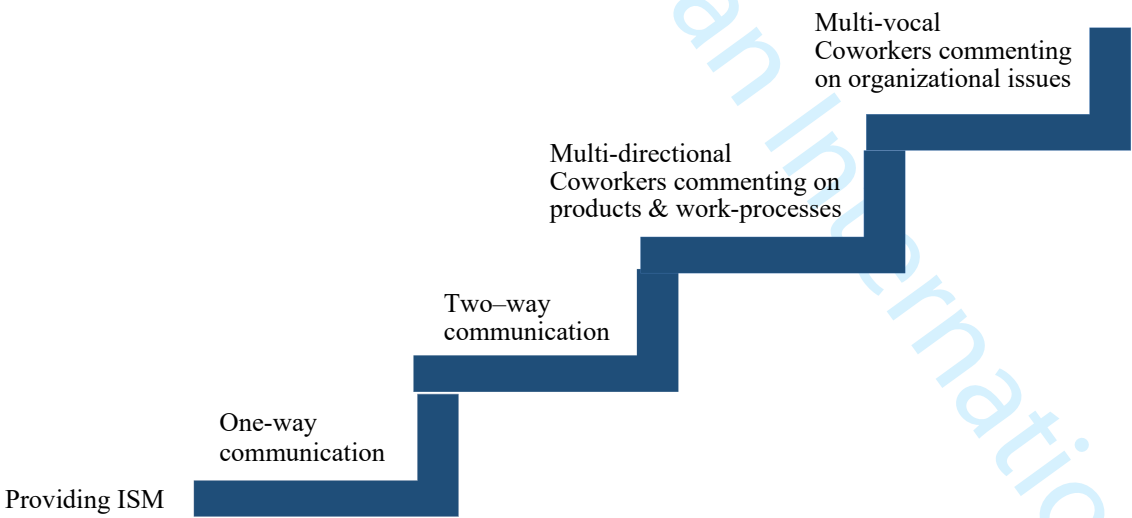*Figure 2: Different levels of participation on ISM (Inspired by Wilkinson et al., 2013; Lewis, 2011).*

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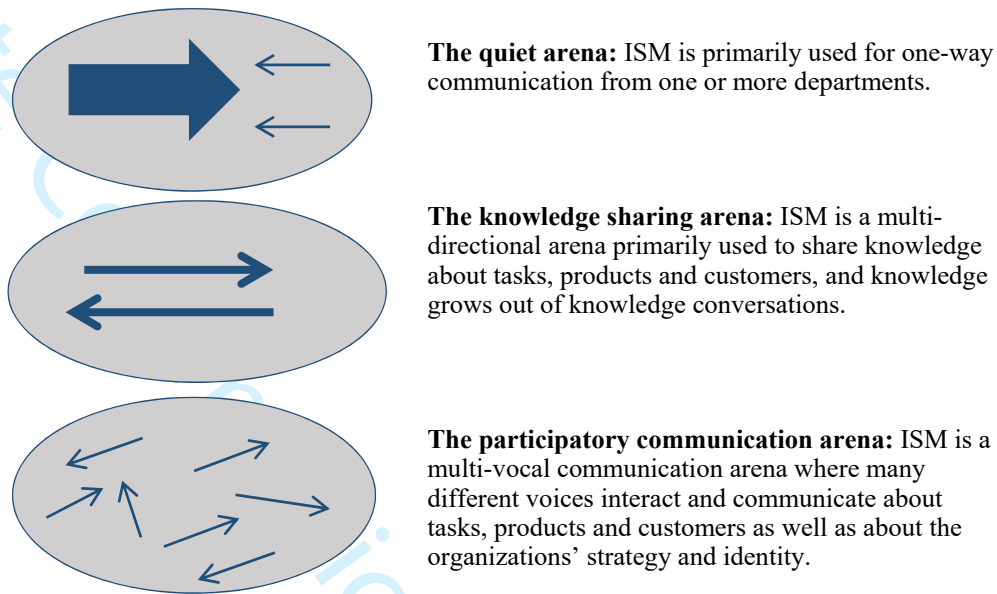
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