

CMC and the Question of Democratisation: a University Field Study

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Abstract

The potential of Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) to enable new forms of social interaction and foster democratisation of decision making has raised much interest but has been challenged by contradictory research results. Conceived as a tool, CMC was examined in terms of its social effects thus indicating a degree of technological determinism. In this paper, we explore CMC as an extension of a productive social space of linguistically-mediated interaction, drawing on Habermas's theory of communicative action. By examining the evidence from a field study of a university, we identify how participants appropriate CMC to produce a consultative discourse motivated by divergent agendas. This investigation helps us better understand communicative practice and concurrent tendencies of CMC towards encouraging and obstructing democratisation.

1. Introduction

Interest in democratisation of organisational decision-making processes has been heightened by the deployment of Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) technologies, such as electronic mail, computer conferencing, group support systems and other types of groupware. Sproull and Kiesler for instance, claim that CMC technologies "are surprisingly consistent with Western images of democracy". ([31], p. 13). The consistency between CMC and the ideals of freedom of speech, equality of participants, and participatory, democratic decision-making has been found in many research studies [30], [31], [10]. The equalising effect of CMC and the contribution to more equitable participation were also reported earlier by McGuire et al. [21] and Siegel et al. [29].

Other researchers have, however, questioned the democratising potential of CMC [1], [4], [5], [8]. Rice [27] found that CMC tend to enforce rather than reduce status-related differences. Studies conclude that CMC are effective in overcoming physical barriers but that they do not necessarily address social barriers, as they are designed to support existing power structures and hierarchies.

Some conflicting research findings have been attributed to the different populations involved in research (students vs managers) and their varying experience with CMC [26]. On the other hand, the democratising effect of CMC has been found to be contingent upon the social context and specific organisational cultures [6], [19]. Whilst to understand the impact of CMC it is necessary to situate it within its social context, it is also important to realise that "the very context itself is not given but made, inherited and appropriated in subtle political ways" ([11] p. 44; [14]).

While these explanations do help in understanding some of the conflicting research findings, we would agree with Mantovani [19] that the very search for social impacts and specifically democratising effects of CMC, implicitly assumes some degree of technological determinism. CMC is implicitly perceived as a *tool* that, by virtue of its implementation and use in a particular organisational setting, is expected to produce some social effects.

We propose instead a new conceptualisation of CMC as an extension of a *social space of linguistically-mediated interaction*. Such a conceptualisation of CMC necessitates broadening the view of organisational decision-making, dominant in traditional management theory, that assumes *purposive-instrumental rationality* of actors who gain knowledge about a situation based on which they choose effective means (actions) to achieve their particular ends. We argue that an alternative Critical Theory approach, and specifically Habermas's theory of communicative action, offers a broader perspective of organisational decision-making, more suitable for the proposed conceptualisation of CMC, [12], [13], [17], [24], [25]. Habermas's formal-

pragmatic approach to linguistic communications shifts attention from the narrow view of goal-directed actions and purposive-instrumental rationality to the communicative structures of social interactions and *communicative rationality* thus providing a categorial framework for the examination of CMC as an extension of a social space and ensuing democratising tendencies.

This paper explores the concept of CMC as a productive social space and related democratisation tendencies in a specific organisational setting. By drawing on the evidence from a field study in a university, we examine the ways participants appropriate CMC to produce a consultative discourse motivated by divergent agendas. More specifically, we investigate participants' productive appropriation of CMC and the ways they perform linguistic acts and undertake actions, thereby recreating themselves and reproducing social relations.

In section two, we briefly outline the theoretical foundation of our study. In section three, we discuss the research methodology employed. In section four, we introduce the field site and provide a description of the University's consultative process. In section five, we analyse field data using the Habermasian theoretical framework and draw conclusions regarding democratisation attempts. In the final section, we raise implications of our study and discuss questions worthy of further investigation.

2. Adapting Habermas's theory of communicative action

Much modern thought, including management theories, posit that an actor interacts with the world around him through representation and action [20]. This is based on "cognitive-instrumental rationality of a subject capable of gaining knowledge about the contingent environment and putting it to effective use in intelligently adapting to and manipulating that environment" ([20], p. xi). An actor, as a goal-oriented subject, is rational to the degree that the means he chooses to achieve his goals are effective and efficient. Furthermore, the selection of goals themselves can be more or less rational depending on actor's values and preferences.

Habermas proposes an alternative, more comprehensive conception of rationality, namely *communicative rationality*. Central to his theory is the claim that "reaching understanding is the inherent telos of human speech" Habermas ([12], p. 287) and that the use of language oriented toward understanding is the primary mode of language use. It is this rational potential, implicit in everyday speech, oriented to understanding that Habermas calls communicative rationality. The concept of communicative rationality, related to achieving understanding in language, points "on the one side, to different forms of discursively redeeming validity claims"

and "on the other side, ... to relations to the world that communicative actors take up in raising validity claims for their expressions" ([12], p. 75).

The theory of communicative action provides the conceptual instruments needed to analyze the rational basis of linguistic communication in everyday social interactions including those performed via CMC. Of particular interest is Habermas's formal-pragmatic approach to language that goes beyond syntactic and semantic analysis of grammar and meaning and focuses on the use of language, that is, the performative character of linguistic utterances. Like Austin [3] and Searle [28], Habermas [12] explores speech or linguistic acts by which actors raise different validity claims, that are in principle contestable. Habermas extends the analysis of speech acts further and considers how linguistic acts by individual actors are combined to create an interaction complex. In such a way he introduces an interaction level at which different actors coordinate their plans of action. At this level linguistic acts function as a mechanism for coordinating plans of action by different actors which in turn implies that the meaning of what is said is derived from the interaction structure of social action.

In summary, Habermas's formal-pragmatic approach to linguistically-mediated social interaction identifies two levels of social interactions (Fig 1.):

- the level of linguistic acts and
- the level of social actions constituted by individual linguistic acts

At the level of linguistic acts we deal with an observable, experiential world of language. When we speak we raise at least three *validity claims*:

- a) we refer to the entities and states of affairs of the 'objective world' and claim that something is the case in the world;
- b) we refer to norms that obtain in our shared 'social world' claiming normative rightness, eg. that our actions are right and legitimate or perhaps that some others are not;
- c) we refer to our inner, 'subjective world' claiming sincerity and truthfulness of our expressions.¹

Habermas claims that our ability to adopt different attitudes toward corresponding 'worlds' is the precondition for our reflective relation to the world [12]. As Cooke explains "A reflective relation to the world is present when participants in communication raise validity claims that can be reciprocally accepted or denied,..., on the bases of reason...The very notion of a validity claim thus seems to imply a reflective relation to the world." ([9], pp. 11-12)

An important issue here is that a participant in interaction recognises that other participants may have reasons for accepting, contesting or rejecting his validity

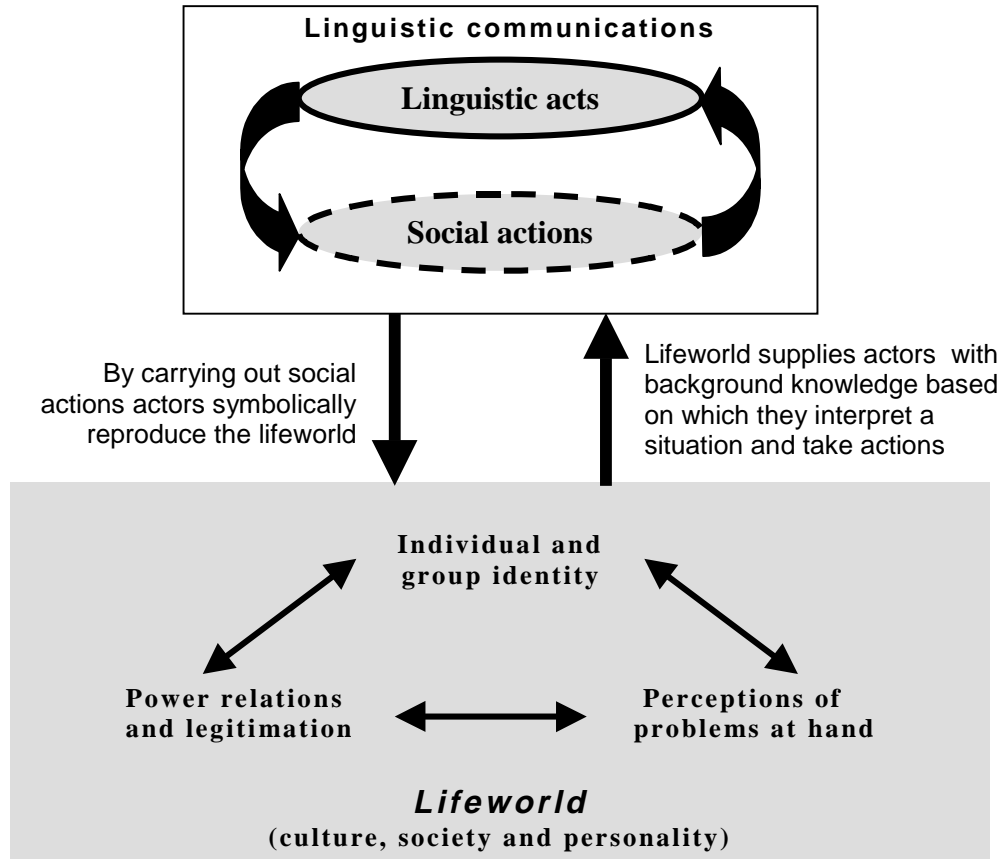


Figure 1 The model of social interaction adapted from Habermas' theory of communicative actions [12], [13]

claim. The possibility of open-ended and critical forms of argumentation, in which no claim to validity is exempt from examination, is vital for Habermas's concept of communicative rationality in everyday linguistic practices.

At the level of social actions, Habermas proposes that actors coordinate their plans to achieve their goals. Actions are identified indirectly based on actors' goals, their orientation (to success vs mutual understanding) and relations to the worlds (objective, social and subjective). Habermas distinguishes different types of social actions "according to how they specify the coordination among the goal-directed actions of different participants" ([12], p. 101). Actors oriented to success carry out strategic action by referring to the objective world (only) and pursuing their goals by way of influencing the behaviour of others (in a given situation the actor selects the means to attain his goal based on a calculation of expected consequences). Coordination is achieved through a reciprocal influencing among actors based on their interest positions. On the other hand, actors oriented to achieving understanding perform communicative action by referring simultaneously to the objective, social and subjective worlds in order to

harmonise their plans based on their common definition of a situation. Coordination of actions is achieved through cooperative processes of interpretation and communicatively reached agreement. As paradigmatic exemplars of purposeful-instrumental and communicative rationality, strategic and communicative action types are particularly relevant for our study.

The concepts of linguistic acts and social action are mutually interrelated, reciprocally defining one another, with obvious implications for the analysis of concrete social interactions. We can observe individual utterances, linguistic acts exchanged among participants that, through time, create an interaction complex within which orientation of actors and their goals can be identified. As actions are not necessarily obvious and clearly identifiable, a researcher, and for that matter a participant as well, may understand them only through the analysis of linguistic acts and the validity claims implied by them. The analysis of linguistic acts may reveal an actor's orientation and the goals he seeks to achieve in a particular situation thereby enabling identification of a social action he is carrying out. Understanding of the social action, in turn, enables

(re)interpretation of the meaning of individual linguistic acts and furthermore their performative effects i.e. what they do or produce in their context.

By performing linguistic acts and carrying out social actions, actors 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 working relationships, etc. In Habermas's words actions serve as a medium for symbolic reproduction of the lifeworld [13]. The lifeworld refers to the stock of implicit knowledge and socially established practices that function as a 'horizon-forming context of communication'. By drawing a shaded region in Fig 1. we meant to illustrate this horizon-framing role of lifeworld.

As a resource lifeworld provides background knowledge for actors to interpret a situation and take actions. On the other hand lifeworld is itself symbolically reproduced by these actions. This is a dialectic relationship. While Habermas defines three broad structural components of lifeworld, *culture*, *society* and *personality*, in our adaptation of his theory we focus on three sub-components appropriate for the purpose of our study: individual and group identity, power relations and legitimacy, and perception of problems at hand (modified from [11]), (Fig 1).

An analysis of the dialectic relationship between linguistic acts and social actions, on one hand, and lifeworld, on the other, even with its more restricted focus, provides a rich enough framework to explore the use of CMC as an extended social space of linguistic interaction. The questions of our particular interest are: how do actors, by performing linguistic acts via CMC, undertake actions, reproduce patterns of beliefs, shape attention and agendas, and other people's sense of the problem? This kind of analysis would shed more light on CMC's potential democratisation tendencies.

3. Research Methodology

Our research methodology derives from critical ethnography [11], [22], [32]. More specifically, critical ethnographic work in our study is guided by the theoretical framework adapted from Habermas's theory of communicative action as briefly described in the preceding section. Building on previous work by Forester [11], Ngwenyama and Lee [24], Myers and Young [23], we aim to highlight embedded pragmatics and communicative structures of social interactions enabled by CMC. We aim to explore how CMC was appropriated to support diverse social actions, to shape attention and agendas, and recreate social relations.

In our study, we focus on appropriation of CMC in the consultative process in a university undertaken during 1997 in the lead up to the strategic restructuring decision

implemented in 1998. The ethnographic study was conducted over an eighteen-month period. Two of the authors were members of the University at the time and therefore participants in the consultative process, while the third (a former member of the University) joined the research team following the consultation. As such we not only bring 'insider knowledge' to the study but also enable data to be contextualised both historically and in terms of their local meanings. This enables richer pictures of and a critical attitude toward the context and meaning of social interactions and communicative practices.

Two of the researchers, participants in the consultative process, collected e-mail messages and documents (most distributed via e-mail and intranet, and some as hard copies) generated during the process. Researchers also made observation notes especially during face-to-face meetings. In 1998 fifty 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, were conducted. The interviews, typically one and a half hours long, were taped and transcribed.

In terms of analysing the field data, identification of themes and issues has been on-going throughout the project. More specifically, the examination of CMC supported University-wide discourse, reported in this paper and elsewhere [6], [7], [33], [34], involved the following steps:

- Review of all e-mails during the consultative process and identification of major issues and themes raised by participants (eg. centralisation of staff resourcing, centralisation of administrative support, academic structure, re-organisation, academic values, vision of academia, etc.)
- Selection of 'centralisation of staff resourcing' as the most frequently discussed issue
- Selection of e-mails/sections of e-mails addressing the issue
- Analysis of the argumentation process (in temporal sequence throughout the process) at the level of linguistic acts focusing on: raising validity claims; responding to the claims in terms of acceptance, criticism and rejection of claims and reasons provided; noticeable absences of response to particular claims and criticisms
- Identification of goals and orientation of participants from the analysis of their linguistic acts
- Matching the goals, orientation and attitudes against the issue at hand, others and self (relations to the worlds) with social action types
- Analysis of interviews dealing with the selected issue for additional explanation and verification
- Re-reading of the complete e-mail discussion to test the interpretation and hypothesised social actions

- Re-interpretation of previously-selected linguistic acts within the context of social actions, and more broadly, in terms of their reproduction of lifeworld (individual and group identity, power relations and legitimation, framing attention).

In relation to the two levels of analysis, linguistic acts and social actions, we find it appropriate to apply the first principle for the evaluation of interpretive field research--the Fundamental principle of the hermeneutic circle--as defined by Klein and Myers [16]. Namely, the understanding of social interactions can be achieved by iterating between the meaning of linguistic acts (that is elements of interaction complexes defining actions) and the meaning of actions (determined by actors' goals, orientation and references to the worlds). Moreover, the mutually defining linguistic acts and social actions, as a social interaction complex is part of a larger context that is the lifeworld from which it gains meaning and which, in turn, it recreates.

4. The field study

4.1. Research site

The University, which we shall call Sygma University, is situated in a semi-rural area on the outskirts of a large metropolitan centre. It was established in 1891 as a single-purpose college and became a University in 1989, as part of a federated structure. It is a small university with an enrolment of approximately 6000 students. By 1997, the staff body comprised approximately 250 academic staff distributed over five faculties and 420 general staff members including administrative staff, technical and scientific officers, field and maintenance staff.

The field study focuses on a complex strategic decision-making process in Sygma University motivated by shifts in Federal government policies and a concomitant decrease in government funding, increased competition in the higher education sector and economic and social changes and uncertainties.

4.2. The consultative process

There were four phases of the strategic change process during which consultations took place over 1997: I initiation phase, II Planning Conference, III *Sygma Blueprint* discussion, and IV implementation phase. The consultative process, itself emergent, though with strongly designed components, included face-to-face forums, facilitated small group meetings and workshops, a planning conference and a CMC system.

The CMC system was established 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.

CMC was based on the University wide network and included an e-mail system with 'Sygma-All' facility enabling distribution of messages to all members of the University. Participants in the consultative process sent their messages, discussion papers, official documents, and announcements, to a coordinator who posted them on Sygma-All and updated an intranet repository. This repository contained messages and documents organised according to the type of document and the stage of the consultative process. While the Coordinator was responsible for managing and regularly updating e-mail and the intranet, he did not have any censorship role.

The issues raised and discussed during the consultation process spanned a wide range from economic, financial, and market conditions to teaching and learning, research and consulting, funding and income generation, organisational structure and culture. Indicative of the argumentation process conducted via CMC is a discussion about a model of staff resourcing which provoked most interest from the initial phase of the consultation. The next section describes the sequence of proposals, reactions and counter-proposals regarding the future staff resourcing.

4.3. A constructed narrative of an illustrative argumentation process

This section presents a narrative constructed from messages and documents communicated via e-mail concerned with the major issue of staff funding, identified most frequently by staff. The argumentation process traced in this data is symptomatic of the social interactions via CMC during the consultative process.

Early in 1997, the Executive published a series of strategic issues papers, *The Future of Sygma*, designed to be a catalyst for more detailed discussion and action.² They invited the University community to respond to and comment on the papers, to raise other issues and propose new ideas via e-mail. In his strategic paper, the President suggested *the core elements of one possible alternative academic function and structure including central allocation of resources*. This proposal was offered as *a stimulus to further debate on a crucial important topic*.

Several e-mail discussions followed, disputing the President's claims and arguments for the proposed structure:

...a balance needs to be struck between the benefits of a more local (where the action takes place) level of control and management of resources and a more centralised approach which is capable of seeing the bigger picture, 'inside' and 'outside' this institution. (e-mail;30-5-97; Brandon, an academic).

...the proposal, as it stands, is centralist as it further entrenches the exercise of power in the academic structure in three appointed (not elected) Chairs of Boards of Studies (read as super-Deans). Proposal: ...Budgets devolved to academic departments, by-passing Faculties/Boards of Studies (e-mail;10-6-97; Rita, an academic).

The most crucial flaw in the President's proposed restructure lies in its financial and managerial centralism. ... a modest proposal [is that] the School be the basic Academic Organisational Unit, and that budgetary responsibility be fully devolved to schools (e-mail;15-6-97; Robert, an academic).

This discussion continued at the Planning Conference (mid July). Six weeks later the President released a draft document, *Syigma Blueprint 1998 – 2001 Principles*, which he stated was based on the consultative processes which have taken place since late last year [1996], ... culminating in the recent Conference. The Syigma 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.

The major change proposed by the draft *Blueprint* document was a redesign of the academic, administrative and executive structure and a new staffing and resource allocation model:

under which the establishment and variation of positions must be approved centrally. Because somewhere between 70-80% of our operating costs are directly related to staffing, it is crucial that we have effective management and more control of staffing allocations. Overall this will mean some significant reduction in current levels of financial devolution...(the Blueprint, p.7).

The President argued that the proposed centralisation of staffing allocations would facilitate *responsiveness and flexibility, more effective cooperation and elimination of duplications, and encourage efficiency and effectiveness*. This proposal and claims (to truth) provoked strong reactions by both individual staff members and academic units who questioned President's claims or explicitly rejected them and provided counter claims:

At a meeting held today staff of the Faculty of Business unanimously resolved: That the model for centralised academic and resource management proposed in the President's Blueprint be rejected and replaced by a model to provide for devolved management. The centralist approach proposed by the Blueprint will remove essential element of flexibility and responsiveness. It will seriously jeopardise the many entrepreneurial and curriculum successes achieved in recent times ... as well as inhibiting the capacity of Syigma to meet future challenges (e-mail; 4-9-97; Ronald, Dean).

In addition, thirteen e-mail messages had been posted, most of which were critical about the proposed centralisation and other aspect of the *Blueprint*. In his e-mail response, the President advanced the view against accepting a change in his stance, without engaging in substantive issues or addressing directly any of the disputed claims:

I know that change of any kind is uncomfortable for most of us. I am no exception, but I recognise that for those who feel they have least control over change, it can feel very uncomfortable indeed. ... Change has become an intrinsic part of our operating environment. We can no longer treat it as an unscheduled intrusion or as an anomaly. We must learn to work with it, and not against it if our University is to prosper and develop. (e-mail;12-9-97).

In his lengthy message, the President does not address directly any of the disputed claims nor does he provide counter-arguments to defend his proposal for centralisation of staff funding. Instead, he plays down staff criticism by presenting it as somewhat understandable 'resistance to change'. He neither rejects staff arguments against, nor defends, his own reasons for centralisation; he simply dismisses all criticism by naming as typical resistance to change.

In the ensuing discussion till the end of September, ten e-mail submissions by individuals and groups directly targeted the centralised staffing model: some rejected it, raising more arguments against it; others accepted it, agreeing with the major arguments raised by the President. A group of academics (in e-mail dated 30-9-97) for instance, expressed their support for the *Blueprint's* centralised staffing model, but did not address any of the criticism or the counter-arguments expressed by staff in previous e-mail discussions. The Faculty of Technology (e-mail; 30-9-97) argued for decentralisation (*adopted*, they claimed, *by majority of universities*), stating that the major assumptions made in the *Blueprint* had not been tested. Finally, the School of Engineering strongly opposed the model and raised new claims regarding its drawbacks:

Central control of finance does not allow for the diversity of units or for new initiatives to be easily constructed. Central financial control is too removed from the 'coal face' to deal with the management issues relevant to each academic unit (e-mail; 30-9-97).

After the draft *Blueprint* discussions ended (on 1/10/97), the President produced the second version of his document the *Blueprint 1998-2001 Principles and Implementation Plan* and announced it by e-mail. While some changes had been made, the original proposal for centralised resource allocation remained basically unchanged in the new version:

A revised financial allocation model must enable essential strategic decisions to be taken in the interests of the Institution as a whole. ... These changes will thus include the development of a staffing model under which the establishment and variation of positions must be approved centrally. Because somewhere between 70-80% of our operating costs are directly related to staffing, it is critical that we have highly effective management and more control of staffing allocations. Overall this will mean some significant reduction in current levels of financial devolution for staffing ... in those areas of the University which currently operate with a very high degree of devolution. (7-10-97, p.11)

While here no attempt is made to respond to any of the criticisms and disputed claims, a new argument for the decision is raised, one appealing to *the interest of the institution as a whole*. The new financial allocation model was implemented in the last phase that ended early in 1998 when the Sigma University restructure took effect.

5. Analysis of social interactions via CMC

The argumentation process, presented above, is indicative of the University discourse emerging over CMC. The way participants deal with claims and especially disputed claims (eg. which funding model increases flexibility and responsiveness) and how they engage in the argumentation—by providing reasons or by resorting to the authority of power—indicate their intentions and the nature of their actions.

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 *Blueprint* document later on in the *Blueprint* discussion phase, the President clearly stated that he wanted to consult with staff and that all issues were open for discussion. However, as the argumentation process unfolded as the e-mails and many consultation documents show, he did not respond to participants' criticism and arguments against his claims, nor did he comment on counter-claims and alternative solutions. This evidence shows that his understanding of

the University problems (eg. the financial situation and lack of flexibility of academic structure) and his major solutions (such as new academic structure based on centralisation of staff funding) were not publicly altered by criticism and arguments expressed during the debate.

Thus the way the President engaged in the argumentation process suggests that his actions can be interpreted as strategic. In his e-mails (12/9/97) and *Blueprint* documents, he expressed his objective to solve the financial crisis by restructuring the University (including a centralised model for staff funding). He advocated his views and his particular solution in these documents and e-mails but their examination shows that he did not engage in open debate on this issue.

At the same time, 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 (aiming to achieve mutual understanding), which is confirmed in his final *Blueprint* document:

The genesis of this Blueprint 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 "Blueprint-Principles" 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. (Blueprint Principles and Implementation Plan, 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 *Blueprint* 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 lead us to conclude that, in fact, he undertook strategic action with the appearance of a communicative action, which Habermas calls covert strategic action.

The appropriation of CMC in the consultative process by the President appears to play an essential role in enabling his covert strategic acting:

- He used CMC (e-mail especially) to establish a climate for an open dialogue, free criticism, unrestricted debate
- He interacted with staff via CMC on many occasions, attempting to show his sincere intention to listen and establish trust
- Through CMC he exposed his ideas and proposals to public scrutiny and unrestricted debate
- The e-mail discussion created such a number of different comments, ideas and proposals that, without

careful analysis, it was not possible to make sense of what the University community wanted.

While the President was successful in achieving his goals and undertaking the strategic action, he was not so successful in presenting it as communicative action. A comment from Chris' 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 attitudes of staff participants in the argumentation process can be classified in two broad groups: one group that responded to Presidents' invitation for debate by acting strategically themselves and the other that attempted to act communicatively.

The linguistic acts in e-mail discussion about the draft Blueprint is illustrative of the first group actions. Ronald and several others criticised the President's claims, provided arguments against the new model for centralisation of staff funding and rejected his proposal. Some staff participants agreed with the President in principle but raised other concerns about the model's implementation. However, all staff in this first group, aimed to achieve their particular goals (staff budget control within schools) by influencing the President. While recognising the implicit limits of the President's 'openness', they attempted to argue for changes within these limits. In doing so, they legitimated both the process and its final outcome (the Blueprint document). By accepting the President's invitation to be consulted and by adopting CMC productively to engage strategically so as to counteract his strategic action, they also established their identity as more or less successful players in the game and relevant negotiators regarding conflicting matters. This interpretation is confirmed by staff interviews.

Other staff participants understood the consultative process as driven by communicative rationality and the President's actions as an offer for cooperation and dialogue (they would typically start their message with *Dear colleagues*, indicating that they are talking to all staff, not only to the President). This was especially evident in the first two phases of consultation in which there were numerous attempts by staff (mostly academic) to raise problems other than those identified by the Executive. Participants such as Brandon, Rita and Robert, openly discussed and criticised the President's initial proposal, aiming to increase mutual understanding (not only with the

President but with other staff as well) and establish cooperative interpretation of University problems. Some suggested alternative proposals seeking communicatively-achieved agreement. Neil's (academic Union representative) message expresses this attitude:

Dialogue was our first key request. We got it. I believe the benefits are obvious to all. The consultative processes must, in our view remain alive as processes, and not ossify into structures. ... Dialogue is only given weight if it has wide currency, if it is continually revalued (in all senses of that word), and if it occurs as a means of real negotiation. ... Much more work needs doing, and if we are to escape the strictures of edict habituation in our community, often in the form of resentful passive resistance and non or inappropriate compliance (e-mail, 28/5/97).

While Neil expresses his satisfaction with the consultation (perceived as cooperation), he also points to the potential benefit (for the Executive): elimination of staff's *resentful passive resistance*. By expressing his commitment to *dialogue* and *real negotiation* Neil also reaffirms his powerful position as a Union representative.

Both attempts to use CMC in achieving goals, by acting either strategically (more or less overtly) or communicatively were productive. All participants in the argumentation process employed CMC effectively to their approach ie. to influence others or to establish mutual understanding. Each appear to be successful in appropriating CMC for their purposes. As a result, we see contradictory effects of the deployment of CMC concurrently emerging throughout the consultative process.

Superficially, CMC enabled public debate towards the democratisation of decision-making. By providing an open arena for free, unrestricted public debate, in which *everybody can have their say*, and by exposing all claims to public scrutiny, the adoption of CMC gives an impression of equality of participation, openness, transparency and criticisability. Such a conclusion about the democratising impact of CMC is consistent with some findings in the literature [10], [21], [29], [30], [31].

Our critical analysis, however, highlights a more complex relationship between CMC and argumentation practices. First, evidence from the consultation indicates that conflicting agendas of participants and different forms of rationality driving their actions produced two distinct appropriations of CMC, directed towards either strategic or communicative action. Second, while CMC was employed for both strategic and communicative action, it made all actions more transparent; the repository of messages and documents enabled scrutiny of what had been said (and what hadn't). In this way, awareness of the actions of others was increased with the potential for staff to be more reflective. Third, even though attempts by some staff

members to appropriate CMC for mutual understanding and cooperative interpretation of problems was not widely successful, they succeeded in demonstrating, through interacting via CMC, an alternative organisational discourse based on communicative rationality. As such, there was potential in the University to change the nature of its consultative discourse.

Understanding CMC as a tool, like telephone or fax, that provides yet another electronic medium to exchange messages over distance faster and more efficiently than mail, does not explain the nature of communicative change enabled by CMC. As a particular extended social space, differing from face-to-face communication, CMC enables more reflective communication with others. The effects are to produce a new awareness of others and self in organisational discourses. In turn, actors' abilities to adopt a reflective relation toward a situation, toward the actions of others or themselves, are increased. However, while this reflective relation to the world is a necessary precondition for any meaningful participation in any kind of argumentation, it does not necessarily imply free and equal participation (Cooke, 1997). Nevertheless, by extending the opportunity for communication not only in terms of overcoming time and space limits but also by enabling these reflective relations with others, CMC offers potential for democratisation.

6. Conclusion

This paper reports a field study of the use of CMC in a university's consultative process leading up to restructuring decisions. By adapting Habermas's theory of communicative action, our ethnographic work adopts a critical gaze sensitive to socially-constructed meanings and to the subtle ways participants (re)created themselves and reproduced social and political relations while acting (linguistically) via CMC. Such an approach is useful in examining communicative practice enabled and supported by CMC (e-mail and intranet in this case). Far from being just a tool, CMC provides a new space of social interactions, in which participants, in order to be successful actors, require new skills beyond those concerned with its technical operation.

The question of CMC's potential for democratisation in its linguistically-mediated social space is raised by this field study. Not in a sense that CMC raises hopes for democratic utopianism, as some authors seem to suggest, but more realistically in a sense that the social interactions extended via CMC are transforming the landscape of public discourse, opening up new horizons of communicative rationality, beyond the limits of purposive-instrumental rationality. As such, the deployment of CMC for consultation represents a new contingent variable in the never-ending struggles of power in decision-making [33].

Many new questions are raised by this study. Given existing CMC technologies and their implementation, what are the personal, institutional and social factors that encourage or impede CMC's democratisation potential? What are the features of CMC implementation that are specifically conducive to open and covert strategic action as opposed to communicative action? Furthermore, what are the desirable forms and features of CMC technology that will specifically support open argumentation and democratic and participatory decision making?

Endnotes

¹ Habermas defines the three world concept: "1. the objective world (as the totality of all entities about which true statements are possible); 2. the social world (as the totality of all legitimately regulated interpersonal relations); and 3. the subjective world (as the totality of the experiences of the speaker to which he has privileged access)" ([12], p. 100).

² For ease of signalling to the reader, the authors adopt the practice of placing in italics all textual quotations made from consultation documents, e-mails, and interviews.

7. References

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