The Effect of Social Media on Intra-Organisational Communication

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Abstract: This paper discusses the effect of social media from an intra-organisational communication point of view. It is argued that previous studies of intra-organisational communication still consider intra-organisational communication from a very traditional point of view, somewhat ignoring the effects of modern social media. Due to the rapid advancement in today's information and communication technology, the intra-organisational communication landscape has changed significantly. The paper discusses how social media can affect management in terms of formal communication and information flow caused by the proliferation of social media usage in the workplace. The paper draws from literature reviewed concerning the effect of social media in the context of intra-organisational communication. The findings suggest that social media has the capability to distort and damage the management of formal communication and information flow in an organisation. The findings are based on literature reviewed. Therefore further empirical research is needed to corroborate the findings. An organisation should be well aware of the effect of social media in intra-organisational communication. Without proper communication management and policies, social media communication could possibly affect the management from the point of view of formal communication and information flow in an organisation. This paper offers an original contribution to the on-going discussion of the effect of social media on the intra-organisational communication landscape.

Key words: Social media · Communication · Informal communication · Information flow · Information and communication technology

INTRODUCTION

Intra-organisational communication refers to communication between organisational members and is mainly for the purpose of task completion, i.e. achieving the goals of the organisation as well as relationship building among employees in the workplace [1], Furthermore, as contended by D.P. Modaff, S. DeWine and Butler [2], "Organisational communication is considered the process of creating, exchanging, interpreting (correctly or incorrectly) and storing messages within a system of human interrelationships" (p. 3). Santra and Giri [3], noted that this dynamic process goes beyond the simple transference of information, but rather seeks to influence a specific behaviour. However, today's intra-organisational communication landscape has been greatly affected by the proliferation of information and communication technology (ICT), particularly social media such as Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp alike. While traditional methods of communication, such as face to face communication, email, telephone and meetings, are still the preferred form of formal communication in organisations, communication in an organisation is no longer limited to only these forms or methods. Instead, it has been seen that formal interactions can take place online as well. Moreover, informal communication, which used to take place during office tea or coffee sessions between organisational members, is now also significantly changing its location to become online.

A review of the literature indicates that social media is now considered as one of the accepted mediums of interaction in today's organisations and the number of organisations utilising this media is argued to be rising [4], Nevertheless, despite the many advantages of social media, the emergence of social media as a medium of intra-organisational communication is argued to potentially affect the organisation's control over how information is released and disseminated. This is because once the conversation is taken online, organisations

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appear to lose their control over the information that is being discussed. Organisational absence or control over the information and the inability to confirm the accuracy of the information may cause the information to be distorted, which consequently heightens the possibility of misunderstandings occurring with consequent possible damage to the organization [5].

Formal vs Informal Communication: Formal communication can be referred to as communication which is related to the structure and hierarchy of an organisation [6]; [7]. According to Johnson, Donohue, Atkin, and Johnson [8] formal communication is accepted to be official communication by whatever means of medium of transmission, while informal communication is the communication between employees which is not in line with the structure of the organisation and is most likely to be personal. Formal communication in the workplace takes the form of meetings, roundtable discussions, talk etc., while informal communication takes the form of personalised relationships between employees. It may occur during coffee breaks and social office activities.

Over the years, efforts by scholars of communication have focused on perfecting the deliverance of formal communication messages. This means to find a comprehensive intra-organisation communication model to improve message dissemination to employees.

Studies of business and corporate communication have proposed various communication models to enhance intra-organisational communication. For example Lewis [9] proposed message transparency when communicating new developments to organisational members. Barrett [10] on the other hand suggested an integrated communication strategy which included the strategic positioning of staff, effective management support and an efficient use of media. Meanwhile, Klien [11] integrated communication principles which helped him to create a communication strategy for an effective organisation.

However, formal communication is viewed as being unable to deal with all the major uncertainties and questions among the members of an organisation, as formal communication is sometimes tied with the policies and procedures of an organisation. This could possibly prevent employees from giving accurate and reliable feedback to management. Employees may feel sceptical that their feedback would be accepted. Therefore, they turn to informal communication channels.

According to Fishsbacher-Smith and Fischbacher-Smith [12] informal communication is capable of influencing the organisational decision-making process as well as performance. This could occur because messages disseminated across organisations and shared between organisations are often shared via informal communication and not captured effectively through the formal decision-making processes. Some decisions made by organisations could also be discussed by members using informal channel, which sometimes leads to adjustment or withdrawal from the original decision due to receiving negative feedback from the members.

Even though some authors explain the positive part of informal communication [13] especially to gather feedback, however, in contrast, informal communication is reported to be vulnerable and a threat to formal communication [14]. Messages originating from informal communication are at risk of distortion, damage and fragmentation and even speculation. For instance, irresponsible parties could damage the information by making baseless speculations.

In addition, informal communication creates a "grapevine", where employees communicate doubtful messages i.e. rumours and gossip [15]; [16]; [17]. This may influence and hinder the effective transmission of formal communication. The informal communication that takes place in this context could also be speculated upon or sensationalised and therefore has a negative impact on the organisation.

One aspect that determines a clear differentiation between formal and informal communication in traditional intra-organisational communication is the element of authority, credibility and filtering of messages passing through the network of the organisation. Formal communication has credibility, authority and control of the message disseminated to the members of the organisation as the message has gone through the process of filtering and control before it is released. However, informal communication is a doubtful message, without a clear source of information and authority. Anybody in the organisation could create something with a positive and even negative sentiment towards any message that originally came from formal communication.

Uncertainty Reduction Theory: The Uncertainty Reduction Theory was first introduced by Charles Berger and his associates in 1975 [18]. The Uncertainty Reduction Theory rests on several basic assumptions. The main assumption is that uncertainty creates cognitive discomfort, which people will try to reduce. Uncertainty reduction occurs primarily by questioning others in an attempt to gather information about others or issues that do not satisfy a person's understanding. This information can then be used to predict the behaviour of people,

or the outcome of a discussion or decision. In other words, the theory elaborates the information seeking behaviour of individuals, which it contends that when dealing with ambiguous information then individuals tend to gauge additional information from alternative sources in order to increase their understanding and consequently, reduce the vagueness of the information.

In this study, the Uncertainty Reduction Theory will help to explain the transition of formal communication to informal communication in an organisation. As contended by Vuuren and Elving [14], individuals in organisations will seek information from other sources particularly from informal communication channels when the information they receive from formal communication does not satisfy their need for understanding. This usually occurs when communication obtained using the formal channels fails to adequately communicate appropriate information. Furthermore, according to Mckay, A. Kali and Kuntz, J.R.C. Naswall [19], the members of an organisation will seek each other's reactions and clarification from their informal communication network for the purpose of checking their own understanding, as well as the understanding of others. By gathering this reaction, individuals may make sense of their intentions, attitudes and behaviour [20]. The advantage of this is that their uncertainties may be reduced. However, the effect could backfire. This takes place when the uncertainties among the members of an organisation may escalate and turn into negative communication where speculation and baseless assumptions could occur.

In today's intra-organisational communication landscape, the informal communication platforms used by members of an organisation are not constrained to tea-coffee break sessions, over lunch conversations etc. Instead these informal conversations are rigorously moving online. This present development requires a deeper assessment of how social media affects the reliability, validity and accuracy of the alternative sources used by organisational members in their conversations and how organisations are able to manage and control these conversations as a preventive action in protecting the image of the organisation as well as its processes.

As mentioned by Vuuren and Elving [14], in the process of reducing uncertainties, individuals seek additional information from the informal communication network which coincides with the Uncertainty Reduction Theory. The assumptions of the Uncertainty Reduction Theory are still very much applicable to this development. However, the effect of individual information seeking behaviour due to the use of social media, may be more detrimental to organisations than the previous informal communication platforms. Social media may have the capability to direct the actions of users as well as their judgment [21].

Social Media as a Communication Tool in an Organisation: According to Jones, Watson, Gardner and Gallois [22], social media has advantages in terms of media richness and channel preference. Therefore, most organisations prefer social media as a platform to communicate effectively with members of the organisation [23]. Even though the usage of social media was initially intended for personal space, however, the usage has expanded as a communication tool in internal communication within an organisation such as applications like WhatsApp, Facebook and Twitter. In the workplace, social media encourages informal collaboration and spurs knowledge sharing among employees [24]. In fact, a recent study of the usage of social media in team-working in a company in the United States indicated that social media posits to become an influential mechanism for team communication in the future and could be a major factor to improve the ability to coordinate work tasks [25].

Additionally, the number of organisations who use social media to improve internal communication has increased significantly since it has been found to improve internal efficiency, team collaboration, innovation and organisational alignment as well as cultural transformation [26]. In a global study by McKinsey Global in 2013, 90 percent of executives whose companies used social technologies reported measurable benefits from using such social media technology. In terms of social media usage, according to the Mckinsey Global Survey Result [27] in a sixth annual survey of business use of technologies, 83 percent of respondents said that their companies were using at least one social technology and 65 percent said employees accessed at least one communication application of a mobile device.

A recent study of a group of employees in the sales division of a global manufacturing organisation indicated that informal communication using Internet applications was a significant factor in shaping the culture (cultural dynamic) and functionality of an organisation [28]. This indicates that organisations can no longer depend on formal hierarchical structures as the primary tool for managing information flow, as informal relationships are equally powerful in changing the shape of an organisation.

Social media complements formal communication not only internally (employees) but also externally (customers) in terms of stakeholders [29][30]. Social media is also capable of tying up the relationship between employees as some information, such as similarities of interests or hobbies, may predict the strength of the relationship [31]. For example sharing the same hobbies may make the interactions between employees actively communicated as much information could be shared.

A study of the effect of social media on the public relations of local government found that social media can be a significant communication tool. One of the results indicated that the stakeholder can participate in the decision making or other operational activities without having to physically attend a programme or event [30]. In addition a study in Korea indicated that social media such as Facebook is an important communication channel that could complement web-based e-government systems [29]. Another study of a group of university students found that the social media role is significant in organisations facing crisis management [32][46][47].

To further escalate the challenge, the advancement of smart-phone technology has become a catalyst for the extensive use of social media as it is mobile friendly [33]. Healthy competition between smart-phone producers has made the price and technology highly competitive. People can be side-lined from the current trend because of not owning a smart-phone. It is reported that smart-phone penetration in the developing world now exceeds two subscriptions for every three people, driven by expanding networks in Asia and in Africa [34]. In the context of Malaysia it is reported that sophisticated and affordable smart-phones have contributed significantly to the rise of the communication subsector to 9.3 % in 2012 compared to 7.6 % in 2011 [35].

Therefore, due to the capabilities and the advantages of the usage of social media as a channel for employees to communicate, makes social media highly usable to improve the daily operations of an organisation. Its role is now turning from being just in the personal space to being in the professional space as well, especially when organisation matters are discussed and shared using social media applications i.e. WhatsApp, Facebook and Twitter.

However, social media has also become a channel that encourages a "grapevine" (communication with doubtful information) and the effect may result in extensive dissemination to the masses in which gossip can become "viral". Results from a study on the effect of informal communication against formal communication in social media indicated that informal communication in social media does have the capability of influencing the perceptions of the masses [28]. "The visibility afforded by social media may undermine organizational efforts to provide a distinct socialization strategy. For instance, because social media used in organizations have been demonstrated to support widespread informal communication, even among people who do not know each other personally," [24] (p.168).

From the perspective of intra-organisation communication, the emergence of social media may hinder effective communication and the process of information flow. Firstly, the employees may face difficulties to distinguish between informal and formal communication. For example messages could be written in an informal manner. This could cause employees to confuse formal or informal messages due to the lack of control of information. In social media the role of controller or "gatekeeper" is not established [36]; [37]. Therefore, uncorroborated messages could be accidently released and widely spread. To make it worse, social media allows the interaction of users whether one-to-one or one-to-many. Thus any message, genuine or unsubstantiated, can be widely spread in a split second. There is a high potential for purposeful or accidental release of information that could be damaging to other people or organisations due to misunderstandings and other human factors [38]. The users can also freely interact by giving opinions on certain postings and may create negative orpositive sentiments among users [26]. Additionally, according to Kaplan and Haenlein [39] before the era of social media, organisations could strategically frame and control the information delivered. However, with the emergence of social media the strategy does not effectively take place.

Secondly, social media is initially setup for personal space [40]. Therefore, employees may perceive that messages communicated through the social media are not deemed to be compulsory. Further, it is not possible to monitor every message communicated. This could also escalate into a situation of "information overload" -the situation of too much information at one time [41]. Confusion and misinformation could result.

Thirdly, distraction of employees could also occur as users do not want to miss receiving and viewing their messages. This explains the phenomenon of more and more employees spending too much time communicating using social media compared to traditional media.

CONCLUSION

Informal communication originates from intra-organisation communication which has changed location from the traditional communication platform to a social media platform. This may affect the efforts of an organisation to manage the information flow of the organisation. Employees presently turn to social media as an alternative source of information to reduce uncertainty when previously they were informed through formal communication. Even though social media is designed to be used as personal space [40], due to the various advantages of social media it is now used as one of the primary communication mediums used by an organisation to communicate with its employees and stakeholders [42].

Nevertheless, despite its various advantages, social media may have dire consequences for an organisation which is unable to manage and control its information. A study of organisation governance of social media usage indicates that organisations tend to perceive and portray the effect of social media primarily as a source of risk which may harmful to the reputation of an organisation [43][45].

Therefore, an organisation must formulate a comprehensive communication strategy without neglecting the use social media strategically and as a formal medium when communicating with its employees and stakeholders. This is because according to [44] the utilisation of social media in an organisation is mostly not strategically planned and integrated with other organisational communication methods. The communication strategy of an organisation should be outlined and enforced as a policy. Consequently, the element of communication control could be implemented. Without a doubt, the members of the organisation themselves must also be educated to embrace the policy as users may have their own judgment on certain issues or messages posted in social media.

Finally, future empirical studies should be conducted to determine the effect of social media as a platform for informal communication from the perspective of intra-organisation communication. This will therefore, shed light on how to improve communication within the organisation and consequently facilitate the development of a clear policy for better management of intra-organisation information flow.

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