Thesis Proposal

Coworkers as communicators on internal social media

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1. Introduction to the thesis proposal

The work on this project started in September 2013, when I was employed as a PhD student at BCOM, BSS, AU for a period of three years. The purpose of this Thesis Proposal is to present the current state of my research, which investigates coworkers as communicators on internal social media. The PhD dissertation will be an article based dissertation, comprising of three articles. The first article is part of this TP (cf. appendix 2). During the first year I have reviewed literature on internal social media and organizational communication, conducted a pilot study within ten organizations and written my first article, that is going to be submitted to CCIJ this autumn.

The thesis proposal is structured in the following way: After a short introduction to the overall research topic “Coworkers as communicators on internal social media”, the purpose of my thesis and research questions are presented, followed by a clarification of the two central concepts: internal social media and coworker. In the next section I briefly present my research position, the research design, and a delimitation of the research topic. Then I present my theoretical framework, followed by a detailed review of organizational communication from a coworker perspective, and a shorter overview of how I intend to use the concept of the rhetorical arena (inspired by crisis communication theory) to understand communication on internal social media. In the final section I make a short overview of presumed content and interrelations between the three articles of the thesis, and some concluding remarks.

I have attached a draft of my first article as appendix 2, and it is my hope that the TP committee will read the article. It will give an overview of my work within the first year of my PhD, and at the same time it will give an insight into the results from my first explorative study and my review of research on internal social media.

In order to show my plans for the next two years I have attached an appendix (appendix 1) describing my research process and activities as participation in PhD-courses and teaching.

2. Research topic and contribution to the field

“Horizontal (and “informal”) communication will become crucial, perhaps more important than downward or upward.” (Redding, 1972:486)

The intention of the PhD project is to create an insight and understanding of the phenomena internal social media as well as coworkers as communicators, because more and more organizations introduce internal social media, and coworkers as communicators are becoming still more crucial for organizations. The two areas are linked together, since internal social media provide a communication arena and a communication opportunity for coworkers, which they have not had before (Treem and Leonardi, 2012) and at the same time the role of coworkers has changed. Coworkers have become more self-dependent (Heide and Simonsson, 2011:204), and the perception of them in organizational communication has changed from perceiving them as passive receivers of communication to active communicators (Mazzei, 2010; Heide and Simonsson, 2011).

The phenomenon internal social media is interesting in several ways. Firstly internal social media facilitates horizontal communication between coworkers, because coworkers can communicate and connect with each other. So far most studies of internal communication have been concerned with superior-subordinate communication (Sias, 2013), and therefore internal social media can give an insight into communication between coworkers and develop theories about internal communication.
Secondly, communication on internal social media is visible to everyone in the organization, and it is not edited by anyone before it is published. All organizational members have in this way an unfiltered access to communicating to everyone. It is interesting to study what happens, when coworkers have this opportunity, and the visibility allow researchers to study communication between coworkers involving memberships negotiation, self-structuring, institutional positioning and activity coordination, the four flows suggested by McPhee and Zaug (2000), and in this way internal social media makes it possible to study a fragment of how communication constitute organizations. Thirdly, the style of communicating and the content of communication on internal social media is another area of interest. Does it add another dimension to internal communication or is it just another internal channel such as e-mail or intranet?

Fourthly, the phenomenon highlights that coworkers have different communication behavior and different motives for communicating or keeping silent on internal social media. Finally it raises some questions in relation to power and organizational structure. Does communication on internal social media change the professional and personal relationship between organizational members, and does it change power processes in the organization?

Treem and Leonardi (2012) claim that internal social media has a potential to change organizational communication, since it can alter socialization, information sharing and power processes in organizations, and I am interested in investigating whether and to which extent organizations with internal social media use the potential, how they use the communication platform and for what purposes? (See my first article for an elaboration for the motivation for studying internal social media). This change in internal communication is relevant to study, since effective internal communication is often seen as a prerequisite for organizational success (Ruck and Welch, 2012), and very little research have looked at communication on internal social media (Heide and Simonsson 2011, Treem and Leonardi 2012, Koch, Gonzalez and Leidner 2012), including coworkers as communicators (Sias, 2013) and the role of internal social media in internal communication (Ruck and Welch, 2012).

The project will in this respect address a gap in organizational communication, and the contribution of the project is twofold. It will help practitioners understand the phenomenon internal social media and provide insights into, what it takes to introduce internal social media. Theoretically it will develop the research field of superior/subordinate communication to include communication between coworkers as well as provide insights into the collaborative turn in organizational communication by looking at coworkers as communicators and how communication on internal social media constitutes organizations.

2.1. Purpose and research questions

The purpose of my project is to explore coworkers communication on internal social media in order to describe and understand coworkers as communicators. Furthermore the purpose is to discuss the circumstances under which social media in internal communication is used and discuss whether it changes communications practices and the understanding of internal communication.

Specifically, I want to address the following research questions:

1. How and why do coworkers communicate on internal social media?
2. What characterizes communication on internal social media?
3. Does internal social media change the role of coworkers as communicators?
It is my ambition to some extent to build new theory about communication on internal social media and coworkers as communicators.

2.2. Two central concepts – internal social media and coworker

Before presenting the research design two central concepts in the Thesis Proposal are defined – internal social media and coworker. Within the field of information technology the term “Enterprise social media” is used and Leonardi, Huysman and Steinfield (2013) define it as:

"Web-based platforms that allow workers to (1) communicate messages with specific coworkers or broadcast messages to everyone in the organization; (2) explicitly indicate or implicitly reveal particular coworkers as communication partners; (3) post, edit, and sort text and files linked to themselves or others; and (4) view the messages, connections, text, and files communicated, posted, edited and sorted by anyone else in the organization at any time of their choosing."

Inspired by this definition, I have elaborated a definition of internal social media, which takes a communication perspective and focus on internal social media:

"Internal social media is an easy accessible and visible webbased rhetorical sub-arena inside the organization, where coworkers and managers can communicate, connect and make sense of their work and organizational life."

The concept of coworker replaces the term employee to indicates that in post bureaucratic organizations coworkers are no longer viewed as passive subordinate workers or employees but as active communicators who can influence and change the organization. The word “employee” focus on the relation between the individual person, the manager and the organization, whereas “coworker” indicate a more holistic approach, where the relation to other coworkers are more or just as important as the relation to the manager and the organization. Employees are attached to the organization. Communication by coworkers is the organization. Today coworkers communication roles “are broader and more consequential than the roles they have traditionally been given” (Heide and Simonsson, 2011). You could say that the attitude has changed from workers needing a job to earn money, to employees taking on the identity of the organization in an almost lifelong relation to coworkers, acting as free agents, changing jobs from time to time to contribute with their knowledge for the sake of both the organization and themselves. Coworkership is closely related to the Communication Constitute Organization (CCO) perspective (Heide and Simonsson, 2011). In CCO organizing is understood as local and emergent processes, and these processes start with coworkers communicating with each other.

3. Research design

Before I describe my research design, I will briefly establish my position as a researcher.

3.1. Research position

As a researcher I place my self within the interpretive paradigm (Burell and Morgan, 1979) and I view myself as a moderate social constructivist (Wenneberg, 2000). I believe organizations are continuously socially constructed in people's interactions with each other and the physical objects around them. My interest is focused on the process of organizing to use Karl Weick's terminology (Weick, 1979). The organization is not a stable entity but a collection of people making sense of communication and activities in the organization. In
line with my position as a social constructivist I take a CCO-perspective, communication constitutes organizations (Putnam, 2009), on organizational communication.

As a social constructivist I am aware that as a researcher I construct my findings. I decide which questions to ask when I interview, and I select which data to focus on and I interpret the data based on my own previous understandings, my research questions and selected theories. So when I interview an internal social media coordinator or a coworker, they first interpret and make sense of their own communication on internal social media and afterwards I interpret and make sense of their interpretations. In this way my findings are socially constructed. They are not fictitious, but another research question and another slice of data could highlight other findings or themes.

My research position will be elaborated in the final dissertation, and my CCO-perspective on coworkers as communicators will be developed in the theoretical framework.

3.2. Research strategy - methodology
The research strategy is to conduct explorative qualitative case studies in order to understand the phenomenon internal social media. It is appropriate to build theory from case studies, when there is very little research within the field (Eisenhardt, 1989). The approach is grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), and qualitative data will be collected. In the first article (cf. app. 2), I describe in detail how the research is conducted, so the reader can make his or her own conclusions about the quality of the research. Case studies are criticized for being biased and subjective, since it is not possible to generalize on the grounds of a case study (Eisenhardt, 1989). However case studies is one of the best ways to build new theory, since it is “deeply embedded in rich empirical data”, and it is “likely to produce theory that is accurate, interesting and testable” (Eisenhardt, 1989:25-26). The explorative research will consist of two sets of studies.

1. An explorative pilot study with internal social media coordinators in ten organizations
2. An explorative single case study of coworkers communication on internal social media, where I will collect data in two ways:
   a. A netnographic study of communication on internal social media
   b. Interviews with coworkers about their communication behavior on internal social media

3.3. The pilot study
Since very few studies have looked at coworkers as communicators on internal social media an explorative study (Yin, 2014) was conducted to get an initial understanding of how and why coworkers communicate on internal social media. Internal social media coordinators in ten organizations were interviewed about their perceptions of coworkers as communicators on internal social media. The idea was to get a direction for the project and future research. My reflections about my selection of the cases and my bias about the perceptions of internal social media coordinators are presented in the first article (cf. app. 2).

3.4. An explorative single case study with two sets of data
The initial findings in the pilot study will be explored in a single case study (Yin, 2014). A single case study can richly describe the existence of a phenomenon (Siggelkow, 2007) and "elevates a view of life in its complexity" (Thomas, 2011:ix). A case organization has accepted to be part of the research project, and I have started to collect the first data. The
case was selected on the basis of the criteria intensity (Neergaard, 2007:28), and it could be considered a key case (Thomas, 2011:77) or even an extreme example (Eisenhardt, 1989). The organization has just received the digital communication award 2014 in Berlin for best internal communication, and the organization has many years of experience with letting coworkers communicate with management and each other in an open discussion forum on the intranet. The culture and the management in the organization have for many years encouraged open communication, and coworkers are known for voicing opinions on both work-related and organizational matters in the discussion forum. The organization has in spring 2014 introduced a new intranet technology with social media features (Sharepoint 2013) and according to the perception of the internal social media coordinator, they have continued the open communication and have benefitted from using the additional social media features. The case study therefore gives a good opportunity to explore communication on internal social media.

In the case organization an explorative study will be conducted in autumn 2014 and autumn 2015, where I investigate the actual communication on internal social media and coworkers perceptions and motives for communicating. The study will consists of the following three steps:

### 3.4.1. A study of coworkers communication and communication behavior

During three months in autumn 2014 I conduct a netnographic study (Kozinets, 2002; 2010) of the communication on internal social media in the selected case organization. Netnography is an ethnographic method applied to the study of online communities to understand and analyze conversations and networks online. It has mainly been used to study online communities, and internal social media could be perceived to be an online community behind the firewall. Netnography is naturalistic and unobtrusive (Kozinets, 2010:56), meaning that my presence as a researcher does not affect the data. An option in netnography is to participate in conversations online (Kozinets, 2010), but it does not make sense in this study, since I am interested in communication between coworkers, and not between coworkers and an outsider. Besides the organization has not given me free access to their intranet and internal social media. A contact person in the organization downloads screen dumps of conversations on internal social media during the selected period. I visit the organization and the contact person every two weeks to examine communication during the last two weeks to choose, which communication I will like to include in the study. I use the screen dumps to explore what coworkers communicate about, how they communicate, how conversations develop and who communicates with whom.

After 14 days I made a sequence analysis (Eisenhardt, 1989) to try to analyze the content so far and to start creating patterns, and to adjust or change the collection of data, if it makes sense. This process is repeated again after one month, a month and a half, two months, two months and half and then finally after three months.

### 3.4.2. A study of motives and thoughts behind the communication

At the end of the three months or just after I will interview 10 to 15 coworkers until I reach a point of saturation (Eisenhardt, 1989) to explore their motives for communicating or remaining silent. The coworkers will be purposefully selected (Neergaard, 2007) combined with convenience. From my study of the screen dumps with communication on internal social media, I will try to identify different kinds of communicative behavior, like Brandtzaeg and Heims (2011) five distinct user types found in closed social networks: Sporadics, lurkers, socialisers, debaters and actives or other kinds of communicative behavior, present in the single case organization. The identification of different kinds of behavior, I will use to find out which coworkers I want to interview. I want to interview
 coworkers representing very different kinds of behavior to get as wide a variation of behavior as possible.

3.4.3. An update after one year
The present internal social media technology was introduced in spring 2014, and the pilot study has shown that coworker communicative behavior is likely to change over time (cf. app 2). Either the technology becomes a natural way of working or it might turn out to be less successful and even be abandoned. In autumn 2015 the organization will collect screen dumps of conversations for one month, so I can explore whether the conversations are the same type of conversations as the previous year or whether they have developed or changed. If I find a big difference, I will collect screen dumps for another month or two. Again, I will interview 5 to 10 coworkers until I reach a point of saturation (Eisenhardt, 1989) to explore if and how their perceptions have changed.

3.5. Three challenges when collecting the data
Since I have a grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) approach, I will enter the organization with an open mind and start to collect data. It will be an iterative process where I constantly pend between data and literature. Collecting data is a matter of making choices about which data to select, and so far I can see three challenges when collecting data about communication on internal social media in the case organization.

The first challenge is to delimit internal social media within the organization. The organization has an intranet, which integrates many different social features. Coworkers can create news, upload a video and start a discussion in the discussion forum as well as comment on all news, discussions, videos and blogs. I have to make a decision about which social tools to include and exclude in my research once I have observed them. Kozinets (2002) suggests to include all data to begin with, and afterwards concentrate on the content relating to the research questions. Since I am primarily interested in coworkers as communicators, I will initially concentrate on the social tools, where coworkers can initiate a professional or social conversation, like uploading a video, starting a discussion in the discussion forum and create a news item, while the centralized channels like corporate news, the daily news video and a managers blog will not be studied.

The second challenge is how much data to collect. It could make sense to get a general picture of the internal communication and gather data from all the internal communication channels. In this way I can compare communication on internal social media with other kinds of internal communication to find out if they are similar or different, and in the last case how they differ from each other. However the amount of internal communication is huge and instead I will select significant communication situations and in this way select cases within the case and see how they are presented, discussed and perceived across the different channels. The advantage of collecting multiple data is that it provides a stronger substantiation of constructs (Eisenhardt, 1989).

The third challenge is the selection of coworkers. The initial idea is to select coworkers who display very different kinds of communicative behavior – from very active to more passive. Another consideration is to interview coworkers in different job positions and locations or a mixture of the two. In some way I will try to see if it is possible to combine the considerations, so that I will primarily interview coworkers representing different kinds of communication behavior, secondly coworkers representing different job positions and thirdly coworkers from different locations. The variation gives me an opportunity to identify different kinds of communicative behavior, common patterns across differences as well noticing issues relating to different job positions and locations.
3.6. Ethical netnography and confidentiality
Conducting case studies and netnographic research involve reflections about how to collect data without harming anyone (Thomas, 2011; Kozinets, 2002; 2010). In the single case study I have to consider how I report my findings without compromising any coworker or the organization. All the published postings will be approved by the organization, which we have agreed on by signing a confidentiality contract. Since I only follow, but do not participate in their internal social media, I act as a ”professional lurker“ (Kozinets, 2002), and since the organization has to approve all the data I publish, it could be characterized as ”informed consent“ (Thomas 2011:69-70).

3.7. Delimitation of research field
As mentioned earlier the phenomenon internal social media raises a lot of questions and open several paths to research. I have chosen to take a coworker perspective, meaning that I investigate coworkers as communicators on internal social media. In this respect my focus is on the horizontal communication. However I will use literature on superior/subordinate communication as an inspiration to identify relevant themes, when people communicate with each other and see if there are differences or similarities, when it comes to coworkers communicating with each other.

Another relevant focus could have been manager communication on internal social media and how their role as communicator changes with the introduction of internal social media. Internal social media can also be used as part of a change management process. But again this is beyond the scope of my research. I am not concerned with management communication.

4. Theoretical framework
The first year I have used to decide and clarify my theoretical framework. I use organizational communication as both a lens (big theory or meta theory) to look through and as a research tradition to draw middle range theories from. I build on existing literature about internal social media, which mainly comes from a technological perspective. I use theories about social media, especially theories about different typologies of behavior (Nielsen, 2007; Brandtzaeg and Heim, 2011; Agerdal-Hjermind, 2014; Li and Bernoff, 2009), and the concept of materiality or sociomateriality (Orlikowski, 1992, 2007; Leonardi, 2009), to understand how the interpretation of technology influences the use of it. The three sets of theories I place under the label media and communication technology, but you could also argue that they belong to organizational communication. Finally I have used the rhetorical arena theory and the multi-vocal approach (Johansen and Frandsen, 2007; Frandsen and Johansen, 2011; Coombs and Holladay, 2014), from the field of crisis communication within corporate communication. To illustrate my theoretical framework I have made the following illustration:
4.1. Organizational communication as a research tradition and a lens

The project is seen through a CCO-perspective, and it is situated within organizational communication. In order to understand organizational communication and the CCO-perspective, the changing perception of organizational communication and coworkers role in organizations since the beginning of last century are reviewed.

The review is structured around decisive times in the history of the field. It starts with the understanding of communication in early organizational studies in the beginning of the 20th century and after the influence from the human relations movement, also called the seminal years (Redding, 1985). Then the crossroads in the history of organizational communication mentioned by Taylors (2013) is followed with stops around 1972, 1981, 2000 and 2013, plus an additional minor stop in 2009.

The review implies a kind of linear development. But communication theory doesn’t develop in a linear and rational way. As Craig (1999) points out communication theory is not a coherent field. He describes seven different traditions and trace their roots, some to the old Greeks others to the 1950s and argue that they co-exit. He does though make a distinction between empirical-scientific and critical-interpretive approaches (Craig, 2013), which tends to polarize studies of communication.

Figure 1: Theoretical framework
4.1.1. Communication in early organizational studies
Organizational communication became a field in the 1950s, but Tompkins (1984) finds that the concepts and theories of classical writers on organizations have influenced the studies of organizational communication. Fayol, Taylor and Weber perceived communication as an instrument to achieve a more effective organization, and it has since been known as the transmission paradigm (Redding, 1972). The concept “worker” was used and it sends a clear signal. They were there to get a job done.

The human relation movement changed the perception of workers. In a first book about organizational communication “Sharing information with employees” (1942) Alexander R. Heron addresses the question of internal communication in organizations in terms of what information to share, the reason for doing it and the characteristics of the different internal communication channels. He points out that managers cannot just transfer information to employees about how to do their jobs since it will not encourage them to do their best (Heron, 1942: 34). Managers had to share information and facts about the organization, the products and the financial situation in order to create an understanding of their own role in the organization and how they were contributing to the success of the organization (Heron, 1942: 55). He even wanted employees to ask questions about the information since it would indicate an active rather than a passive reception of the information (Heron, 1942: 181).

The human relation movement still aimed at creating an effective organization. Employees should be informed, if it could create a more effective organization, and managers needed some input from employees if they wanted to improve the organization (Tompkins, 1984). Attention was drawn to a two-way communication between superior and subordinate. Not as a mean of involving coworkers but as a way of meeting employees social needs by listening to them and creating a communication climate that facilitated communication upwards (Tompkins, 1984) or a way of making sure that the employees had understood the information. Subordinates could communicate upward but only if the manager had the ability to listen. In other words the human relation movement advocated for a two-way asymmetrical communication.

Four research “traditions” developed out of the human relations tradition. It was communications channels, communication climate, network analysis and superior-subordinate communication (Putnam and Cheney, 1985). The four research traditions are all to some extend relevant to my research project.

4.1.2. The open system perspective (1966 - 1972)
In the first comprehensive and detailed review of existing literature on communication in organizations Charles Redding (1972) changed the focus of communication studies from the sender of a message to the receiver. He points out that a sender cannot transfer a meaning. The meaning is created in the mind of the receiver (Redding, 1972:27), and only the message, which is understood, counts. He also postulates that everything communicates, including furniture, silence and action. His conclusion is “it is impossible not to communicate” (Redding, 1972: 30).

Redding builds on Katz and Kahns (1966;1978) perception of organizations as open systems (Redding, 1972: 483), and finds that the organization adapts and reacts to influences from the outside world. The organization is perceived as a container within which communication occur. Redding’s (1972) main concern is the “organizational climate” which shapes the interpretation of the communication. In other words the perception of the communication is influenced by assumptions and attitudes within management and the organization (Redding, 1972:111). The main point with the book is that the total managerial climate is more important than any communication technique or management style.
Redding (1972) has a chapter about participative decision-making and views communication as a central feature of participation. He distinguishes between "pseudo-participation" and "real participation" (Redding, 1972:177), claiming that employees can tell the difference. The incentive behind participative decision-making is to create more effective organizations. Redding cites studies, which find that heterogeneous groups produce more high quality decisions as well as groups characterized by dissent views (Redding, 1972: 205).

Redding predict that horizontal communication will become much more important in the future than upward/downward communication. In this situation it becomes relevant to look at internal networks and the most influential employees so called gatekeepers and linkers, who facilitate or stop the flow of information (Redding 1972:491).

Heron (1942) and Redding (1972) raises some relevant issues in relation to studying communication on internal social media. The communication climate makes a difference, the receiver creates the meaning, everything communicates and employees can tell the difference between pseudo and real participation. This means that communication on internal social media will be influenced by the communication climate in the organization, the organizations can not control communication on internal social media, since coworkers create their own meaning, and managers refraining from communicating on internal social media is a communication in itself, and finally managers really have to wish to involve coworkers in communication on internal social media, otherwise coworkers will not communicate. They can sense, if managers are not willing to listen.

4.1.3. The linguistic turn in 1981
Redding's interest in the communication climate and Katz and Kahns concern with organizations as open systems were the first signs of understanding organizational communication in a new way. Then Burell and Morgan (1979) launched the idea of a functionalistic and interpretivistic paradigm, and Karl Weick presented his idea of organization as processes of organizing instead of being a psychical object or system (Weick, 1979). The two sources were a big inspiration for scholars within organizational communication, and in 1981 a seminar in Alta, Utah, USA gathered scholars who supported the new paradigm. It was called “First Annual Conference on Interpretive Approaches to Organizational Communication” and it has since then been known as the event that introduced the linguistic turn in organizational communication.

The presentations from the Alta seminar were collected by Putnam and Pacanowsky in “Communication and organizations – An interpretive Approach” (1983). The book tries to present a comprehensive understanding of the interpretive paradigm in relation to communication. The best overview is given in a paper by Linda Putnam, where she describes the interpretive perspective as an alternative to functionalism. The mechanistic way of thinking about communication from the beginning of the century is characterized by thinking of communication as an objective transmission of messages and the study of communication show how it causally hangs together in a logical chain. As a contrast the interpretive paradigm experiences meanings as happening in the interaction between people and they are subjective, intersubjective and socially constructed (Putnam, 1983). Therefore it is not possible to present one way of understanding an event. There will be several understandings and they can be from both managers and employees perspectives.

The interpretive approach however is not a unified way of understanding organizing. Fundamentally there are two traditions within the paradigm - the naturalistic and the critical tradition. Linda Putnam sketches the differences between the two and in other chapters in the collection of papers different scholars like Bantz (1983) and Deetz (1983) explain the traditions more in detail. Scholars in the naturalistic tradition are interested in understanding how organizing is socially constructed through the words,
symbols and behaviors of organizational members (Putnam 1983:35). In other words they are interested in the micro level of organizing. The critical tradition has the intention to expose power relations and the economic situation and it is more concerned with the macro level of organizations and society. Both traditions perceive language and discourse to take on a muscular and defining role in constructing reality (Putnam and Mumby, 2013:5).

With the linguistic turn in organizational communication employees are seen as more influential than in prior understandings of organizational communication. The employees represent a plurality of interpretations that help constitute the organization. But the collection of essays has very few indications of how it happens in practice and how the individual employee as a communicator should be perceived. The general argument in the papers is that when organizations are treated as a social construction of reality, organizing becomes a process of communicating (Johnson, 1977; Putnam, 1982, cited in Putnam and Mumby, 2013).

4.1.4. Communication constitutes organizations (1996-2001)

The linguistic turn has since been criticized by Deetz (1996) for creating an artificial distinction between the functionalist and interpretivist paradigm. The first one is seen as an objective way of approaching organizations and the other as a subjective way and in reality the functionalist approach is just as subjective. In the same way quantitative research is seen as more objective than qualitative research and again Deetz (1996) claim the distinction is fictitious. Both approaches are equally subjective or objective. Instead of paradigms Deetz prefer to talk about four different orientations, where scholars borrow from the different orientations when it suits their purpose (Deetz 1996:199).

Mumby and Stohl (1996) acknowledge the fragmentation of the field organizational communication, but they claim that the objects of study hold the field together. Many organizational studies focus on managerial voice in organizations whereas Mumby and Stohl (1996) claim that organizational communication scholars provide insights into traditionally marginalized groups or forms of organizing, like women and different ethnic groups. Furthermore they point at four central problematics for organizational communication scholars. The problematics are voice, rationality, organization and organization-society relationship. Especially the topic of voice is relevant in relation to understanding coworkers as communicators, because it tries to understand motives for voicing or not voicing an opinion. The theories mainly looks at voicing an opinion towards management, but it is also relevant in relation to coworkers.

Since the interpretivist perspective was introduced, organizational communication scholars have been occupied with how they should study the plurality of organizations and how organizing actually happens. The micro level of the naturalistic tradition had difficulties in reaching the macro level of the critical tradition and the idea of communication as constitutive of organizing (Mumby and Stohl, 1996) was rather abstract and therefore McPhee and Zaug (2000) introduced a four flow model to explain how communication constitute organizations. The four flows are memberships negotiation, self-structuring, institutional positioning and activity coordination (McPhee and Zaug, 2000: 7). They argue that the four flows needs to be present before we can call something an organization. In relation to this project the four flows could all be present in communication on internal social media. Newcomers use internal social media to get to know and become part of the organization (Koch, Gonzalez and Leidner, 2012). Coworkers use internal social media to structure or rather communicate about their work and to coordinate activities with other coworkers, and finally the organization can position itself just by using internal social media. Whether the four flows are present on internal social media is so far only guesswork, and my research will shed more light on it.
4.1.5 Institutionalizing the CCO-principle (2009)

The four flows model has been very influential. In “Building Theories of organizations. The Constitutive role of communication” (Putnam and Nicotera, 2009) the big issue is how communication constitute organizations. Rather than seeing organizations as a social phenomenon, they approach the communication-organization relationship by treating organizations as conversations and texts. They all relate to McPhee and Zaug (2000) four flows model either by using, extending or criticizing it.

Another approach to how communication constitutes organization is introduced by The Montreal School with the concept of objects, sites and bodies. Objects are simultaneously material and ideational, and they develop through human-object interaction (Ashcraft, Kuhn and Cooren, 2009: 29), and it is another way of saying that everything communicates, including technology. Meaning that internal social media in an organization is not a neutral work tool, the existence of it communicates in itself. Internally the introduction of internal social media can send a signal to coworkers, that the organization is willing to listen to them or that it is considered work to share knowledge and answer questions. Externally the introduction can send a signal that the organization is a front runner and an innovative organization. The notion of sites refers to the psychological and physical context within which organizing and communication occur. To some extent it is an extension of the concept of organizational climate. Bodies are understood as the bodies actually communicating and how it influences what is being communicated. The Montreal School also presented a new definition of communication and by focusing on symbols in use they place communication in space and time (Ashcraft, Kuhn and Cooren, 2009: 22-23) and thereby making the definition more process-oriented.

From a CCO-perspective coworkers have a voice and their communication makes a difference, since “organizations are materialized through coworkers conversations and their texts” (Heide and Simonsson, 2011:203). However their communication is influenced by what was formerly known as the organizational climate. The four flow model points out that everything communicates and just by being and acting in an organization, coworkers communicate and are part of the process constituting the organization. Coworkers are seen as active communicators. They communicate not only with the words they utter, but the way they act, work with others and perceive of themselves in relation to the organization. You could argue though that a lot of their communication is unintentional or unconscious, so they are viewed as active but not proactive communicators.

4.1.6 The collaborative turn

In the introduction to The SAGE Handbook of Organizational Communication (2013) Putnam and Mumby (2013) announce that chapters in the new edition embrace new understandings of the communication-organization relationship reflecting the post bureaucratic way of organizing and a development of the CCO-principle. Brumanns, Cooren and Taylor (2013:173) describe three different approaches, which try to make the CCO-principle more concrete. McPhee and Zaug four flows model mentioned earlier, The Montreal School with Taylors dynamics of four translations and finally Luhmanns systems approach. They claim that McPhee and Zaug four flows model creates deductive research whereas the Montreal school has an inductive approach. The four flows model has already been explained and in the following the Montreal school and the Luhmann perspective will be described.

At the core of the Montreal School is Taylors four-translation image of organizational communication (Brummans, Cooren, Robichaud and Taylor, 2013:177). The four translations are organizations as network of practices and conversations, collective experience through distanciation, authoring through textualization and representation and
presentation. According to them translations do more than involve changes from one position to the other. “A focus on translation foregrounds the inductive stitching together of a multiverse of communicative practices that scale up to compose an organization, then to constitute it as a person” (Brummans, Cooren, Robichaud and Taylor, 2013:177). Especially the translation of organizations as network of practices and communication are relevant to the study of coworkers communication on internal social media, since internal social media could be perceived as a network.

The Luhmann view is that an organization is nothing but a communication system, (Brummans, Cooren, Robichaud and Taylor, 2013:186) and organizations are networks of communication episodes. Luhmann sees life as an emergent reality, which starts with communication, and in his view communication is a synthesis of three selections, selection of information, selection of utterance and a selection of understanding or misunderstanding (Luhmann, 1992). Again a relevant approach when trying to understand communication on internal social media. A coworker has some information, he or she can choose to communicate a selection of it on internal social media, and other coworkers can understand, misunderstand or not understand the information. According to Luhmann the crucial aspect in this process is the value of the information and the reason for uttering it (Luhmann, 1992).

Deetz and Eger (2013) claims that in communication studies the linguistic turn has been replaced by a collaborative turn. Scholars are no longer interested in information and control, but in collaboration and emergent forms of decision making (Deetz and Eger, 2013:43). When we live in an interdependent world, meta-problems like the climate and HIV are a communal issue. This is also the case at the organizational level, where coworkers have to collaborate to constitute the organizations and to come up with the best solutions. Deetz and Eger (2013) suggestion of a collaborative turn are in line with Taylor (2013:209), who finds that organizational communication is now at a new crossroad, where the focus is shifting towards viewing relations as a primacy of organizing, and he proposes a new slogan: “It All Begins and Ends as a Relationship, in a Context” (Taylor, 2013:20).

When relations and collaboration are central to organizing, leadership communication is no longer centered on the leader’s ability to communicate. Leadership is more seen as socially constructed and the focus shifts towards making sense and the management of meaning. In other words managers are concerned with how they can direct or control the understanding of information flowing around in the organization. (Putnam and Mumby, 2013). A difficult task, when leadership and the relationship between leader and member are (re)produced in communication between leader and member (Sias, 2013: 379). In this perspective coworker communication becomes a key site of sensemaking (Sias, 2013:383).

The three different approaches to the CCO principle view the coworker as a communicator in different ways but regardless of the different approaches the individual coworker as a communicator is regarded as central to constituting the organization. Coworkers are very much active communicators, and their communication make a difference and the collaborative turn reflects that meaning is constituted in the relation between people in the organization.

The presentation of organizational communication and the changing perceptions of coworkers and their roles as communicators gives an insight into the CCO-principle, which is the lens of my project and it present different research traditions within organizational communication, that I can draw on in my research. However I lack literature that can shed light on the actual communication on internal social media, and here I will draw on research on crisis communication.
4.2. Understanding internal social media as a rhetorical sub-arena

Research traditions within organizational communication have mainly been concerned with senders and receivers of communication, reflected in the classic communication model within the transmission and interaction paradigm. The models do not grasp communication on internal social media, which is much more multidirectional. In the field of crisis communication Frandsen and Johansen (2007) have established a rhetorical arena theory (RAT), and introduced a rhetorical arena model to move the understanding of communication into a “third step” (Frandsen and Johansen, 2010:430), or a complexity paradigm (Frandsen and Johansen, 2007). The field has inspired me, since the multivocal aspect make sense, when I try to understand communication on internal social media.

The concept of the rhetorical arena introduces a space, where actors and voices act, when a crisis opens up (Johansen and Frandsen, 2007). Voices can choose to enter the arena or can be forced to do so. The strength of the model is its multivocal approach (Frandsen and Johansen, 2010; Coombs and Holladay, 2014), where communication around a crisis is produced by a multitude of senders and receivers. The rhetorical arena model recognizes that receivers of crisis communication are as much interpreting and sending communication and they can have a major influence on the interpretations of the crisis. In other words the organizational voice is not the only voice, and the organization can not control the rhetorical arena.

In a similar stream Louma-aho and Vos (2010) talk about issue arenas in corporate communication, places of interaction where different stakeholders communicate about an issue. The issue arena has a similar dynamic to the rhetorical arena, but the concept of “rhetorical” is more suitable to understand communication on internal social media, since coworkers have different motives for communicating.

The multivocal aspect has been used in an organizational communication context by Aggerholm, Asmuss and Thomsen (2012). They describe it in the following way:

“The multivocal setting is a metaphor of the situated context in which the various organizational actors act, communicate, and encompass sender and receiver communication, in that actors continuously assume both roles and enter into relations with one another as they communicate to, with, against, about and past each other – resulting in multivocality” (Aggerholm, Asmuss and Thomsen, 2012).

The metaphor of the rhetorical arena can be transferred to understand internal communication in post-bureaucratic organizations, since organizations have no voice of their own (Christensen and Cornelissen, 2010: 19), but emerges from, or are constituted in a multiplicity of voices. The difference between the rhetorical arena in a crisis and in an organization is that the first one opens up around a crisis, whereas I assume an internal rhetorical arena will consist of a string of conversations about different topics and issues, which will pop up in waves.

Internal social media is part of the internal rhetorical arena, and it can be seen as a rhetorical sub-arena (Coombs and Holladay, 2014), which might have a little or a huge impact on the internal rhetorical arena. Coombs and Holladay (2014) argue that each different social media channel could be seen as a sub-arena, and that could be the case for the different internal social media channels in an organization depending on how separate or interrelated they are. Different coworkers will have different preferences in terms of media use, and therefore different kinds of sub-arenas might emerge around the different social media platforms.

The rhetorical arena model in crisis communication has a macro level, which maps out the key voices involved in a crisis communication and the relationship between them, and it has a micro level of analysis, which takes four parameters into account: context, media, genre and text (Johansen and Frandsen, 2007). At the macro level applying the concept of the rhetorical arena to internal social media can give insights into the different
voices in the sub-arena and their relations to each other. Voice in this context is understood as "discretionary communication of ideas, suggestions, concerns, or opinions about work-related issues with the intent to improve organizational or unit functioning" (Morrison, 2011). The rhetorical arena is assumed to host coworker voices and conversations between coworkers, since horizontal communication is likely to flow easier than the vertical communication (Kassing, 2011). They will not all join in the same conversations, and like in crisis communication, they may communicate with, against, to, past or about each other (Frandsen and Johansen, 2010). Even if it is easy to communicate on internal social media, there will still be barriers that prevent coworkers from communicating with each other. The internal stakeholder is different than the external stakeholders and has more at stake like salary, job security and motivation (Frandsen and Johansen, 2011), and voice theories point out that the motives behind silence and voice are influenced by structure and culture (Morrison, 2011).

The understanding of internal social media as a rhetorical arena is more briefly presented in the first article, where it is used to develop a model to understand communication processes on internal social media. So therefore I have chosen to elaborate on it in this Thesis Proposal. I have only just started using the rhetorical arena model, and I still need to review more literature and develop my thoughts about it.

5. The three articles and the next steps
As mentioned in the beginning of the Thesis Proposal the PhD project will emerge into three articles. The articles use the findings from the pilot study and the single case study to understand the phenomenon internal social media and to develop new theories or extend existing theories. See the illustration for an overview of the three articles. Each article will try to answer one of the overall research questions.

**Figure 2: The relation between the three articles**

**Article 1:** Understanding the phenomenon internal social media

*Theoretical contribution:* A model of communication processes on internal social media

**Article 2:** Understanding communication on internal social media

*Theoretical contribution:* Develop theories about horizontal communication between coworkers using theories about superior/subordinate communication as an offeset

**Article 3:** Understanding coworkers as communicators

*Theoretical contribution:* Extend theories about coworkers as key communicators using theories about voice
5.1. First article – Understanding the phenomenon internal social media
See appendix one to read the first article, which I will submit to Corporate Communication: An International Journal.

The article is based on an explorative study in ten organizations as well as a literature review of internal social media. The review shows that studies on internal social media have so far shown that coworker’s communicative behavior depends on the person and the organizational culture and it is related to organizational members perception of internal social media (Treem and Leonardi, 2012). Internal social media has the potential to strengthen weak ties and build up social capital of organizational members, and internal social media can potentially introduce a new kind of communication, develop coworker’s communication roles and in this way change the internal communication.

The pilot study shows that internal social media coordinators perceive internal social media to facilitate work-related horizontal communication between coworkers. But the organizations in the study are far from having multidirectional communication. Self-censorship stops coworkers from communicating. Finally the first article presents a model of communication processes on internal social media based on the concept of the rhetorical arena. The model tries to grasp the complex processes of communicating on internal social media.

5.2. Second article – Understanding communication on internal social media
The intention with the second article is to explore the actual communication on internal social media and who communicates to whom. Internal social media gives coworkers an opportunity to communicate, but the question is whether they use the opportunity and whether communication on internal social media could be said to be multivocal. Organizational communication has a long research tradition for looking at superior/subordinate communication (Jablin, 1979; Sias, 2013), while communication in peer to coworker relationships have not been studied very much (Sias, 2013). However the superior/subordinate communication literature can be used to identify relevant themes, when organizational members communicate with each other.

The article will be based on the explorative netnographic study of communication on internal social media, the first step in the single case study. The article’s aim is to develop theories about communication on internal social media and to answer the following questions:

Research questions
• How and when do coworkers communicate on internal social media?
• What characterizes communication on internal social media?
• Who communicates and who remain silent?

Intended journal: Public Relations Review

5.3. Third article - Understanding coworkers as communicators
The intention of the third article is to explore the role of coworkers as communicators. According to the CCO-perspective, organizations are constructed through the communication organizational members have with each other. In this respect all employees have a key communication role. However this has not always been the perception in organizational communication, and therefore the intention is to explore how the role can be described, how coworkers perceive of themselves as communicators and whether the role of coworkers as communicators has changed with the introduction of internal social media. Pursuing coworkers as communicators will also give insights into the collaborative turn (Deetz and Eger, 2013) in organizational communication, and the research is an opportunity to investigate and perhaps extend theories about voice (Morrison, 2011), since
internal social media offer a more visible opportunity for coworkers to voice their concerns, discontent and support.

The article will be based on the second step in the explorative single case study, where coworkers will be interviewed about their communication and communication behavior on internal social media. The article’s aim is to develop theories about coworkers as communicators and to answer the following questions:

**Research questions**

- Why do coworkers communicate on internal social media?
- How does self-censorship influence coworker communication?
- Does internal social media change the role of coworkers as communicators?

Intended journal: International Journal of Strategic Communication

**6. A few concluding remarks**

The purpose of this Thesis Proposal has been to present and explain the current state of my PhD project without repeating too much of what I write in my first article. A lot of the work I have done in the first year is in the article, and therefore I hope the TP Committee will take the time to read it. The central questions at the moment are whether the project as a whole is coherent, if my plans for the second and third article make sense, and which theories I will benefit most from using in the two articles. I have a few suggestions, but I am still in an early phase of developing the two articles, so ideas are very welcome. I look very much forward to discuss my project, and the steps I need to take in the future to make the project relevant and interesting for both practitioners and the academic world.

**References**


Heron, A. R. (1942), Sharing information with employees. California: Stanford University Press


Weick, K. E. (1979), The social psychology of organizing.


Appendix 1: The research process and study elements

Activities in the research process

| 1. Semester | • Work on research question and theoretical framework  
|             | • Read literature about CCO, social media, internal social media and organizations  
|             | • Develop research design and interview guide for a pilot study  
|             | • Find ten organizations for the pilot study  
|             | • Interview four internal social media coordinators  

| 2. Semester | • Work on literature review about internal social media  
|             | • Read literature about organizational communication, methodology and case studies  
|             | • Interview six internal social media coordinators  
|             | • Analyze data from pilot project  
|             | • Write the first article about the pilot study  
|             | • Find case for single case study  

| 3. Semester | • Rewrite and submit first article about the pilot study  
|             | • Write Thesis Proposal and present it  
|             | • Read literature about nethnography, case study, materiality, voice and rhetorical arena  
|             | • Sign up contract with Jyske Bank (case company)  
|             | • Develop research design and interview guide for single case study  
|             | • First field research: Collect screen dumps for three months and interview approx. 15 coworkers in Jyske Bank  
|             | • Start analyzing data from single case study  

| 4. Semester | • Continue analyzing data from single case study  
|             | • Write the second article about communication on internal social media  
|             | • Read literature about voice and communication behavior  
|             | • Start writing the first chapters for the dissertation  
|             | • Submit second article  
|             | • Start writing the third article  

| 5. Semester | • Second field research: Collect screen dumps for one month and interview approx. 5 coworkers in Jyske Bank  
|             | • Analyze data from second field research  
|             | • Compare data from first and second field research  
|             | • Finish analyzing and start writing about them  
|             | • Write third article and submit it  

| 6. Semester | • Finish first chapters for the dissertation  
|             | • Write text to connect the three articles  
|             | • Write last chapters that sums up the whole research  
|             | • Rewrite the whole dissertation  

PhD Courses: 30 ETCS

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Teaching activities total: 596 hours

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Change of research environment
I am going to ASCoR, The Amsterdam School of Communication Research, as a visiting PhD for three months in spring 2015. I hope to attend a PhD course during the stay. My host and mentor is Associate Professor Joost Verhoeven.
Appendix 2: The first article

The article is not included in this document. If you are interested in the article, please contact me on vtm@bcom.au.dk