

## CRITICAL INFORMATION SYSTEMS RESEARCH: A HABERMASIAN APPROACH

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### ABSTRACT

*The paper presents a critical inquiry into the relationship between Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) and progressive rationalisation in modern organisations. By drawing on the evidence from a field study of a University consultative process, the paper investigates how communicative practices embedded in a public discourse via CMC influence rationalisation of organisational processes. This investigation has been conducted within a theoretical framework of social interaction derived from a particular interpretation of Habermas's theory of communicative action in an organisational context. By interpreting electronic messages as linguistic acts and social actions, the paper seeks to provide a new insight into an appropriation and use of CMC. Moreover, by analyzing communicative practices in the light of relationships between social actions, systems rationalisation and lifeworld rationalisation, the paper seeks to explain both visible and hidden impacts of the public discourse via CMC on the organisation.*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Critical IS researchers have recognised the importance of meaning-making power of electronic modes of communication (enabled by IS) in contemporary organisations that not only determine their material and economic production, but also (re)construct individual and collective identities, and shape social and cultural reproduction (Ngwenyama and Lee, 1997; Olesen and Myers, 1999; Cecez-Kecmanovic and Janson, 2000). While this understanding is applicable to many types of Information Systems (IS), it is especially pertinent for IS based on various e-mail, groupware and internet technologies that are designed to enable electronic communication and collaboration. Namely, in many instances of organisational use of e-mails or other Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) systems for public debate, the question arises how organisational electronic discourses produce and reproduce organisations.

In this paper I address this question by exploring the use of CMC for public electronic discourse during a University restructuring process (a field study conducted in 1997/8). As a participant, I was intrigued by ways in which CMC affected individuals, the University and its academic community. I was also concerned with the discrepancy between the intended, visible role of CMC as an open social space for unconstrained debate, on one hand, and widespread disappointments with its outcomes among participants, on the other. Gradually I came to recognise all major concepts and themes from Habermas's theory of communicative action (1984, 1987): social interaction in an electronic space, e-mails as linguistic acts and social actions; systems imperatives such as funding cuts, market pressures, efficiency and effectiveness of the University

operations, and the like; lifeworld issues raised by participants such as concerns for the future of the University community, collective identity and collective responsibility; rationalisation of the University (as both system and lifeworld), etc. My interpretation of Habermas's social theory in organisational context resulted in a framework that helped me understand deeper meanings of electronic discourses and their more profound social implications, including subtle, hidden ways they shaped the University.

This research builds on several important contributions to the understanding of IS—organisation relationships informed by critical social theory, and in particular Habermas's theory of communicative action (Klein and Lyytinen, 1985; Hirschheim, Klein, and Lyytinen, 1996; Ngwenyama and Lee, 1997; Myers and Young, 1997; Cecez-Kecmanovic and Janson, 1999; Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2001). This particular approach to critical IS research has been shown to open new avenues for investigation of IS—organisation interaction, leading to new research questions and potentially relevant answers. However, it has been subjected to serious criticism and ideological condemnation (Wilson, 1997). Klein (1999) also rightly points to the lack of empirical foundation and problems with linking critical theory with methodology in critical IS research that impacted upon its legitimacy and acceptance in the IS research community. The research I present in this paper addresses some of these concerns, provides an example of an IS critical empirical study and demonstrates how critical theory is linked to a critical research methodology.

My specific aims in the paper are threefold: a) to briefly present the field study of the University public consultation via CMC, b) to illustrate the Habermasian framework for a critical inquiry into electronic organisational discourses by applying it to this study, and c) to discuss contribution to knowledge from this analysis and potential limitations of the framework. The structure of the paper follows these aims.

## **2. RESEARCH METHOD**

The research method used in the field study was critical ethnography (Myers, 1997; Myers and Young, 1997; Thomas, 1993; Forrester, 1992). The study is part of a larger critical IS research program informed by Habermas's (1984, 1987) critical theory (Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2001; Cecez-Kecmanovic and Janson, 2000; Cecez-Kecmanovic, et al., 2000; Treleaven et al, 1999).

As a participant-observer I conducted the ethnographic fieldwork in the University X during 1997/1998. Two other members of the University and a research assistant took part in different stages of the study. While we observed the whole consultative process, my focus was on appropriation and use of CMC in the process. Specifically, I was interested in communicative practices via CMC in the broader social, cultural and historical context of University X. As a participant in the consultative process I had access to and collected all the e-mails and documents distributed by CMC (130). I also participated and made notes at the meetings, forums and informal gatherings. In addition my research collaborators and I conducted fifty unstructured and semi-structured interviews with academics and general staff, spanning the range of executive, faculty/units, seniority, gender, length of service, and extent of (in)visible participation in the process. The interviews, typically one and a half hours long, were taped and transcribed. The resulting ethnographic material was coded and analysed for more than a year (and we still continue to do so in a less intensive way). As participants, we not only brought 'insider knowledge' to the study but also enabled data to be contextualised both historically and in terms of their local meanings. This enabled a richer picture of and a critical attitude toward the context and meaning of social interactions and communicative practices.

## **3. FIELD STUDY: A STORY OF THE UNIVERSITY ELECTRONIC DISCOURSE**

In response to funding cuts by the Government, the President of University X conducted a broad-based consultation with staff (250 academic and 420 general staff) about University restructuring and rationalisation. The consultation process throughout 1997 involved public forums, facilitated

workgroups, a Planning conference, and a variety of working teams and committees. A key communication medium, however, was a CMC system--a particular setup of e-mail and intranet--managed by a coordinator and accessible by all staff. This included a dedicated e-mail facility that enabled each staff member to receive and send messages and documents related to the consultation. Moreover, these messages and documents were at the same time posted on a special intranet page, serving as a repository of discussions and a 'memory' of the consultation.

The purpose of the CMC system was to:

- enable organisation-wide communication, discussion and sharing of information independent of limitations imposed by time and space
- maintain an accessible electronic repository of messages and documents created in the process
- enable effective and efficient coordination between different individuals and groups involved in the consultative process.

Throughout the consultative process more than 130 messages, discussion papers and documents were exchanged via CMC.

The consultation started with a series of strategic issues papers distributed via CMC by members of the University Executive and the President. They addressed future social and economic environment, changes in higher education, changes of academic structure, resource allocation and management models, income generation problems and opportunities etc. The ensuing public discussions took place in forums and via CMC leading up to the Planning Conference in mid 1997. Initially, staff displayed a cautious attitude towards speaking freely. While in this stage electronic discussion was sporadic and without focus, it gradually opened a new social space for debate. As an academic staff put it: *anyone could put anything on it...it was just open space for everyone to put their things in, ..., it was sort of open slather.*

Six weeks after the Conference, the President released a draft document *University Restructure*, which he stated was *based on the consultative processes*. The major change proposed by the *Restructure* document was a redesign of the academic, administrative and executive structure and a new *centralised staffing and resource allocation model*. The University community was given approximately one month (September) in which to discuss the document and provide feedback. An intensive e-mail discussion followed producing 67 messages by individuals and groups, both academic and general staff members and units. In the discussion that followed, most academic staff members objected the President's arguments and especially his proposal to centralise funding decisions. The President however did not engage in the discussion. Soon after the close of the e-mail discussion, he announced by e-mail his final *University Restructure document* in which the original proposal for centralised staff funding remained basically unchanged. While he made no attempt to respond to any of the criticisms and disputed claims, he added a new argument stating that it is in *the interest of the institution as a whole*. The new financial allocation model was implemented in the first quarter of 1998 when the University restructure took effect.

The participants in the CMC debate in this stage expressed freely their concerns and criticism of consultative process. While many staff members were disappointed with the final *Restructure document* they still continued to participate in the implementation phase. The electronic public debate seized towards the end of 1997.

#### **4. ANALYSIS OF THE FIELD DATA USING HABERMASIAN THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

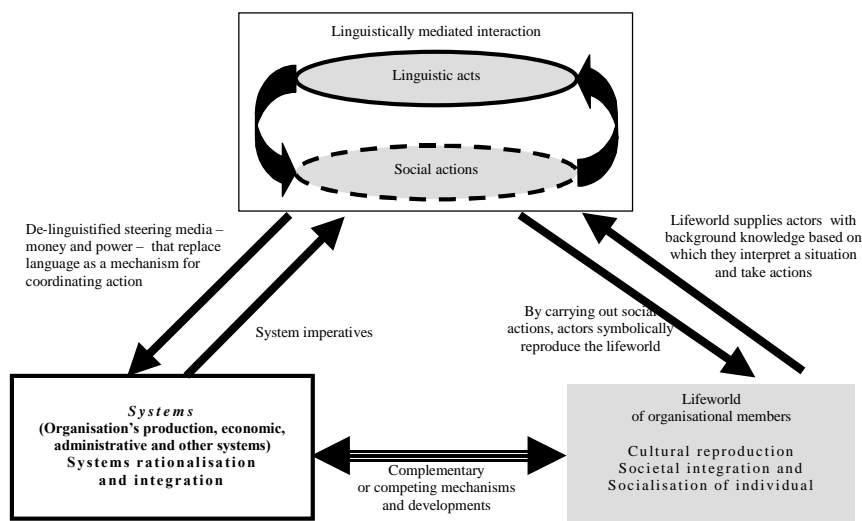
The brief description of the Consultative process, presented above, indicates how electronic discourse over CMC emerged. By announcing the consultative process and inviting staff first, to put forward ideas and suggestions in the initial phase, and second, to respond to his draft

*Restructure* document later on, the President clearly stated that he wanted to consult with staff and that all issues were open for discussion. The extensive use of CMC throughout the consultation made all information readily accessible to all staff, opened the restructuring process to criticism by all interested parties, and generally gave an impression that the process was transparent and inclusive. Especially in the first half of the process, the participants raised expectations that CMC would foster freedom of speech, contribute to equality of participation and reduce status-related barriers. However, as the e-mail discussion unfolded, especially during September, participants noticed that the President did not actually engage in argumentation. He did not respond to participants' criticism of and arguments against the proposed changes in his *Restructuring* document, nor did he comment on counter-arguments and alternative proposals. The evidence shows that his understanding of the University problems (eg. the critical financial situation and lack of flexibility of academic structure) and his major solutions were not publicly altered by well-argued criticism and counter-proposals expressed by many participants during the debate. In particular, the most disputed issue of centralisation of staff funding, proposed in his draft *Restructuring* document, remained unchanged in the final document, and subsequently implemented.

The President's establishment of the consultative process, including CMC as an extended social space for public discourse, on the one hand, and subsequent ignorance of criticism and counter-arguments by staff, on the other, were contradictory. It is hard to understand why the President put so much effort and energy to establish consultative process and then ignored staff criticism, arguments and proposals, and never engaged in the debate himself. Moreover, as evidence shows, the use of CMC did help in making the whole process open, transparent and seemingly democratic. However, such a process paradoxically helped advance a repressive outcome, the one most vigorously disputed by the participants in the consultation. To explain these contradictions, one needs to explore beyond the *words* and understand the *deeds*. Or, in Habermas's terms, one has to examine beyond *linguistic acts* and understand *social actions*.

#### **4.1. Linguistic Acts and Social Actions**

Habermas's theory of communicative action (1984;1987) identifies two levels of social interactions: i) the level of speech or *linguistic acts* and ii) the level of *social actions* constituted by individual linguistic acts (see Fig 1.). The linguistic acts are an observable part of linguistically mediated social interaction. By sending e-mails, a participant aims to achieve something, that is, to perform an action. As interactions via CMC exclude body language, the meaning of actions is derived from 'pure' linguistic acts, as they appear on the screen. In the case of the University X consultative process, the President was pretty explicit in his e-mails and *Restructuring* documents that his objectives were to resolve the financial crisis, to achieve efficiency, flexibility and responsiveness, to increase earning capacity, etc. On the other hand, most staff members were explicit about their aims to preserve financial devolution and autonomy of schools. Therefore, by posting e-mails, interpreted as linguistic acts, they all attempted to perform different actions.



**Figure 1:** The framework for a critical inquiry into electronic organisational discourses informed by Habermas's theory of communicative actions

According to Habermas's theory, the type of social action can be determined based on the way participants (attempt to) achieve their goals. Actors *oriented to success* aim to achieve the goal by intervening in the target system *instrumentally*, or by influencing other actors (presumably rational opponents), that is, by acting *strategically*. By undertaking instrumental or strategic actions, an actor is concerned only with goals, that is, intended changes (in the system) and the most effective means to achieve them, disregarding the needs, interests and values of other fellow actors. Contrary to them, actors *oriented to understanding* achieve their goals by communicating with other actors in order to achieve a common understanding of the problem at hand, based on which they coordinate their action planes. Habermas calls these actions *communicative actions*. Therefore, "social actions can be distinguished according to whether the participants adopt either a success-oriented attitude or one oriented to reaching understanding" (Habermas, 1984, p.286).

The way the President used the CMC system, the way he invited staff for consultation and then failed to engaged in the argumentation process, suggests that he adopted a success-oriented attitude and tried to achieve his objectives by influencing participants. His action may therefore be interpreted as strategic action. However, the analysis of his linguistic acts indicates that he did not want to show his strategic intent and that he upheld the appearance of communicative action (acting as if he is oriented to mutual understanding), which is confirmed in his final *Restructure* document:

*The genesis of this Restructure document emerges from collegial processes traditional in a university, as reflected in institutional discourse and related consultative activities. ... it is important to remind ourselves that although the "Restructure document" necessarily has a great deal to say about structure and our future operating framework, this has been driven by an extensive period of wide-ranging institutional discourse about the future of our core mission: teaching, learning and research. (7-10-97; p.7)*

In this quote, the speaker presents (in an attempt to reconstruct) himself as someone who is committed to academic tradition and *collegial processes*, claiming that the final *Restructure* document emerged from such a tradition, institutional discourse and the consultative process. Here, however, he also reconstructs the process, presenting it as a *wide-ranging institutional discourse*. This example and many others indicate that, in fact, he undertook strategic action with the appearance of a communicative action, which Habermas calls *covert strategic action*.

Most staff members were lead to believe that the President's invitation to consult with staff meant that he wanted to explore University problems cooperatively and establish mutual understanding

with staff. They understood the consultative process as an opportunity for a community dialogue. This was evident for instance at the beginning of the public e-mail discussion when staff (mostly academic) raised and explored problems other than those identified by the Executive. Furthermore, participants in the September public discussion openly criticised the President's draft proposal, aiming to increase mutual understanding (not only with the President but with other staff as well) and establish cooperative interpretation of University problems. The analysis of e-mail postings indicates that many participants undertook a communicative action believing that the President did too. This was confirmed by their interviews showing how disappointed they were towards the end of consultation. As one staff member put it: *It appears that a course of action has already been decided and will be implemented no matter what the wider university community thinks of it.* Both attempts to use CMC in achieving goals, by acting either strategically (more or less overtly) or communicatively appeared to be productive. However, only the President was successful. For him, the appropriation of CMC in the consultative process played an essential role in enabling his covert strategic acting:

- He used CMC as an effective means to influence participants, to set the agenda, to frame problems and impose solutions,
- He used CMC (e-mail especially) to establish an appearance of an open dialogue, free criticism, unrestricted debate in which *everybody can have their say*,
- By conducting a public debate via CMC he made an impression that he wanted to expose his ideas and proposals to public scrutiny and criticism,
- He invited and encouraged staff on many occasions to raise issue, discuss any options and proposals (via CMC), thus creating a huge number of messages and documents (flood of information) from which one could not easily make sense of what the University community actually wanted.

The appropriation of CMC in the consultative process enabled the President first to act strategically and then to conceal his strategic intent and pretend to act communicatively. In such a way he succeeded to achieve his objectives in the University restructure not by using his power in an authoritarian way, but by *conducting comprehensive consultation with staff*. This partially explains why he took the trouble of conducting the consultative process.

#### **4.2. Actions, Systems and Lifeworld**

By performing linguistic acts and carrying out social actions, participants in interaction not only pursue their goals, they also define a situation and a problem at hand, they present themselves and recreate personal and group identities, they (re)establish their position and legitimacy, they maintain or alter their views about working environment and working relationships, etc. In other words, linguistic acts and social actions cannot be fully understood without exploration of their relationships with *systems* (production, administrative, economic) and the *lifeworld* (Habermas, 1987). Consequently, the role of CMC in organisational discourse cannot be explained without further insight into its implications on the major organisation constitutive processes such as *system rationalisation* and *social integration*.

Namely, by interpreting Habermas's social theory in organisational contexts, an organisation can be seen simultaneously as the *system* and as the *lifeworld* of its members (Fig 1). A system aspect of an organisation involves its material and intellectual production, its economic foundation, administrative and management structure, formal decision making processes and control mechanisms, policies, rules and regulations, etc. In order to survive, systems -- such as University X -- have to be more and more productive, economical, efficient, effective, that is, driven by purposive rationality. Without further exploration, it is important to emphasise here that the

development and maintenance of organisational systems are steered by *power* structures and *money* allocations, largely disconnected from norms and values.

The lifeworld, on the other hand, is the taken-for-granted universe of daily social activities of organisational members. It consists of unproblematic, cultural knowledge shared by organisational members, involves a vast and unexpressed set of beliefs, convictions, tacit assumptions, and values that are in the background of social interaction. Members draw upon this knowledge to make sense of a situation, other actors, and their linguistic acts, and to take actions. When, for instance, participants in the University discussion refer to *community*, and identify themselves as *we*, they in fact, have in mind their lifeworld. By acting communicatively and coordinating their actions based on mutual understanding, actors rely on membership in a social group and their lifeworld, thus strengthening the *social integration* of the group. In Habermas's words communicative actions serve as a medium for symbolic reproduction of the lifeworld.

The meaning of Habermas's differentiation of actions oriented to success and actions oriented to reaching understanding can only be fully understood in relation to system rationalisation and social integration. Actions oriented to success are driven by purposive rationality (instrumental or strategic) and are coordinated by money and power, based on interest positions. Money and power, *steering media* as Habermas calls them, "replace language as a mechanism for coordinating action. They set social action loose from integration through value consensus and switch it over to purposive rationality steered by media" (Habermas, 1984, p.342). System integration in organisational context operates through power structures and money allocation mechanisms and is driven by economic and administrative rationality, independent of lifeworld concerns. On the other hand, the lifeworld is reproduced and rationalised by way of communicative action, in which intersubjective understanding, achieved through language, is a basis of action coordination. These are mechanisms by which social integration is achieved.

CMC as adopted by University X for electronic organisational discourse changed the context for social actions in both visible and hidden ways. The University-wide CMC introduced unprecedented openness and transparency of decision making processes. Posting of messages via CMC was not restricted by any means: could have been about any problem or aspect of the University life, of any length, and in any form or shape. The space for action seemed unrestricted, open to anybody who had ideas, proposals, arguments, or complaints and was willing to engage in consultation. From that point of view CMC was presented (and sometimes perceived) as an extension of the social space intended to contribute to rationalisation of the lifeworld: assisting participants to develop intersubjective meanings and mutual understanding and thereby coordinate their plans of actions. In other words CMC was endorsed as enabling and assisting communicative action. And indeed this new social space for action looked markedly different from traditional face-to-face encounters (large forums, meetings or small group sessions) that preserved power-laden interaction patterns, cultural norms regarding roles (such as the role of the President of the University, the role of an academic etc.) and implied constraints and inequalities in their relationships.

However, besides the intended 'visible' impact on rationalisation of the lifeworld, CMC had other less visible, or more precisely, hidden impacts. Namely, this very notion of CMC as an enabler of open and uninhibited interaction was in fact a key enabler of the President's covert strategic actions. The President was convinced that CMC was a right vehicle to explain problems to the University members (*getting people to understand that it's now different...environment...*) and make them aware of the harsh conditions in which the University has to operate (funding cuts, increased competition, and deregulation of higher education). Counting on the perception of CMC as an enabler of communicative action, the President used CMC to frame problems, set the agenda and influence participants (in his interview he used the words *consciously persuading*) while bypassing

processes of consensus formation and ignoring attempts by some participants to develop mutual understanding. Moreover, by pretending to act communicatively, he used system imperatives (effectiveness of operations, efficiency and flexibility of academic structure, increasing income earning capacity) to justify his restructuring model, including centralised control of resources. As a result the lifeworld context of participants “gets *devalued*: the lifeworld is not longer necessary for coordinating actions” (Habermas, 1987, p. 281). In such a way he instrumentalised a communicatively structured lifeworld and the perceived role of CMC in order to achieve his goals. This has the character of deception and distorted communication. A comment from an academic’s interview is indicative:

*I think there was a well-defined process for asking people what they thought and for getting that back... there was still a power centre that set the agenda and set the framework for consultation, controlled and managed that very carefully... it is a way of drawing areas of potential resistance and taking control of them, appropriating them...diminishing them in some way, even if it is just in the process of hearing them, or letting groups or people be heard.(Interview #4)*

The hidden impact of CMC was distorted communication and deception of participants. Distortion was anchored in the formal conditions for electronic discourse: unrestricted and unlimited electronic postings, and the absence of any rules and norms of conduct and argumentation process in the electronic social space (eg. the principle of contestability and fallibility of all claims; obligation to respond to contested claims). While these conditions may look as unintended, resulting from the lack of experience, there is evidence indicating that they were in fact deliberately chosen. In his interview, the President explained that they were necessary to obtain *the most uninhibited and honest views*. During the consultative process he refused to discuss any *procedural aspect of consultation* or conditions for electronic discourse.

Not everybody though was so naïve as to fail to notice at least some aspect of distorted communication and deception. Some participants even try to warn others that the electronic discourse as it is set up

*fragments and individualises responses...[which] takes away from our collective responsibilities and encourages a disabling form of individualism. Whilst there should always be space for people to make individual responses, it should also be acknowledged that we are not only a group of individuals: we are an academic community concerned for the intellectual integrity of our courses and the ways in which these will be organised. (an e-mail by two academics, 4 Sept)*

*I think the culture of organisation works against [collaboration between individuals and groups across the institution] at the moment.... I think we have all protected and policed our boundaries very effectively in the past and the system has been set up to make us do that.(interview #23).*

These excerpts suggest that the hidden danger of unlimited and unrestricted electronic discourse has been recognized. They point to the assumption behind such a discourse: that the University is conceived as *a group of individuals*. The conditions for the electronic discourse are created precisely for the University as a group of individuals and not for the University as an academic community. For instance, such electronic discourse did encourage presentation of individual interests and positions but prevented articulation of collective interests, building collective understanding or coordination of actions. In other words, the University electronic discourse in fact disabled exactly what it professed to enable--communicative action.

Those staff that still attempted to act communicatively, raising concerns regarding the future of the University, addressing academic collective identity and responsibility, failed to engage others. As these communicative attempts to achieve mutual understanding and converge to an agreed



restructure model failed, and the President ignored staff concerns, objections and criticism, the lifeworld concerns and systemic imperatives are pushed further apart. This is another hidden implication of the electronic discourse: systems rationality was given preference to social integration. This is precisely what Habermas perceives as one of the dangers of increased complexity of modern organisations and society: when systems integration takes over and subsumes social integration, this leads to 'colonization' and erosion of lifeworld.

## **5. CONCLUSION**

The field study of the University X restructure and staff consultation through CMC provided rich evidence to examine how organisational electronic discourses produce and reproduce organisations. In the course of doing that, I proposed a theoretical framework for critical investigation of the use and role of CMC in organisational discourses (schematically presented in Figure 1) based on interpretation of Habermas's theory of communicative action in an organisational context. This framework enables interpretation of linguistic exchanges via CMC at two interrelated levels of analysis. At one level, it enables the analyses of how participants use CMC as a social space to exchange linguistic acts and undertake different social actions. At the other level, the framework enables exploration of the relationship between the CMC-supported social interactions and rationalisation of both systems and a lifeworld of participants. This Habermasian framework provides a methodological contribution to critical IS research, upon which future IS--organisation interaction studies can be based.

A more specific contribution from this research is an understanding of deeper meanings of CMC and of more profound and hidden social implications of electronic discourses beyond the obvious realm of exchange of messages. The proposed critical Habermasian framework helped explain how it became possible to use a particular appropriation of CMC to create an open, transparent process of public consultation and use it to frame problems, control the agenda, promote interests and objectives of a privileged group (the President and the Executive) as those of the organisation (eg. increasing central control of funds). Furthermore, based on these insights I argued that it is precisely unrestricted and unlimited electronic postings via CMC, and the absence of rules and norms on how to conduct an argumentation process in the electronic social space (that is the formal conditions for electronic discourse) that enabled distorted communication and deception of participants.

The theoretical Habermasian framework provides concepts to understand constellation between systems and lifeworld. In the University X case systems rationalisation and social integration were in conflict. This, however, is but one constellation among a range of possible constellations and interdependencies between systems and lifeworld, between systems rationalisation and social integration, as Habermas's theory posits. Systemic rationalisation and societal integration are not necessarily competing developments. They can in fact be complementary. On one hand, systems maintenance and development can be subject to the substantive and normative restrictions of the lifeworld. Conversely, societal integration through communicative action can be subject to the constraints of material reproduction. However, only when a rationalised lifeworld of a social group subjects the imperatives of system maintenance to the needs of its members, could an organisation hope to become emancipated (Wellmer, 1994). Consequently, when CMC supports rationalisation of the lifeworld of organisational members so that they can achieve understanding and agreement about the systems changes, CMC would have a potential to assist an organisation's emancipation (Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2001, Cecez-Kecmanovic and Janson, 2000).

At the end I would like to express my concern that the proposed Habermasian framework cannot be easily and successfully applied without extensive knowledge of Habermas's theory of communicative action, which is a considerable drawback. Other limitations may come from my

interpretation of Habermas's social theory in organisational context. Field studies like the one presented here, are called for to apply the framework, create new knowledge, and question and change its theoretical constructs and their relationships.

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