Can Enterprise Social Media Drive Cultural Change?

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CAN ENTERPRISE SOCIAL MEDIA DRIVE CULTURAL CHANGE?

Research in Progress

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Abstract

Scholars and practitioners increasingly emphasize the role of Enterprise Social Media (ESM) in transforming organizations. By enabling networking across boundaries, knowledge sharing and swift collaboration, it can be used as a lever for changing the shared assumptions about work: organizational culture. This study investigates how employees made sense of paradoxical organizational cultures when their company harnessed ESM to drive cultural change. Using grounded theory, we conducted a 22-month long case study of a multinational company that introduced ESM in the workplace as an enabler of a culture change. We uncovered the paradoxes that impeded the hoped-for cultural change. In this Research-In-Progress, we show the details associated with one of the three key paradoxes that emerged from our findings that is flattening the organization while maintaining the hierarchy.

Keywords: Enterprise Social Media; cultural change; qualitative method; and case study.

1. Introduction

Plethoric records of organizations are turning to Enterprise Social Media (ESM) to achieve instrumental outcomes such as improving performance (Kuegler, Smolnik, & Kane, 2015), productivity (Wu, 2013) and innovation (Leonardi, 2014). In effect, ESM can help bridging siloed work functions (Kane, 2015), nurture collaboration (Neeley & Leonardi, 2018), and accelerate the sharing of knowledge which may otherwise remain in isolated pockets of the organization (Beck, Pahlke, & Seebach, 2014). These important shifts explain why scholars in different fields see a potential for ESM to revolutionize the social fabric of the workplace and why it represents one of the most significant changes to organizational life today (Leonardi & Vaast, 2017).

Yet despite its potential to fundamentally alter important features of organizational, the dynamics that emerge from its adoption in the workplace are poorly understood (Leonardi & Vaast, 2017) notably when it comes to the impact of ESM on organizational culture. In effect, ESM has the potential to alter important aspects of organizational culture as it has the potential to transform major organizational phenomena such as employee voice (Turco, 2016), social networks (Kane, 2015) and employee behavior (Huang, Singh, & Ghose, 2015). However, relatively few IS studies explicitly examined the potential impact of IT on culture (Leidner & Kayworth, 2006) and to the best of our knowledge no study has examined the outcomes when ESM is purposefully introduced to drive cultural change.

The relationship between ESM and organizational culture seems particularly deserving of attention
since culture plays a role in employee learning and satisfaction (Egan, Yang, & Bartlett, 2004) and enhances organizations’ ability to launch new products (Belassi, Kondra, & Tukel, 2007). Meta-analyses show that culture predicts various types of organizational performance (Hartnell, Ou, & Kinicki, 2011; Marcoulides & Heck, 1993).

The relationship between ESM and organizational culture, our focus in this study, seems particularly fraught and deserving of theory building. This is true in part because ESM is described in ways that suggest it offers an alternative cultural toolkit – focused on collaboration, freely sharing knowledge, and innovation – to the toolkit already in play in the more traditional, bureaucratic organizations adopting it. From a toolkit perspective, organizational culture can be defined as the “available symbolic forms through which people experience and express meaning… which people may use in varying configurations to solve different kinds of problems” (Swidler 1986, p. 273).

We were interested in the seeming contradictions of negotiating between the on and offline workplace during an inductive study of an organization adopting an ESM platform, prompting us to research the phenomenon further with the question: “How do employees make sense of online versus offline cultures when an organization leverages ESM to drive change?”.

The organization at the center of our study, Chameleos (a pseudonym), adopted ESM as a means to drive a change in the company culture, yet early in our research we began to see paradoxes emerging from navigating between new ESM-driven egalitarian affordances on one hand and the legacy of hierarchy on the other. Using an inductive, grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 2017; Strauss & Corbin, 1967) we followed the prescription for iterating between emerging themes in our data and existing theory. The literature on paradox in organizations (Schad, Lewis, Raisch, & Smith, 2016) and on affordances (Leonardi & Vaast, 2017) were central to our analysis. Currently, we present one paradox that emerged from the data on how employees made sense of the competing realities that is simultaneously maintaining distance while flattening the hierarchy.

Our work contributes to the literature by positing theory as to how the ‘promises’ of ESM – speed of implementation and ability to shift organizational assumptions – can prevent the benefits of ESM materializing. Rather than opening a path to revolutionary change, ESM can reinforce the status quo – amplifying the existing culture that the organization meant to change.

2. Theoretical background

2.1 Organizational Change, ESM, and Affordances

The use of information technology (IT) to trigger organizational change has been well documented (Heracleous & Barrett, 2001; Markus & Robey, 1988; Robey & Boudreau, 1999). However, integrating ESM in the workplace is qualitatively different thanks to ESM’s novel affordances, defined as the material features of an object or new technology that suggest a potential for action to users (Leonardi, 2017; Leonardi & Vaast, 2017). Rooted in a relational ontology that straddles the social and the material (Faraj & Azad, 2012), the notion of affordances emerged from research on ecological psychology (Gibson, 1986) focusing on the potential actions that new technology provides to users (Leonardi & Vaast, 2017). The central idea is that objects – like forks or glasses, or even digital coded artefacts like ESM – have material properties that inherently “afford” possibilities for action while limiting others (Leonardi & Barley, 2008; Leonardi & Vaast, 2017; Orlikowski & Scott, 2008).

ESM is defined 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 (Gibbs, Rozaidi, & Eisenberg, 2013, p. 102).
ESM has affordances of three kinds – at the very least those “designed” by the provider – that impact organizational change in fundamental ways. First, ESM gives a voice to all members, where they can share their knowledge, ideas, concerns (Leonardi & Vaast, 2017) and broadcast messages to everyone in the organization (Leonardi, Huysman, & Steinfield, 2013), potentially ignoring the hierarchical boundaries of the past. Second, it gives everyone unprecedented visibility of the ESM network (Kane, 2015), allowing them to observe the evolution of their own and others’ connections (Kane, Alavi, Labianca, & Borgatti, 2014). Third, unlike adopting a new strategy or restructuring an organization, ESM has the potential to change the moment-by-moment interactions of employees (rather than the more distal, abstract features of the organization like a new strategic focus or large acquisition), giving a more visceral and proximal sense of revolution to employees.

However, even if the affordance lens is considered as useful to explore why and how social media affect organizational action (Leonardi & Vaast, 2017), we argue that their effect is influenced by users’ actions as they actualize their interaction with social media. Strong, Volkoff, Johnson, Pelletier, Tulu, Bar-On et al. (2014) define actualization as “the actions taken by actors as they take advantage of one or more affordances through their use of the technology to achieve immediate concrete outcomes in support of organizational goals” (p. 70). The iterative nature of the actualization process makes individual actions generate immediate outcomes that provide feedback for future adjustment as they make sense of the degree to which the intended affordances are being actualized. This will constitute the first-hand effect of affordance actualization (Waizenegger, Seeber, Dawson, & Desouza, 2020) which refers to the process of executing the affordance that leads to intended effects of designer of the technology (Markus & Silver, 2008). Still, affordances are not only enabling and can also be constraining (Hutchby, 2001) which might prevent their actualization as initially expected (Strong et al., 2014) and lead unintended effects of their actualization.

2.2 Experiencing Paradox during Change

Research on technology as a lever for organizational change has been criticized (Robey & Boudreau, 1999) for relying on a deterministic logic that metaphorically places technology in the role of an external agent that can transform organizations (DeSanctis & Poole, 1994; Markus & Robey, 1988; Orlikowski, 1993; Orlikowski & Iacono, 2001; Orlikowski & Robey, 1991). Using an affordance lens avoids the deterministic logic to reveal an important counterpoint (Treem & Leonardi, 2012): that tensions may arise as a technology’s affordances are deployed. This is especially important since the leaders who invest in a technology are often sold on the deterministic logic of the “intended” affordances, whereas the typical employee might engage with “unintended” affordance through use. The result of these respective engagements is a logic of opposition, that is, contradictions between the affordances of ESM (Leonardi & Vaast, 2017) on the one hand, and their context, conditions and experience (Faraj & Azad, 2012; Hutchby, 2001) on the other. As a result of the potential opposition between intended and unintended affordances, the organizational cultural change context is rife with paradoxes, defined as a “persistent contradiction between interdependent elements” (p. 10) (Schad et al., 2016). The elements of a paradox may seem logical in isolation but irrational when they appear simultaneously (Smith & Lewis, 2011).

While a great deal of empirical work has examined change and technology, it also reveals that the majority of this work has focused on top-down change with types of technology – ERP, a variety of Knowledge Management or Data Management Systems, Groupware, etc. – that offer the end user limited malleability. Regarding malleability, Boudreau and Robey (2005) observe that “organizational technologies are not ‘infinitely malleable’ in the sense that use is open to all possibilities as human agents may be resourceful enough to overcome technology’s material constraints.” The authors build on Orlikowski (2000) to note that ‘such integration is likely to reduce the degrees of freedom available to users to experiment with and modify their technological artifacts in use.'
Surprisingly, in the research conducted to date, technology is rarely included in theories of organizational change generally, or cultural change more specifically. For example, four recent reviews that each tackle slightly different slices of the organizational change literature all recognize technology as a source of change without integrating studies of change and technology as a key drivers in their reviews (Bartunek, Balogun, & Do, 2011; Buchanan, Fitzgerald, Ketley, Gollop, Jones, Lamont et al., 2005; Elsbach & Stigliani, 2018; Stouten, Rousseau, & De Cremer, 2018). In Stouten et al’s review, for instance, the opening sentence suggests, “Advanced technology, a changing workforce, competitive pressures, and globalization are just a few of the forces that prompt organizations and their members to engage in an attempt to manage planned change” (2018: 752). Technology is then only mentioned once more in the article.

We see ESM not just a solution but an “ethos” that could be infused into the cultural toolkit (Harrison & Corley, 2011): Organizations should buy technology to solve the business’ problems, that is, to drive change management. But this is not the usual technology investment. This is due to fundamentally how they engage the changes… [Technology] is the platform to be able to drive engagement, conversation, within the enterprise. You they then can collaborate, dynamically share information in a fast and quick manner (Pornwasin, 2014).

Using ESM as a catalyst for changing organizational culture brings contradictory elements together in new ways. As evidence, Leonardi and Vaast (2017) argue that when ESM is used for organizational change, it highlights the intersection between people’s goals and a technology’s material features. Any technology, including ESM, has material properties that result from specific choices made by the designers (Leonardi & Barley, 2010; Orlikowski, 1992; Orlikowski & Scott, 2008). Hence there is always a parallel construction entailing the technology “in the head” and the technology “on the floor” (Weick, 2001, p. 158). The technology in the head represents the assumptions of the designer who anticipates a set of socially constructed affordances and constraints associated with expected patterns of use and behavior (Leonardi & Barley, 2010).

Research on technology in organizations broadly, and ESM in particular, highlights the importance of affordances, calling attention to the fact that intended affordances may differ from unintended ones, a subtle implication being that leaders implementing cultural change and employees experiencing cultural change pay attention to different aspects of affordances. Hence, rather than offering a seamless transition from one organizational culture to another, organizational change implemented via ESM is rife with paradoxes as competing assumptions emerge.

We use the above insights and the literature on affordances and paradox as sensitizing concepts for building and extending theory on the nature of the paradoxes employees may encounter when their organization leverages ESM to drive an organizational change.

3. Research methodology

3.1 Research Context

Chameleos (a pseudonym), the organization we studied, is a large multinational company. It shares many of the issues facing mature multinationals: it is a traditionally siloed organization, with limited internal collaboration between business units, and a lack of knowledge sharing between international subsidiaries. Top management saw ESM as the cornerstone of a major effort to create a flatter, more connected organization, with knowledge flowing horizontally across subsidiaries and divisions. To enable this change, an ESM system was implemented, named “Athena” to humanize the platform. We adopted a grounded theory approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1967), i.e., attempting to build and extend theorizing around a topic for which theory building is needed (Edmondson & McManus, 2007).

3.2 Data Collection
Data collection started nine months after the implementation of the ESM platform and occurred over 22 months from multiple data sources, including notably interviews and archival documents. We conducted 81 interviews across the following profiles: the CEO of Chameleos, the three consultants who too part to the implementation of ESM at Chameleos, the 6 members from the ESM steering committee (the digital director, the human resources director, the communications director, an IT manager, a business analyst and the ESM community manager (our key informant), 21 top executives of Chameleos, 19 ESM champions, 15 “super contributors”, 14 “light contributors”, and 2 owners of two extra-professional communities on ESM. Each interview lasted 52 minutes on average and totaled 1,476 pages of transcribed data.

The ‘Champion’ is an informal position with the goal of positively influencing the attitudes of peers with regard to ESM. Super contributors are users who have the highest rates of User Generated Content (UGC). On average, these super contributors generate 1 post or comment per day. Light contributors are users who have the lowest UGC. On average, these light contributors generate 0.75 posts or comments per month.

We used a semi structured interview protocol (Kvale, 1996) to ask questions about the intended and/or unintended change perceived by employees after the implementation of ESM. For instance, we asked: “what were the new opportunities that ESM offered to you?” and “what were the constraints that you feel bounded with since you have started using ESM?”.

In addition, we collected archival data such as the consulting company’s supporting documents and slide decks describing the potential benefits of adopting ESM; Chameleos internal reports, memos, and senior management slide decks describing the strategic goals underpinning the decision to adopt ESM and the perceived benefits to Chameleos.

3.3 Data analysis

The highly dynamic character of social media make it especially important to consider building theory of social media (Vaast & Urquhart, 2017) notably at work (Leonardi & Vaast, 2017). In addition, though the impact of ESM on culture has been acknowledge(Kane, 2017), to the best of our knowledge, there has been no in-depth empirical research that investigates the context when ESM is purposefully introduced the drive cultural change. These reasons explain our use of the grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006; Pratt, Rockmann, & Kaufmann, 2006).

Our analysis proceeded from open coding to axial coding and then theoretical coding. We used NVivo to support our analysis. First, we used open coding to attach initial labels to the data by generating tentative codes, often using the informant’s choice of word as the code (Glaser, 1978). Our goal was to make sure that we had a comprehensive understanding of the variety of dynamics participants described. For example, during this first step we generated initial codes as disparate as “loss of control” or “creating additional workload”. The second step was selective coding in which we emphasized the relationships among the codes to build second order categories, effectively building a “concept-indicator model, which directs the conceptual coding of a set of empirical indicators” (Glaser, 1978, p. 62). Thus, we began creating overarching categories (e.g., deviation from work, additional work, technology overload) from the tentative categories from our open coding (e.g., increasing workload). Third, as our emerging theory began to coalesce, we engaged in theoretical coding that consisted of conceptualizing how the substantive codes and constructs could be related to each other in a way to “be integrated into a theory”(Glaser, 1978, p. 72). Such a theory contains “a statement of concepts and their interrelationships that shows how and/or why a phenomenon occurs” (Corley & Gioia, 2011, p. 12).

3.4 Preliminary Findings

While Chameleos invested in ESM with the hope that it would help afford the possibility to bypass the
existing culture and promote new ways of working, the existing culture was in fact replicated in the new medium. Employees perceived three paradoxes: flattening the hierarchy while maintaining distance, encouraging communication while enforcing silence, and reducing workload while increasing workload. The first paradox relates to the affordance that the hierarchy has become accessible on ESM but with the maintenance of an “offline” bureaucratic distance on ESM. The second paradox is related to the co-existence of intended affordance of encouraging new conversations on ESM and silence enforced on certain topics. The third paradox is related to the paradox of ESM providing intended affordances such as decreasing workload, but perceptions of increased workload surfaced too. We detail first paradox below.

**Paradox 1: Flattening the Organization while Maintaining the Hierarchy.**

The CEO explicitly hoped that Athena would make the organization seem flatter: “What I find very powerful is the ability to get in touch instantaneously with everyone in the company. This was not possible before except by means of a written note. But the ability to broadcast a video on subject X or Y, we gain immediate proximity. [ESM] is much more alive than a simple memo”. Our results show that two intended affordances related to flattening the organizational culture emerged from our informants’ interpretations: *increasing affinity* and *cultivating novel connections*. Similarly, our data also suggested unintended affordances that counteracted these dynamics: *reinforcing attention to power* and *hiding voice on ESM*.

**Increasing affinity.** For employees, features of ESM such as the “Like” button afforded a novel ability to connect regardless of hierarchical or geographical gaps. One informant described having a post “Liked” in these words: “It breaks the hierarchical barriers, the territorial barriers ... someone from the general direction who reads my posts, it amused me, I found it very flattering... I was honored, it made me feel that I exist” (super_6). Employees highlighted the extent to which receiving “Likes” from individuals above them in the hierarchy was particularly gratifying. For them, it was an indication that someone in the hierarchy appreciated their contribution. One informant said, “It is really rewarding, it happens two or three times that (the regional manager) said congrats to the team. It is really gratifying for the team because he told them it’s great, or because he liked something. It is also true for me... I’m happy when he likes something I share” (exec_16). The CEO described it in similar terms: “Liking’ contributions is a kind of recognition, which is really very important. It means that I’m interested by the topic, I see it, I read it. If I ‘Like’ it, that means that it satisfied me.” (CEO).

**Cultivating novel connections.** Another affordance offered by ESM was the ability to “follow” employees they otherwise would never have known because they operated in different parts of the organization. Thanks to the “follow” feature, employees were afforded the capacity to enjoy instantaneous access to knowledge without holding a prior offline workflow, geographical or hierarchical connection or network tie with knowledge holders. It thus created new opportunities for interactions with managers which were not possible otherwise: “We realized it was quite freeing. I think in ESM, there is really a side to it that we claimed, but that I find real, that we can exchange at all levels. That is to say, it is a bit of an opportunity to talk with your directors, with your colleagues, with other countries. Some of our barriers are falling”. (super_8). The new network of who-follows-whom on ESM afforded immediate access to the distributed knowledge as soon as the knowledge holder releases it on ESM as expressed the following super contributor: “I follow many of my colleagues. For example, my colleague Bruce posts very useful information about the market. The last that I remember was about Korean trends in makeup, posted by beauty bloggers. There were beauty bloggers sharing their experiences of using Korean makeup products and how this can be implemented in the Russian market. Korean trends have become very prevalent in Europe. And we really tried to benefit from this.” (super_17)

Following afforded employees the possibility to access knowledge shared by managers and have access to information not previously available by strictly following the existing organizational structure. Another informant voiced: “When I follow my boss, there are direct stakes in play that involve me and I need to make sure that I am aware of what he publishes because there will be a time when I will need
Reinforcing attention to power. Despite the above-mentioned intended affordances and the strategic goal that it would flatten the hierarchy, unintended affordances emerged and created a great deal of anxiety, as baldly stated by one informant: “I know that there have been many managers who have had fears of losing power as a result of [Athena]” (exec_7). Indeed, the very notion that Athena might change the power structure created more attention to the relative positions of power of individuals collaborating via Athena. One informant noted that the existing culture was strongly associated with notions of hierarchy and power distance, and that employees should feel a sense of “restraint” when interacting on ESM: “We must not forget that we are in a group where there is nevertheless restraint, you do not necessarily express your feelings. We are a group that is used to having hierarchical levels” (exec_10).

Indeed, managers struggled with the tension between the proximity enabled by ESM and a desire to maintain the traditional hierarchy. One of the top executives interviewed expressed his astonishment with the affordance associated with his use of the Like feature. He described “liking” a post of an operational employee in Mexico that apparently made the latter feel a connection to him: “I try to pay attention when I use the ‘Like.’ I was in the Mexican online community when I found something that I appreciated, I said, ‘It’s ok, it is nice.’ Poof! I ‘Liked.’ The next time, when I went to Mexico, they introduced me to the woman whose post I ‘Liked’ and she was excited because I, the big boss, ‘Liked’ her. As a result, I try to pay more attention. It is not worth it if clicking on the ‘Like’ button means creating such a messy situation. The lady was so excited that I saw her post and liked it to the extent that it took another dimension. Then, I said to myself, ‘If I start liking all newcomers in this particular universe, I’m going to have a lot of trouble… ‘Have you seen, he liked me!’ You need to be aware of the impact that it may have in some contexts…there was a reaction…Receiving a like from someone from the 25 top executives is not like receiving it from Paul or Jack who works in an unknown factory. There is a need to pay more attention to these things” (exec_21).

Compounding the sense that a lack of restraint and a need to pay “attention” to communicating across levels was contrary to the existing culture, there was a sense that new ESM “communities” were emerging without permission as it is explained by the following quote: “It is evident that my community existed before even [my manager] realized that there are some things that need to be done. There are communities where I have no longer any need and I no longer post. For example, the community ‘Forum and Innovation’, actually when I launched this, I was told, ‘Ah no, you have to stop! You have to stop your community, because I do not know who, but someone is not happy. They want to launch the innovation, the innovation it is someone from the digital IT.’ I waited three weeks and at the end of three weeks, I restarted, I reactivated and then the people posted in the community because they liked it”. (super_6).

As a result, members of the organization were caught in a paradox in which they saw ESM flattening the organization at the same time as evidence of it maintaining the hierarchy. One informant observed, “From a hierarchical point of view we are still a typical pyramid.” (steer_6). Even the areas of the organization that felt like the change was successful described the change in paradoxical ways: There was this phase where not everybody but a number of managers, including those at a very high level, were saying, “Yes, basically it disrupts my hierarchical line, I risk losing my power and controlling the flow of information, and it will disrupt me. I risk being overwhelmed, so I'm not necessarily inclined to give Athena the best welcome. Yes, we were a bit anxious, in particular about managers who are very structured, that really, I think, thought their process, their cascade of information, everything is very normative, they know exactly how it works. These people are often very analytical and that's it. And so Athena runs against their tendencies in a rather brash way. Well, they were mainly these profiles who were the most disturbed” (exec_2). As a result, the intended affordances offered the promise of a flatter organization, but at the same time the unintended affordances reinforced the focus on the power of the individuals interacting on ESM as epitomized in the following quote: “we imagined that ESM was going to revolutionize the managerial culture of Chameleos. However, what I have figured out is that social media reflects, in an extremely faithful manner, the managerial culture of our group… It is a very
hierarchical culture. And I see it in my online community. I will say that spontaneous contributions to ESM were made by people who, how to say, consider themselves at a certain level of responsibility and have a higher influence/power compared to other members of the same group...They feel that they are more able to speak up in my online community. (champ_2).”

**Hiding voice on ESM.** Although the argument was that all employees in the organization would have a voice, Chameleos explicitly discouraged some posts, for example, posts about unions: “Unions should not have their online group on ESM as we do not want them to profit from ESM to spread voices we do not want” (steer_4). Similarly, during the roll out, there was a sentiment spreading at Chameleos that Athena was mainly a platform for white-collar employees in the offices: “We were unable to train everybody and online trainings in factories did not work well. We were unable to train everybody so we concentrated on our white-collar employees at the headquarters and notably the managers” (steer_5). Despite the fact that posting on ESM was encouraged, it was implicitly forbidden to call into question any key practices revolving around strategic organizational aspects such as HR practices or issues. As a result, resources and reasoning associated with the old culture hardened: “Posting poses a kind of risk. You have to think 100 times before posting something as you never know who will view your posts. This is important because it’s a major obstacle. That’s why I understand that if I post it in our community, you have to double check. For me now, it’s better to play safe and just post something that you’re 100% sure you want to post.” (light_2). Perhaps more perniciously, ESM was supposed to provide access to more information, in particular a new channel for leaders to dialogue with employees. Still, what was observed is that their conversations were mainly directed to private groups with other similar top executives as the ESM community manager observed: “Many top executives post only in their private groups. They do not post a lot on their walls. Thus, the employees who follow them on ESM get nothing; they cannot see all their posts or make comments” (steer_4). Thus, while Athena was meant to spur new conversations, the creeping sense of caution while posting, the sense that some groups were marginalized, and the confinement of top managers to specific private groups created a paradox between flattening the organization while maintaining the hierarchy.

In sum, in trying to change a cultural toolkit, leaders almost inevitably activate and reinforce the existing cultural toolkit in the spirit of switching to a new one as exemplified by the following quote: “We realise that the way they [top leaders] voice their views reflects the natural way they voice their views in meetings, in fact it doesn’t encourage the others to get any more involved in playing an active part in the decision-making processes... I don’t think we’ve yet found the means to get people to speak freely.” (champ_2)

### 4. Discussion

Our research considers that ESM not only as a suite of affordances, but as a cultural toolkit (Harrison & Corley, 2011) in itself. Symbols have always been part of culture and are often socio-material in nature (Orlikowski & Scott, 2008), so ESM can quickly become a symbol of culture. More profoundly though, the affordance of ESM can be designed to enable behaviors that align with other cultural resources as they become actualized (Strong et al., 2014) in terms of stories of networked organizational interactions and perspectives that reinforce the idea that the ESM technology was successful. Still, the confluence of perception and automaticity caused by the constraining nature (Hutchby, 2001) of unintended affordances become murky when the goal is to have ESM change the organizational culture. Together, the socio-material symbolism of technology, the affordances that encourage behaviors, and the stories and perspectives represent a cultural toolkit.

Current research with an affordance focus often examines the detailed behaviors that a technology can enable. For example, managers might use the data transparency of social media as a tool for tracking employees (Leonardi & Contractor, 2019) or employees might use ESM new work connections (Neeley & Leonardi, 2018). Our emergent results shift the focus from individual behaviors that align or misalign with intended affordances, to a more holistic view of ESM. This shift is both theoretically important and practically useful. We argue that viewing ESM as a toolkit offers a broader theoretical lens for
examining technology impact. Thus, our work helps to understand the confluence of organizational paradoxes that emerge by moving the use of ESM from specific phenomena such as socializing newcomers (Leidner, Gonzalez, & Koch, 2018) to more holistic phenomena such as transforming the culture of an organization.

Future research could benefit by integrating a sociometric analysis to assess the degree to which ESM reached its change-oriented goals. Leveraging system data from ESM platform (Leonardi & Vaast, 2017) can help us to understand its contribution to organizational culture by analyzing metrics such as network cohesion, centralization or clustering (Kilduff & Brass, 2010).

5. Conclusion

Facebook was initially lauded as a mechanism for spreading democracy and freedom during the so-called “Arab Spring” (Jose Antonio, 2012) but also eviscerated for impeding democracy by aiding the spread of false information during elections in Western nations (Erin, 2018). Technology cuts both ways: extending a promise of major transformation while subtly having a doppelganger effect with the opposite outcome – strengthening the status quo. If ESM had a human voice it might ask, “Am I part of the cure, or part of the disease?” (Coldplay, 2002). From our emergent theory it becomes clear how and why senior leaders believe ESM to be part of the cure yet, paradoxically, also part of the disease – the touted benefits of cultural bypass are subsumed by the unintended affordances of ESM. Continued attention to the paradoxical nature of ESM media as a facilitator for organizational change along with increased sensitivity to the paradoxes that emerge are needed if firms are to capture the promise of ESM technology without falling victim to the paradoxes embedded in its deployment.

References


