

Chapter 4

Organizing, Organizations, and the Role of Social Media Conversations

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ABSTRACT

This chapter traces the concept of organizational identity in organization theory and places it in the social media context. It proposes that organizational communication theories intellectually based in the “linguistic turn” (e.g., the Montreal School Approach to how communication constitutes organizations, communicative theory of the firm) are well positioned to illuminate the constitutive capabilities of identity-bound interaction on social media. It suggests that social media is more than another organizational tool for communication with stakeholders in that it affords interactants the opportunity to negotiate foundational organizational practices: organizational identity, boundaries, and membership, in public. In this negotiative process, the organizing role of the stakeholder is emphasized and legitimized by organizational participation and engagement on social media platforms. The Montreal School Approach’s conversation–text dialectic and the communicative theory of the firm’s conceptualization of organizations as social, are two useful concepts when making sense of organization–stakeholder interaction in the social media context.

INTRODUCTION

This essay frames organization–stakeholder conversations on social networking platforms as organizational communication. While popular media examples of organizations and their brands failing and winning at social media conversations abound, theoretical and empirical insight into the organizational practices and processes contributing to and stemming from these failings and successes is more difficult to find. Based on the premise that social media provide organizations with a tool for communication with various stakeholders, the author interrogates notions of organizing, identity, organizational boundaries, and membership. By doing so, the author examines the boundaries of the organizational communication

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-2823-4.ch004

discipline and suggests that researchers should move beyond the container metaphor and ought to look at how stakeholder interaction on social media platforms influences organizational processes.

Organizational identity as practice (Carlsen, 2006) helps explain how structural and communicative characteristics and affordances of the social media impact organizing. Specifically, external organizational stakeholders have the communicative power to constitute an organization's identity through online conversations by incenting organizational action. To some extent the effects of this communicative power might only be facilitated by social media platforms, not created completely anew. Researchers do not appear to understand or even pay attention to how social media contributes to the communicative constitution of the organization. This essay interrogates these processes and in doing so, provides suggestions for future research.

BACKGROUND

More broadly, social media platforms are defined by interactivity and participation, giving rise to a more participatory audience and eventually, a participatory culture (see, Jenkins, 2006, 2012; Jenkins, Purushotma, Weigel, Clinton, & Robison, 2009). Originally related to fandom, participation through and on social media platforms by various organizational stakeholders presents if not new, then differently contextualized challenges for organizing. Social media has a unique combination of affordances that function simultaneously (Scott & Orlikowski, 2012), and how well organizations and stakeholders understand their function determines the successful utilization of social media platforms for the various purposes of organizing.

Branding social media “blunders” have become de rigueur in popular media news—the now numerous occasions of organizations posting the wrong thing online, or alternatively, not commenting, when they perhaps should. Conversations carried out by J.P. Morgan Chase, Kmart, Home Depot, HMV, DiGiorno Pizza and the hashtags #askJPM, and #WhyIStayed present just a few examples of social media strategy gone wrong (Feloni, 2013; Griner, 2014). Then there are the organizations such as TacoBell and Oreo have become famous for their excellent conversational skills on various social networks (Abramovich, 2013; Watercutter, 2013). Organizational blunders and successes on social media platforms exist because of the various digital stakeholders, a multitude of voices, participating in interaction with said brands and communicatively *creating* failure and success.

Communication as constitutive force is prominent in the social media context, making the Montreal School of organizational communication's conceptualization of the conversation–text dialectic (Taylor & Van Every, 2000; Putnam, 2013) a useful framework. Social media discourse, involves ongoing interactivity characterized by many-to-many communication between companies and stakeholders, as well as between stakeholders themselves (Goldfarb & Tucker, 2011). Interactivity refers to the degree to which two or more communicative parties can act on each other and the degree to which such influences are synchronized (Liu & Shrum, 2002). The ongoing interaction characteristic of social networking platforms is a process of negotiation in the form of conversations. The underlying negotiation is most apparent since organizations often engage with conflicting internal and external stakeholders.

For the purposes of this essay, a stakeholder is someone who has an interest in the organization sufficient to prompt (digital) interaction where the interaction might be of supporting or conflicting nature but is no less directed at the organization. The definition is purposefully broad, because it attempts to account for a wide range of communicative processes overlooked in a more traditional understanding

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