Social media as a driver for new rhetorical practices in organisations

João Baptista (John)  
Warwick Business School  
j.baptista@wbs.ac.uk

Robert D Galliers  
Bentley University  
rgalliers@bentley.edu

Abstract

Social media adoption within organisations enables wider employee participation in corporate communication and rhetoric. We study the impact of social media on rhetorical practices inside organisations, namely how social media reshapes senior management communication. We study the online communication environments of eight organisations and identify two contrasting approaches in dealing with social media adoption: the closed and open model. In the closed model, organisations maintain central control and their communication platforms remain mainly one-way. In the open model, organisations develop and foster two-way interaction. The study finds that in the “open model”, governance and culture of the organisation changes in order to address the shift in control and tension between top-down and bottom-up communication. Our key contribution is in rethinking rhetorical practices in the context of modern open and fluid online communication environments in organisations – rhetorical diffusion - and characterising the changes in governance and culture that enable this transition – internal ambidexterity.1

1. Introduction

Corporate internal communication is increasingly undertaken through intranets and web technologies that enable real time communication and flow of information and news across all areas of organisations. Senior managers publish news on intranets and expect staff to use it to keep up-to-date rather than using more traditional channels of communication such as printed media and face-to-face communication and even email [16]. They use intranets to communicate news but they also shape and design them with a view to reinforcing key corporate values, policies and culture. Intranets are seen as contributing to organisational performance by reducing costs and improving efficiencies by saving time spent by employees in finding information and using resources. Despite the growing importance and deeper embedding of intranets in business processes, however, their strategic significance is not always recognised [4].

More recently, a new wave of intranets, based on the adoption of social media, is reshaping internal communications anew. We follow the conceptualisation of social media proposed by McAfee [17] who characterises this new approach to internal communication as “Enterprise 2.0”. In this new online environment, while the intranet still functions as a repository of official information managed by trained content managers, employees can freely contribute, participate and engage in open digital conversations across different functions, regions and organisational hierarchies. This is enabled through the integration of blogs, social networking, and wikis, for example. Increasingly, these more interactive and open communication channels permeate organisational boundaries, challenging previous models of internal communication that were based on centralised control [3]. The introduction of social media inside organisations has therefore represented a considerable shift in the way organisations manage organisational communication [5] with important impact on how senior management performs leadership in this much more dynamic and volatile digital environment.

One of the key differences in the new social-media enabled online environment is the dissolution of central control on messages and corporate stories. Traditionally, organisations have kept central control over the “official” channels of communication. This allowed the targeting of messages and a large degree of influence over the dominant themes and topics propagated across organisations and discussed by employees. It also allowed managers to manage

1 An earlier version of this paper has been presented at EGOS 2011 and we wish to thank Jimmy Huang from Warwick Business School for his contribution to both papers.
rhetoric in organisations by keeping control over the content, design, branding and governance of the information and issues published. However, the advent of social media has forced senior managers to begin surrendering central control to employees. Employees become legitimate and active contributors in a more participative and dynamic environment. Services such as blogs, wikis, discussion forums and micro-blogging are all examples of new channels that encourage horizontal and bottom-up communication, challenging traditional *modus-operandi* based on manager’s central control of communication. Some of the features that disrupt existing ways of working are the ability of employees to openly comment and express opinions about news and stories, as well as the ability to add content on wikis, blogs and other online forums.

This study reflects on the effects of social media on rhetorical practices in organisations, more specifically on senior manager’s ability to perform rhetoric in a more open and dynamic communication environment. The study bridges work on social media and work on rhetorical practices in organisations. The paper contributes to the IS literature by highlighting the role of technology such as social media on communication and rhetorical practices. The paper may also be of significant interest to the organisation studies community with a greater link between new media and working practices.

The paper is structured as follows. The next section reviews the corporate rhetoric and provides the context within which social media plays a role in establishing new practices in organisational communication. The following section describes the methods used to collect and analyse data. We then present our findings and finish with our discussion and conclusion.

2. Theoretical background

In this section we review the discourse on rhetorical practices to contextualise the use of social media inside organisations. We review the use of social media in this context and suggest potential implications that form the core research question of this paper.

In its essence, rhetoric is the use of language in order to persuade [1]. However, in order for it to be effective, a *rhetor* needs to consider both the message and the context in which that message is delivered [13] by being sensitive to how the content is packaged, the intended audience and the method of delivery of the message. The link between language and action has been highlighted by Ford and Ford [8] who drawing on Searle [19] and Austin [2] argue that verbal communication is not “idle”. It is instead made of speech acts or, in other words, it always plays a performative role by “bringing into existence a social reality that did not exist before their utterance”.

Particularly in the context of organisations, rhetoric is performed with intent and purpose. Although often misconceived in common language for example when it is used to convey a mismatch between words and action, such as when people say “that’s just rhetoric” or when it is considered to convey the idea that someone is only flourishing arguments, rhetoric plays a key role in organisational change. Senior leaders consciously and proactively manage rhetoric to influence and to centre organisational discourse on the themes that are more in line with the values and aims of the organisation. Although in its essence, rhetoric “refers to the strategic use of symbols to generate meaning” (Hoffman and Ford 2010), rhetoric actually operates at the level of *pragmatics* and *social change* in Stamper’s [21] semiotic ladder. Rhetoric is the intertwining of *message* and *intended meaning* but only effective if it leads to purposeful action. This view is a departure from more traditional studies of rhetoric focused on the discourse itself, where the action and processes are studied separately.

Although the aim of rhetoric is to influence and shape behaviour, it is important to differentiate *rhetoric* from *coercion*. Rhetoric aims to influence behaviour without coercing or forcing rules and regulations through brute force or threats [6]. Rhetoric operates at the level of systems of belief, opinions and values to make a certain course of action more appealing than others. As a tool, rhetoric “is a type of instrumental discourse used to persuade audiences, reach reliable judgments or decisions, and coordinate social action” [10]. To achieve this purpose Eccles [7] proposes “Rhetorical strategies” based on the on-going review of the effectiveness of different “Speech acts” in inspiring audiences to act in the intended way.

In its origin, Aristotelian rhetoric was based on primarily one-way communication, performed by a single speaker to address a homogenous audience and convey a discrete message. However, today, communication in organisations reflects a much more complex environment of multi-directional communication across space and time supported by a variety of media [8] where the message is not discrete
and is instead deeply entangled with the wider politics of the organisation, Cheney [6] says that “much of public persuasion today is embedded in institutional arrangements and processes”.

Our research tackles rhetoric at this deeper level, in the social fabric of organisations. At this level “organizational rhetoric is aimed [...] at what an organization does, what its identity or image is, and what the organization itself is promoting as a vision of a 'one-voice company' in which all communication is coordinated into a consistent, coherent and seamless expression” [6]. Therefore rhetoric shapes employee behaviour by creating language and frames of reference that change the way employees understand the world around them while at work [7].

As suggested by Heracleous & Barrett [12] rhetoric underpins the interpretive frames used by employees in their day to day roles in organisations. A pointed reinforcement by Pfeffer [18] by saying that “we perceive things according to how they are described in conversation and debate”.

Therefore rhetoric has the potential to “blind” organisational actors from seeing certain aspects of the environment by the way in which it “programmes” their interpretive frames. Cheney [6] alerts to potential risks of this by suggesting that “organizations are susceptible to their own persuasive efforts, an outcome that underscores the challenges organizational rhetors face as they try to manage multiple audiences”. For example, Heath [11] argues that the asbestos industry failed to respond adequately to the growing recognition of the serious harm of asbestos partially because it convinced itself otherwise, while intensely trying to convince the public.

The above highlights the important role of rhetoric in organisational life and shows its significance to senior management. Sillince [20] shows this well by saying that “one of the main functions of top management is the integration of the firm through common purpose and meaning, particularly corporate culture, but another function is the efficient operation of each component of the organization and the delegation of decision making and authority to aid in that operation”. This view of the manager as a rhetor [7] is aligned with wide evidence that managers spend most of their time communicating, “adjusting ideas to people and people to ideas” [6]. Managers are often involved in large programmes of building and projecting corporate culture and identities within and outside organisations [15, 23]. They are also pivotal in responding to anticipated change by developing communication programmes that sway and influence employee opinion in advance of events [14]. To this point, Green [10] suggests that “Managers use this constant verbal activity to gather information, develop shared understandings of the world, and persuade individuals to contribute to collective purposes, such as the adoption and implementation of new practices. Managers hear and use all kinds of arguments to elicit action and describe the world”.

Managers employ rhetorical strategies such as identification, differentiation and juxtaposition [6]. Sillince [20] finds that managers used these rhetorical vehicles such as emphasising context (by relativising of interpretations), switching perspectives (by amplification and valorisation of opinions) and creating consistency and purpose. However the use of social media as a communication tool inside organisation may impact on the effectiveness of rhetorical strategies employed by managers and employees. For example, blogs, wikis and other user driven services improve the ability of rhetors to emphasise context by developing a better sense of the feelings and views of the audience, so they can adapt arguments accordingly. Social media also improves the ability of the rhetor to switch perspectives by making it easier to access and use multiple perspectives to corroborate particular viewpoints. It also encourages richness of ideas so it may restrict the ability of the rhetor to develop consistency and purpose around an idea, however by triangulating the use of several media and using images, text and sound in coordination, rhetors can improve reach and build legitimation of viewpoints.

It is important to point out that rhetorical tools go beyond conversations, Ford and Ford [8] suggest that it may also “include symbols, artifacts, theatrics, and so forth, that are used in conjunction with what is spoken”. They further conceptualise rhetorical communication by taking a “broad view of conversations as a complex, information-rich mix of auditory, visual, olfactory, and tactile events”. It is therefore important to take account of the media as well as the message when analysing rhetoric in organisations. For this reason our study looks at the wider digital environment used in organisations to support internal communication. The study looks in particular at the expanding role of new media such as blogs, wikis and social networking in rhetorical practices.

The open and fluid nature of social media when used inside organisation breaks established central
control in communication. As discussed earlier it hinders the ability of senior management to influence conversations. Traditionally, senior management kept control by withholding information, determining imagery, logos and templates, as well as defining roles and responsibilities. Green (2004) argues that traditional managerial control is legitimised by the superior knowledge of affairs, which is in turn a factor of the manager’s ability to access exclusive information and use it for rhetorical purposes by being in that position.

Surrendering control and the ability to dominate discussions in organisations is therefore going to create a challenge to senior managers used to previously controlled communication environments. Sillince [20] says that “Top management dislike cognitive dissonance, disruptive change, and threats to identity and security because they identify with the status quo. They therefore seek to align institutional and core-level logics of action and rhetoric for creating consistency in order to reduce”. However, by their very nature, social media services are open to participation from members of a community. Managers fear open communication because there are elements such as topics raised, or things relevant to these topics, which could be regarded as ammunition or as rhetorical resources for participants who want to argue in a particular way. Participants use these rhetorical resources opportunistically. Once something has been said, it acquires more force and so is a stronger rhetorical resource than something remote, which requires more justification.

This research explores the effects of social media on rhetorical practices by studying two types of organisations: 1) organisations that have resisted open communication to keep control of internal communication at the centre, and 2) organisations that have adopted participative media but developed tactics to maintain a dominant voice in the organisation. Our research question is: what is the effect of social media on rhetorical practices in organisations?

3. Methods

To capture the effects of social media on rhetorical practices inside organisations we focused on changes in practices and perceptions of managers responsible for internal communication in several organisations. The study aims to understand changes in control and subtle differences between models of communication inside organisations. It focused in particular on the level of open participation in digital communication inside organisations, such as the ability to comment, rate and discuss ideas openly. We started by studying 20 organisations but then narrowed down the analysis to 8 organisations that made greater use of digital media as a platform for internal communication and collaboration. Although all organisations used social media to some extent, there were two distinct groups. While three organisations allowed open participation through blogs, wikis and other social media tools, the other five organisations restricted publishing rights and maintained central control over the content on these tools.

We followed the interpretive paradigm to analyse the communication environment of these eight organisations. In order to develop an in-depth understanding of the effects of social media on rhetorical practices we used qualitative methods such as lengthy semi-structured interviews with stakeholders, documents analysis (including governance and strategy documents and steering group meeting minutes) and reviewed hundreds of screenshots such as webpages, blog posts and others from across all organisations. All of these sources of data helped to form a picture of rhetorical practices in each organisation. Our unit of analysis was the practices and perceptions of using various media to communicate inside organisations, with a particular focus on comparing practices in closed and open communication environments. We paid particular attention to changes in control following the introduction of participative media such as blogs, wikis, commentary and social networking in some of the organisations. It is important to emphasise that in this study our aim is not to interpret and decode particular discourses, we are more interested in understanding the processes and practices that promote more, or less, effective rhetorical communication inside organisations.

Due to the sensitivity of issues related to senior management rhetoric and strategies, the name of the organisations studied remains anonymous. We used a code for each company when referring to evidence collected from each organisation in our discussion and analysis sections. The following table summarises de profile of each organisation studied and shows the code used in the text to indicate sources of data per company (“C” denotes companies following the closed model of communication described above, “O” denotes companies following the open model):
For each organisation, a total of 50 to 100 screenshots was collected. An average of 10 semi-structured interviews with stakeholders involved in managing internal channels of communication in each organisation was conducted. We have also gathered views from users. Each interview lasted approximately between one and two hours following a two stages process. In the initial part the discussion was more open around the evolution and services available for internal communication, followed by a second more structured part more focused on key themes related with rhetorical practices.

### 4. Findings

In this section we firstly discuss the changing nature of rhetorical practices with the introduction of digital media in the organisations studied. We then characterise rhetoric in this new environment and the role of control held by central teams responsible for internal communication. Following from this we suggest that rhetorical diffusion based on open communication requires changes in the communication practices of leaders and employees. We then show barriers to rhetorical diffusion and highlight ambidexterity practices from some organisations enabling them to better deal with greater ambiguity and complexity in internal communication.

#### Changing rhetorical practices

The role of digital media is growing in the mix of channels used by senior managers to communicate and push through their ideas and get support for new initiatives and projects. A quote from a stakeholder in C5 shows the significance of the intranet as a communication channel in the organisation

"The intranet is the only immediate global communication tool. We discourage sending emails and update the stories on homepage daily. Some of the announcements would be sent by email and linked to the intranet email for immediacy, when we need to hit people quickly."

In five organisations studied, the role of the intranet was growing but it was still used in conjunction with email and other channels to promote and communicate news and stories across teams and functions. C2, one of the leading global law firms saw the intranet as the most effective global communication channel. However the company still used email to bring employees to the intranet, a stakeholder explains

"The intranet is the most important information channel for employees. We have around 145k employees and 130k of these have regular access to the intranet. 80-90k people access the intranet on daily basis."

#### For each organisation, a total of 50 to 100 screenshots was collected. An average of 10 semi-structured interviews with stakeholders involved in managing internal channels of communication in each organisation was conducted. We have also gathered views from users. Each interview lasted approximately between one and two hours following a two stages process. In the initial part the discussion was more open around the evolution and services available for internal communication, followed by a second more structured part more focused on key themes related with rhetorical practices.

### 4. Findings

In this section we firstly discuss the changing nature of rhetorical practices with the introduction of digital media in the organisations studied. We then characterise rhetoric in this new environment and the role of control held by central teams responsible for internal communication. Following from this we suggest that rhetorical diffusion based on open communication requires changes in the communication practices of leaders and employees. We then show barriers to rhetorical diffusion and highlight ambidexterity practices from some organisations enabling them to better deal with greater ambiguity and complexity in internal communication.

#### Changing rhetorical practices

The role of digital media is growing in the mix of channels used by senior managers to communicate and push through their ideas and get support for new initiatives and projects. A quote from a stakeholder in C5 shows the significance of the intranet as a communication channel in the organisation

"The intranet is the most important information channel for employees. We have around 145k employees and 130k of these have regular access to the intranet. 80-90k people access the intranet on daily basis."

In five organisations studied, the role of the intranet was growing but it was still used in conjunction with email and other channels to promote and communicate news and stories across teams and functions. C2, one of the leading global law firms saw the intranet as the most effective global communication channel. However the company still used email to bring employees to the intranet, a stakeholder explains

"The intranet is the only immediate global communication tool. We discourage sending emails and update the stories on homepage daily. Some of the announcements would be sent by email and linked to the intranet email for immediacy, when we need to hit people quickly."

One key finding from our study is that senior managers work across channels to promote their ideas and image in organisations. For example a senior stakeholder in C3 said

"The intranet is our primary and strategic channel, we support that channel with others to amplify what's there. For example if the CEO publishes a 'Dear colleague' letter, this will go on the group intranet with a combination of email and speaking to our colleagues to push that message out. It links within the email, but email is not a strategic channel for us. We compliment the intranet with other channels such as posters pointing people to the intranet. The intranet offers the only way to get reliable management information."

Working across channels was key for some organisations where the intranet and digital media had limited reach. In these organisations senior
management used alternative channels to communicate to certain groups of employees with limited access to PCs, a situation particularly relevant for C4. However, a group of three organisations, out of the eight studied, had placed a much greater emphasis on the intranet and formally recognised it as the primary communication channel in their organisations as stated by a stakeholder in O1 “The intranet is now the primary communication method in our organisation”.

Another key findings was that in these three organisations internal communication was not just one way, employees were able to publish and actively participate online. Key events and messages were posted in blogs and discussion forums where employees were able to comment, rate and feedback their views. We saw this in several screenshots where senior managers used the intranet to handle change or implement large programmes of organisational change as illustrated by a quote from a stakeholder in O1, a large global manufacturing company:

““We have recently announced that we are totally restructuring the organisation in January and we have set up a change blog. It’s very active with lots of people commenting on change.””

Characterising digital rhetoric

We found significant evidence that digital rhetoric requires different strategies and techniques than traditional rhetorical methods based on face-to-face and other forms of personal communication. One aspect was the deliberate role of the intranet in reinforcing corporate values, as explained by one stakeholder in C1

“We use the intranet to give people a line of sight into what we are doing in terms of corporate strategy and performance”. He further stated that “Stories are typically developed around one of our pillars for example client loyalty... or if someone had an idea to reduce costs, new technology or rebranding a product they try to group these stories around one of the pillars.”

Other organisations also proactively used the intranet to promote corporate strategies by choosing and editing content that reinforce the strategies and values of the organisation, as illustrated by the following quotes

C2: “Most weeks, probably most days, there's some kind of news piece that reflects those principles, whether it's obvious or more subtle”

C4: “All the information we publish comes out of our business plan (e.g. a focus on lower prices and co-worker retention are two items for this year).”

The intranet was also designed to promote large programmes of organisational change, for example in O3 the intranet was part of a wider programme of consolidation and integration of resources across the organisation as stated by a stakeholder that said that

"The intranet was set up as one of the first visible signs of our One Company strategy. That sort of feeling is still in existence and it symbolises it."

Our findings reveal the effort used in planning stories and editing content to reinforce corporate values. The following quote by a stakeholder in C1 shows that publishers proactively sought stories and edited them in order to reinforce the value and the agenda of senior management

“The intranet is a great representation of our organisation in terms of brand and values - we are very values driven as an organisation. So the stories that we chose are stories that bring those values to life... we would go and find stories that help illustrate those values”.

The extent to which the intranet played a role in influencing employee behaviour varied, but in one organisation this link was more obvious because the intranet was used to reward employees for following business strategies. In C1 the intranet was used to manage a programme “employee recognition awards” that rewarded employees that contributed to one of the company’s aims and objectives. Employees receive a prize, online recognition and an online badge, which is also visible on the corporate directory and personal homepage of the individual.

Control and digital rhetorical strategies

One way of amplifying the rhetorical effect of the intranet was to keep specialised central teams in control of the content and design of the intranet
homepages. Corporate rhetoric was the main feature of all homepages with an emphasis on corporate news, taking a high proportion of the space available on the homepage. In some organisations the homepage featured primarily corporate and regional news as well as messages and videos from the CEO.

However in all organisations the content on the homepage was curated by a central team of dedicated specialists in internal communications. These specialists were trained to enforce templates and guidelines on tone of voice, as well as centrally defined plan of communication. One stakeholder in the central team of C3 explained his role “Some of the work that I am doing is to influence people to be more consistent.” The system was locked down using templates to enforce consistency in layout and design of all sites. This was also clearly communicated by a stakeholder in C2

“We have a strict set of guidelines for identity across sites. This is in the "Intranet Policies and Procedures" section. There is no scope to go outside the templates, so all sites are on brand”

The main function of these templates was to ensure that the entire digital environment looked and felt in line with the expected imagery of the organisation, reinforcing corporate identity across different groups in the organisation. Organisations took the branding and layout very seriously and used it to convey and promote their own values and culture. This was a common feature of all organisations as demonstrated by the quote

O2: “Yes, our job is to ensure that the branding of whole intranet is in line with the corporate brand.”

Monitoring comments was also another way of selecting and editing content. This job was another responsibility of the central team. A stakeholder in C3 acknowledged that the discussion forums that were used by employees to share ideas were monitored but it was interesting to note that the word “closely” was used to describe this activity. The exact quote was “There are discussion forums but they are closely monitored”.

Rhetorical diffusion
Control over the templates and standards was a common feature of all organisations studied. However while five organisations maintained strong control over the editorial content, the other three organisations in our group took a more liberal and bottom-up approach to the management of content on the intranet.

These three organisations allowed open discussions and commenting and senior managers were more active in requesting direct feedback from employees. For example they encouraged participation through regular online live discussion forums as seen in company O2. In company O1 a stakeholder was quick to say, “we have a lot of top management blogs”.

However the significant difference between this group of three organisations and the other five organisations studied was that the blogs were interactive and any employee could post freely on the intranet. As described by one of the stakeholders “users can post anonymously. For example, a colleague moving from Finland to the UK could ask about average salary in the UK”. In these three organisations there was no moderation or curation of posts and employee contributions as stated by a stakeholder of O2. “We don’t do any moderation. It is a risky strategy, but people are professional and straightforward in putting their opinions forward”. In O2, the company proactively “fosters open and straightforward exchanges and collaboration amongst employees via ‘Your Views’, commenting, wikis and blogs”. The discussions forums were used differently to how they were used in the other organisations because these forums were used to encourage feedback from employees as stated by a stakeholder in O3 “Our forums encourage corporate values to be talked about and challenged”.

Adopting a more relaxed stance towards open communications enabled free participation from employees fostering internal sharing of ideas and information. This was recognised by a stakeholder in C3 who acknowledged that

“There are point solutions for colleagues who have an idea for a business improvement to submit that online. What we need to do is step back and ask: ‘how do we tap into the ideas, knowledge and expertise that may be in the heads of employees across our organisation?’”

However it also reduced the level of central control over the messages and stories discussed on the intranet. Three organisations saw the potential benefits from greater interaction, while the other five organisations prevented changes, keeping central control over the content and only allowed specialised
and trained internal communications staff to publish on the intranet.

**Barriers to rhetorical diffusion**

Not all organisations showed rhetorical diffusion, the approach in the other five organisations studied was much different. These five organisations proactively resisted diffusion and losing central control of communication. Digital communication in these organisations was mainly one way from senior leaders and central teams to employees, there was little opportunity for employees to feedback their views to management. Resistance to rhetorical diffusion was deeply embedded in the culture of organisations. In C3 a stakeholder said, “we have the technology to do two-way communications, but the problem is more about the culture”. However in some organisations we found deeper issues with participation and sharing of knowledge by employees. For example in C4 there was clear resistance to opening up and reducing the level of control over the publishing of content.

“We are a bit afraid of spreading good ideas internally, it’s a problem. There have been examples of good ideas that turned out to be really bad ideas. So they tend to be checked by a central authority and turned into processes and are published as ‘Best Practice’. It has become too formalised which is a characteristic of our culture.”

This issue was also found in C3 where the central team was clearly concerned with employees posting un-moderated messages online so check everything, with the downside of signalling lack of trust in employees who then interpret this as lack of authority and feel anxious about open participation. A stakeholder in C3 explains

“My problem with [name of organisation] is there’s not enough trust in employees. We get comments about having to moderate everything and as a result colleagues don’t feel trust in the company. They don’t trust that whatever comment they do make is going to go down on some sort of record. We waited ten months for the acceptable use policy to be signed off. I think we need a lot more work to make the intranet two-Way.”

**Ambidexterity practices: coping with rhetorical diffusion**

Our findings show that some managers prevented rhetorical diffusion because of their fear and anxiety in managing conflicting views from open debates on the intranet and other digital platforms. A stakeholder in C4 said

“The intranet isn't used to gather feedback at the moment. I think we have been a little bit afraid that we won’t be able to manage feedback in the right way. People fear that we might not have enough time to manage the discussion forums so it would be better not to do it so we don't let people down.”

Keeping communication one-way avoided having to deal with negative feedback and contrary arguments posted by unhappy employees, because as stated by another stakeholder “If the CEO says something that people don't like, people will make comments”. That is why organisations keep control and moderate comments and contributions as explained by a stakeholder in O2

“We pre-moderate everything. The head of communications or the senior editor decide whether to publish. We have to filter. We do get pushback. We handle it sensitively. There are things we can say to make people feel better.”

However, three organisations changed their rhetorical practices to adapt to this more ambiguous communication environment. On O2 one of the stakeholders explained the purpose of a section of the intranet called “Your views” and how senior management had a much more relaxed approach to enforcing points of views.

O2: “Your Views” is an online forum. It features a new topic every week related to [name of company] Strategy, product or policy. A specific manager sponsors it. Sometimes this manager comes back and challenges or provides answers

This is further reinforced by another quote

O2: “Our executives, starting with CEO, seek constructive dialogue and debate via Q&A sites and online chats”

The main difference was that in these organisations open online communication had become the norm, so employees expected senior managers to use these channels to establish interactive communication. A stakeholder in O3 said

“We do monthly live web chats with Group HR Director for half an hour. We normally run a story ahead of that session and start a thread. We try to be controversial or pick topics where we think
employees will want to know about something. We have started doing for other executive team members for example Marketing & Communications”

Open Q&A online were regularly held for employees to pose questions directly to senior managers and receive live feedback, as indicated by a stakeholder in O3

“Once a month a leader will host a Q&A session that is open for all employees. Usually greater involvement in UK and Europe related to time zones: It’s usually over lunch.”

We found very different practices in these three organisations where senior managers regularly engaged in open two-way communication with employees. This required different rhetorical practices in handling ambiguity and conflicting comments and points of view as illustrated by a stakeholder in O3

O3: “Our employee forums are a great example. It’s an open discussion board with many instances of debate being joined by senior leader”

Overall our data reveals that participative technology has emerged differently in different organisations. Only three cases showed a high degree of social media embedded in the functioning of their intranets, with modified forms of governance and structure in place to enable and address associated new risks.

5. Discussion and conclusion

In all eight organisations our findings show that digital communication through digital channels played a central role in organisational rhetoric. Our study also suggests that rhetoric is deeply embedded in organisational behaviour and plays a key role in organisational change, going beyond the semantics of language and discourse. Our case data reflects the view that the intranet was used by senior leaders in all organisations to “conscious, deliberate and efficient use of persuasion to bring about attitudinal or behavioural change” [6]. Top management used the intranet as part of their annual communication plan to inform employees about key events and topics such as new business strategies, annual results and key international initiatives. Our data also shows that they used the intranet to actively manage their profiles and “public personas” as well as push forward new concepts and agendas across the organisation.

Previous literature has highlighted the role of rhetoric in organisational reality and in fulfilling specific corporate strategic goals [6, 20]. However, what has been less articulated in prior accounts is the role of mediating communication technologies such as intranets in this context. Our data shows that in organisations following the “closed model”, digital media was used as a rhetorical tool to persuade employees during “special occasions”, such as the introduction of an innovation [10], the contest and struggle of institutional change [22], the implementation of corporate restructuring [24] and the implementation of new strategy [13]. Rhetorical practices in organisations following the closed model did not change significantly, despite the introduction of social media features. This is because essentially the mode of communication remained top-down and heavily centrally controlled.

However, in the three companies following the “open model”, rhetorical practices changed considerably. One contribution from this study is therefore to characterise the way organisational rhetoric changed for these organisations. We show that the proliferation of social media inside organisations drives multi-directional communication across levels and areas of the organisation – we term this shift rhetorical diffusion. However, we also find that rhetorical diffusion challenges some of the fundamental principles governing the dissemination and consumption of information in organisations following closed models. Our findings show that this tension leads to considerable changes in the governance and culture of organisations implementing social media. We found that more open and dynamic online environments led to erosion of central control, more flexible policies and the propagation of new roles. We conceptualise internal ambidexterity as the necessary mechanism to harmonise the tension between top-down and bottom-up pressures in the two models of communication. Characterizing the “ambidextrous” capabilities developed by these organisations to handle conflicting demands and move beyond apparent trade-offs [9] is another element of our contribution. In sum, the paper studies the impact of social media on organisational rhetoric and contributes to the literature by characterising rhetorical diffusion as a phenomenon prevalent in organisations following open models of internal communication. It also describes how some organisations develop ambidextrous capabilities to deal with the intrinsic tension arising from the introduction of more open models of communication.
We have had unprecedented access to data from the intranets of several large global organisations and have found that many have adopted open methods of communication where senior management have surrendered control over the dominant discourse inside organisation. We are keen to explore the effects that this more open and fluid communication environment might have on senior managers, who still feel compelled to dominate conversations and influence behaviour but need to achieve this through greater engagement, persuasion and convincing.

Our findings reflect the use of social media within large and dispersed organisations and will have greater significance to organisations already considering the implementation of social media as an internal channel of communication. Theoretically it contributes with two concepts rhetorical diffusion and internal ambidexterity, which encapsulate the effects of on-going engagement in open communication inside organisations. At a more practical level, the paper offers an informed view of the type of changes driven by social media to communication practices in a more connected and fluid organisational environment.

10. References