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## Forum: Inconsistency and Communication in Organizations

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In all organizations – whether corporations, public administrations, cultural institutions, community groups, NGOs or political parties – activities take place under circumstances that are highly contradictory. Multitudinous objectives and professional norms, diversity in stakeholder expectations, interests and goals as well as varying structural conditions bring complexity, uncertainty and fickleness to organizations. By defining what and who they are, by making decisions and performing different activities, organizations must find ways of dealing with circumstances stemming from different forms of generality, producing tensions and more or less precarious compromises (Jagd, 2011). In these contexts, communication plays a crucial role allowing decision and activities to be enacted and represented in public. To an increasing degree, much of what we know about organizational activities is based on second hand information. In most fields, organizational activities are primarily mediated either by news media, environmental organizations, customers and other stakeholders, or by organizations' own communication activities (Pallas, Strannegård, & Jonsson, 2014).

The seductive power of consistency in such contexts is evident. There is an obvious tendency among journalists, investors, customers, citizens, politicians, organizational members and other stakeholders to seek certainty and clarity in order to be able to make sense of situations and organizational activities insofar as such states facilitate sense-making and make complex realities easier to navigate (Weick, 1995). Gaining and maintaining control over mediations has therefore become a central aspect of managers' communication whose aim is often to produce a consistent, coherent and distinct narrative both in relation to external stakeholders and organizational members (Christensen, Morsing, & Cheney, 2008). Consistency is the favoured communicative ideal, since organisational clarity (e.g. of purpose, practice and ethics) and a strong, distinctive identity, are seen to provide reliable points of reference to which audiences can orient themselves. Correspondingly, consistency is believed

to enable organizations to maintain legitimacy and trust, and to create and maintain a collective focus on the organisational mission (see, e.g. Hallahan, Holtzhausen, Van Ruler, Verčič, & Sriramesh, 2007; Hatch & Schultz, 1997; King & Whetten, 2008). As a result of increasing emphasis on organizational accountability and transparency, this ideal seems to have gained status as the sine qua non of professional and responsible management. It is extensively reproduced, and failures to live up to the standards of consistency are frequently portrayed as shortcomings. That said, it has to be noted that the situation is somewhat paradoxical. Because while increasing complexity may lead individuals to seek out certainty as they make sense of the world, and therefore expect more coherence in communication by organizations and their representatives, the difficulties for organizations to communicate consistently across different audiences and situations have only become more challenging. Due to increasing complexity, the abilities of organizations to provide stable grounds for consistent narratives has decreased: discourses and practices are constantly (re)constructed as organizations encounter different situations, activities or member groups whose interests may differ significantly from one another (Bromley & Powell, 2012).

Organizational scholars have widely acknowledged the complexity surrounding organizational activities and the notion of organizations as consistent and coherent entities has been challenged and critiqued for more than five decades. Inspired by Simon's notion of bounded rationality (1957), Cohen and his colleagues' (1972) work on garbage can models of decision making, Meyer and Rowan's (1977) conceptualizations of decoupling, Weick's (1995) concept of retrospective sense-making, and Brunsson's (2002) writings on organizational hypocrisy, organizational scholars have provided profound frameworks for detailed analyses of inconsistency in organizational activities. Many of these theories highlight the inconsistent conditions for communication in organizational contexts, but when it comes to studies and analyses of management communication itself, there have been few

attempts to develop theoretical grounds where inconsistency is the point of departure. Rather, the opposite seems to be the case: management communication scholars seem to preserve and to promote the ideal of consistency. Several conceptualizations of communication management can be seen as direct responses to increasing demands on consistency including integrated communication (Schultz & Schultz, 2003), corporate communication (Cornelissen, 2014), reputation management (Doorley & Garcia, 2015), branding (Kornberger, 2010), and CSR (Roper & Schoenberger-Orgad, 2011). This is not to say that the challenges of inconsistencies have been unnoticed (cf. Aggerholm, Asmuß, & Thomsen, 2012; Cheney, 1991; Christensen, Morsing, & Thyssen, 2013; Frandsen & Johansen, 2016; Putnam, 1987; Sillince & Brown, 2009), but rather to point out that the call for consistency in organizational communication tends to remain constant (Torp, 2015) and that inconsistencies, gaps, interruptions, multivocality and other irregularities are most commonly perceived as problems to be managed and to be solved (Jarzabkowski, Sillince, & Shaw, 2010). Generally, organizations are expected to create and maintain alignment between what they do and what they say across different media, situations, and audiences as well as between front stage and backstage, ideals and practice, past, present and future.

From what we can understand, management communication scholars hesitate to embrace inconsistency in their work. As a result, we argue that some of the more fundamental conditions for organizational activities are disregarded, as these are anything but supportive to consistency. In addition, traditional management communication theories tend to deal with communication as something detached from other organizational activities. It is presented as an object of management and a focus for control – a tool for organisations to use to achieve their aims. This, we argue, is to disconnect management communication from its organizational contexts and to handle it as a unique form of social activity embedded in its own principles and conditions. However, such a standpoint disregards much research in the

field which interprets organizational communication as a practice that is both generative, insofar as it makes things happen, and constitutive, insofar as it brings certain organizational worlds into being (Deetz & Eger, 2014).

### **Points of departure for analyses of inconsistency and communication in organizations**

This forum explores the implications of approaching inconsistency as a fundamental characteristic of organizations and communication rather than to see it as an obstacle or a consequence of poor or insufficient management. The general argument is that by embracing – rather than repudiating – inconsistency, scholars can build more accurate, relevant and informed understandings of communication in and by organizations. This, in turn, makes them better prepared to contribute to the development of a more realistic understanding of the role played by communication in organizations struggling to cope with the complex environmental challenges and issues that affect efforts to manage organizational identity, reputation, stakeholder relationships, and futures.

To be able to understand how inconsistencies play out, the nature of the reciprocal relationship between environmental inconsistency and organizational activities and processes, and the mediating, generative and/or constitutive effect of communication on inconsistency and its manifestations, it is necessary to start with a rather elementary question: what mobilizes inconsistencies? This point of departure for our joint work turned our attention to the theoretical challenges scholars encounter when they are about to explore inconsistencies, and to how investigations grounded in inconsistencies might differ from dominant conventions in studies of management communication, where issues, activities and outcomes are explored through the identification of central tendencies. In this forum, we therefore offer reasoning and discussion regarding the value of different theoretical approaches for enriching our understanding of the inconsistencies governing communication in organizations. Each of the following pieces applies a different area of existing management communication

scholarship to the idea of inconsistency: forms of coupling and decoupling (Winkler et al.); dialectical thinking (Edwards); stakeholder engagement (Ellerup Nielsen); and translation of institutional ideas (Fredriksson and Pallas). These starting points have allowed us to demonstrate a range of ways to engage with inconsistency. We hope that the results of our own search for explanatory theories, models and concepts will prompt other scholars to use inconsistency as a way of adding depth and substance to future analyses of communication in and by organizations.

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