CORPORATE COMMUNICATION AN INTRODUCTION IAN CONNELL

The articles in this section are concerned with employee and corporate communication. Were this an American publication, we might well begin by suggesting that these are sub regions of the field of organisational communication studies, which has been a busy and stimulating one for nigh on two decades now. But this is not an American publication, and European communications scholars have not been drawn to these areas to anything like the same extent, though a good deal of European critical theory has been employed by American scholars to further their understanding of organisational communication and cultures. So, a few introductory words are in order, not only to offer a working definition of the area, but also to encourage more interest in conducting research.

Employee communication might refers to that official communication employing organisations attempt with their employees. It is useful to think of this as a branch of corporate communication, in part because employee communication is more likely to occur in the larger corporate organisations and public institutions (departments of government, health authorities and the like), and in part also because employee communication is focused by external communication which is concerned to position organisations in key public spheres. Few such bodies now ignore communication activities which seek to licence their continued operation in the eyes of stakeholders defined broadly enough to include not only employees, but also any other groups in their operating environments whose opposition might upset their efforts to sustain acceptable levels of profitability. So, we might usefully regard employee communication as internal communication which attempts to position an organisation in the eyes of its employees, while simultaneously defining for them a place within the organisation.

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Of course, an adequate understanding of such communication is not possible in the absence of consideration of the other networks through which the reality of any given organisation is constructed. To achieve such understanding we would have to consider something of the myriad conversations that occur between employees, and the several channels and communication episodes that may be acknowledged, but are not officially recognised. In short, reference would also have to be made to informal networks, and to the often elusive, "grapevine" communication within an organisation. The comparatively recent development of managed or controlled channels, that has added team briefings, quality circles, broadcast magazines and bulletins, email briefings and such like to newsletters and notice boards, has frequently been recommended with reference to the grapevine, as the best way of combating and reducing the allegedly damaging impact of rumours circulated through it.

The development in European, and British companies especially, took off in the late 1970s during a period of intense industrial disputes, fundamentally occasioned by incipient restructuring of markets and companies. It was encouraged in a context of intensely antagonistic industrial relations, government led wage controls, productivity agreements, and the first signs of structural unemployment and apparent de-industrialisation. The primary aim of such communication was to circumvent and to neutralise the influence of trades unions, and to regain "the manager's right to manage." While in some quarters this was aggressively asserted (Coates 1989), the Confederation of British Industries (CBI) settled on its advocacy by more conciliatory paths and was encouraging managers to **involve** and **commit** other employees to their companies' missions on the grounds that to do so would significantly improve economic performance and, moreover, enable them to sustain it. Huczynski (1993) has observed that economic circumstances were taking shape which meant that "the reluctant acquiescence of employees had to be replaced by active co-operation" (Huczynski 1993, 167). By the mid 1980s, the CBI had begun to support employers with advice on auditing internal communication and on models of good practice. It recommended employee communication to companies as one of

> a range of processes designed to engage the support, understanding and optimum contribution of all employees in an organisation and their commitment to its objectives... Employee involvement promotes business success by: fostering trust and shared commitment to an organisation's objectives; demonstrating respect for individual employees and drawing on the full range of their abilities (Thomas and McAdam 1986, 424).

Coincidentally, these efforts were assisted by certain technical and occupational developments in British broadcasting. The early 1980s saw a quite dramatic growth in the availability of portable and relatively cheap video cassette recorders and cameras. While in 1980 there were virtually no homes in the UK with VCRs, by 1986 it was estimated that about 60 per cent of UK households used one regularly. At the same time, broadcasting organisations were beginning to contract out increasing proportions of their production work, stimulating the formation independent production companies headed up by people who had gained significant reputations as broadcasters. These companies did not thrive on contracts with the broadcasting companies alone, but also on commissions from companies to provide them with promotional and training videos, and not least of all, with videos servicing general communication with employees.

In September 1982, the industry magazine *Televisual* conducted a postal survey of "1000 top public and 1000 top private companies" to determine for what purposes video or film was being used. It reported that 52% of companies were using these media for "General Employee Communications," which was, by a considerable margin, the most popular of the specified "internal" categories of communication. Production for this purpose also exceeded even the most popular categories of "external" communication — "Sales Promotions" (48% of companies) and "Corporate Communications including PR" (48%). On the returns of this survey, it also appeared that video was beginning to edge in front of film, and tape/slide, as the preferred medium. Of the responding companies, 74% said they used video, while 33% said they used film and 57% said they used tape slide. By 1987, videos for training (33% of the companies that responded) and for employee communication (23%) purposes were the two categories which accounted for the largest proportion of production for the business sector. Later surveys in the 1990s conducted on behalf of the IVCA and the CBI, suggested that while production for employee communication had decreased somewhat in the early 1990s, it had picked up again after 1993.

Corporate video was being recommended to companies as "a primary tool in a communications programme," which, when conceived and implemented by the senior management of a corporate organisation, aims at winning acceptance of the values, opinions and proposed actions of that management as common sense. This view was promoted in the wake of employment legislation which had made secondary picketing illegal, required periodic ballots on "closed shops," outlawed clauses in contracts requiring the employment of union labour, and then required secret ballots on strike actions, the regular election of officers by secret ballot, and ballots of members in unions with political funds. The managerial video was one of the means to respond to and combat such loyalties.

More recently, however, a somewhat different view of employee communication has been taking shape, although the view that it can also counter trade union "propaganda" remains strong among senior managers. Now its importance appears to have more to do with change and the seeming unpredictability of business worlds that have become more intensely competitive. The following observation is typical. To introduce a conference on employee communication, Phillipa Dennell, at the time Head of Identity and Communication Strategy, Post Office Counters, proposed that

> *If anything can be said to be facing us all, that each of us has in common, that one thing must be change. Many will already have come to terms with the fact that change will be constant, for others that may not yet be the case. In these times of change, while continued good performance of the organisation naturally remains a priority, excellent internal communications becomes integral to the success of the organisation if it is not to grind to a halt under the sheer weight of rumour.*[1]

Communication is typically referred to as "open, honest and timely" and as consistent with a style of management which is facilitating. Developing communications is also typically justified with reference to such matters as the rise of global markets, sophisticated customers, "the growing expectations that corporations will be good citizens" (Pratt 1995), and the cultural changes these phenomena seem to necessitate. Nowhere is this more so than in the automobile industry. As the Ford Motor Company steadily realises its Ford 2000 ambitions, which have already led to the creation of five vehicle centres around the world, each responsible for specific car and truck

lines, it has also recognised the need for a global communication network to address its 325,000 employees in 200 countries. In 1983, this company was already using satellite technology to communicate with external media, and it went on to use the same technology to support its Ford Communications Network (FCN) which by 1989 was broadcasting a daily schedule of programmes to over 300 locations in the US, Canada and Mexico. By the 1990s, it had crossed the Atlantic to the UK, then Spain and on to Germany which was fully operational by early 1996. Other manufacturers, BMW and Volkswagen for instance, have followed this lead. In the UK, Unipart, a component supplier to the auto industry, makes use of a complex run by its subsidiary Complete Communications. Apart from an array of computer and video presentation facilities located in the subsidiary's Cowley complex, used for training, there is satellite uplinking and downlinking facilities for occasional video conferencing and live transmissions. From here it also produces a monthly programme on videocassette, *Channel Five*, which deals with sales, training, products and incentives, and *Grapevine*, a monthly employee communications programme. These are only a few examples of the increasingly sophisticated networks which publish and broadcast to employees in many industries on a regular, often daily basis. In many types of employment, the spaces are now few wherein it is possible to escape imaginary representations of the employing company, its missions and its working relations.

Gone are the days when such communication was turned over to the enthusiastic amateur. Now trained professionals, often with experience of PR, and to a lesser extent marketing, are responsible for internal and external communications, and sometimes both. In publications such as *Internal Communication Focus*, a monthly publication featuring (invariably successful) case studies on internal communication projects, the professional contributors present themselves as policy makers and strategic planners, able to make significant contributions to now prominent business objectives - achieving greater productivity, achieving cultural change, creating an awareness of the importance of delivering quality products and services, and as internal consultants able to offer advice on how best to mount communication events that will engage the "emotional labour"(Quirke 1995) of employees. Just how employee communication is now actually conducted, depends largely and increasingly upon their professional concerns and values, and on their understanding of communication. Communication between senior managers and employees is once again mediated, less now perhaps, by the negotiating rituals of works committees or councils, than by the expectations of this new corps of communication professionals. While managers may often see internal communications as a conduit to employees, unimpeded by trade union "noise," communication professionals increasingly see them as the means to inform employees about company affairs and to disseminate a "company culture," which does not always result in senior managers being given the personal conduit they might wish. Nevertheless, what they frequently share is "a manufacturing and production line mentality underlying communication" which pictures it as "an assembly line in which discrete messages are produced by the specialists, crafted, packaged and sent out, relegating the communication function, at worst, to the despatch department" (Quirke 1995, 13).

And the point of this activity? The following observation appears to catch a widely shared sense of the prevailing purpose. According to Roger White and Angus Scrace of Coopers & Lybrand, their policy is

to devolve responsibility to operating units and to keep the central functions small, so making something happen by decree is almost impossible. It needs consensus, but not compromise. In simple terms our framework encourages, enhances and, when necessary, enforces the one firm culture and shared vision (White and Scrace 1994, 12).

In various, contextually specific ways, it tries to fashion disparate and potentially antagonistic interests into a common pursuit. Such communication will set agendas for relatively autonomous operating units, will encourage individuals to ever greater productivity, and will at the same time seek to embrace them within a single "firm culture," which will be enforced when necessary. In short, it offers imaginary organisation.

I have observed above that many of those now involved with corporate communications have been professionally disciplined in the field of Public Relations. Some would go so far as to suggest that, whether internally or externally oriented, corporate communications is but a branch of Public Relations. So, it is with Public Relations that we start. Ann Haugland's article[1] addresses Public Relations from a position somewhat apart from the American research literature on the subject. She questions the assumptions embedded in that research literature about the role of PR in "putatively democratic societies," and well she might. Public relations has become a profession which is central to the workings of contemporary public spheres. Too often research on journalism, or recommendations about its future, continue to ignore the fact that in large measure what we read, hear and see is derived from press releases written by PR executives. Indeed, increasingly journalists do little more than cut-and-paste from these releases, and not just in the specialist areas of journalism. Moreover, PR disciplines largely inform internal and external corporate communications. There is now a not inconsiderable specialist literature on corporate communications and corporate positioning which is targeted on PR practitioners. In an age when corporate organisations are explicitly embroiled in political processes, when for some they seem to threaten and undermine representative political structures, and when so much of the "information" we are provided originates with PR practitioners working on their behalf, the questions Ann Haugland raises really must be tackled seriously.

Beyond the prescriptions contained in a growing body of "how to..." literature, we still know little of the ways and means by which communication in employing organisations is attempted, let alone whether or not they are successful. Despite the view (Blyler and Thralls, 1993) that uses of language are integral to establishing and maintaining workplace cultures and positions, and extensive reference to the importance of concepts of discourse and voice, the absence of specifically linguistic analysis in the American literature on organisational communications has been quite striking. Much has been claimed about the impact of such communication, about the transformation and extension of managerial controls for example, but little has been methodically explored. The articles here offer some, hopefully interesting and stimulating starting points.

Three of the articles, those by Wheatley, Galasinski and Connell provide examples of the application of methods derived from certain schools of linguistics. They do not draw on ethnomethodological or CA approaches, though these have been interestingly applied to such activities as sales and business negotiations (Frith 1994), and to misunderstandings in workplace settings. Using methods derived from critical dis-

course analysis, Dariusz Galasinski looks at the documentation used in team briefing, which is recommended as a way to keep employees informed on a regular basis. While it may do, Galasinski is interested in what else it may accomplish, and so considers the ways in which it constructs the team briefing process, and the communication roles it constructs for managers and other employees. He not only questions whether or not the practice of team briefing in the educational organisation he has studied can really be seen as "open communication," but also goes further to question whether or not employing organisations can really realise open communication as its has been defined and recommended by consultant groups like Smythe Dorward Lambert.[2]

John Wheatley's article is manifestly concerned to present analytical tools by which we might grasp the structural and dynamic dimensions of communication in the humdrum, everyday contexts of work. In the case of his research, examples are drawn from situations in which clients brief their PR consultants or check through drafts of promotional material with them. It too makes a contribution to our understanding of the matter of control. Questions of power and control are not entirely absent. In the fragments of discourse he presents, there is evidence of participants being involved in the microcosmic operations of control. Their contributions propose decisions, which may or may not be supported, or justified. These proposals may or may not be accepted. If they are not, the refusal may or may not be justified. Wheatley's concern is to evolve a way of analytically discussing these matters, to reveal the strategic logics of the contributions, without recourse to the participants' own perceptions of the situation as would CA scholars.

Ian Connell's article[3] draws on similar methodological resources as Galasinski's to examine the use of corporate video in a company undergoing changes in its working practices and organisational design. The company was seeking to establish a "Total Quality Culture," and to put in place the management procedures consistent with this approach to production and labour processes. The video purports to explain why the company had to do so, and what benefits will follow. Connell's article is particularly interested in identifying the ways in which the video seeks to ground and legitimate the initiative in terms derived from cultures it attributes to employees.

Particularly motivated videos, video magazines and team briefings are now commonplace devices. So too in many work situations is email which is now often used to support company news services, especially, but by no means exclusively, among companies in the computing and information technology industries and in the financial services sector. Like team briefing, email is supposed to allow employees opportunities to make an input. It can support interactive exchanges. Moreover, unlike meetings and even team briefs, the use of email does not always occur under the watchful eye of a gatekeeper - the chairing role in meetings for instance. Stephen Phillips and Eric Eisenberg's study[4] looks at the uses made of email, and audit the new possibilities for communicative strategies. Their article, interesting in several respects, is I think especially so in light of the claims that have been about the extension of managerial controls which the adoption of such "computer mediated communication" is seen to allow. Their analysis uncovered a range of strategies and revealed ways in which control structures were exploited and negotiated for a variety of purposes.

These then are the articles. I would have wished there had been more, but I am not surprised that there were not given that comparative lack of attention to the kinds of communication we, many of us, now encounter in the course of our working lives. As

the time spent with work grows, as more and more of us, even in higher education, encounter communication campaigns designed to motivate us to work ever longer hours and still more productively, surely the time has come for more of us to spend more of our professional efforts on understanding communication in the workplace. I hope the pieces here stimulate further inquiry.

Notes:

1 A version of this was presented to the Public Relations interset group of the ICA in Albuquerque, May 1995.

2 Smythe Dorward Lambert is a firm of Communication Management Consultants, now owned by the US Omnicom Group Inc. In the UK and Europe, it has taken a lead in providing auditing and training services in internal communications to major business organisations. Through the 1990s, the company conducted surveys of the attitudes to, and the resources invested in, internal communications among 'leading' UK companies public organisations, and it has been particularly active in promoting attention to internal communications within the business community. What many senior managers understand internal communication, and its value, to be is largely down to the actions of this company.

3 A version of this article was presented to the Organisational Communication Division of the ICA in Chicago, May, 1996.

4 A version of this article was previously publishied in the *Electronic Journal of Communication*, 1993, 3, 2. We thank the editors for permitting us to reproduce it here.

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