Introduction: Business Communication in the Digital Age – Fresh Perspectives

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Although text-based, digitally mediated communication has been around for more than 60 years, the communicative environment and the digital genres that came into existence in this environment are still new and unsettled. The reason for this "novelty" is twofold.

First, the evolving media and emerging new communication technologies create new social and business contexts and thus novel communicative situations, continuously shaping interactions, meanings, discourse, and language. One recent example of this emerging context is the use of social media for corporate communication: the new media enables and fosters interactivity between corporations and businesses and their customers, which means that this new business environment and the resulting communicative situation has led to a change of paradigm in the ways businesses address and respond to their audiences. Perfectly crafted corporate messages – manifestos, reports, newsletters – have given way to instantaneous and often spontaneous interactions, with no time and opportunity for revisions or withdrawal of messages. The corporate world has had to respond flexibly to the requirements of this new social context and the resulting new communicative situation in order to avoid mistakes – which can be very costly, and at times lead to damaged reputations, destroyed brand images or loss of trust.

Second, the way in which people use language to communicate via these evolving communicative technologies is also in a state of flux. Computer-mediated discourse is still an emerging phenomenon and "has not yet had time (nor attained the requisite social status) to become formalised in 'rules;' but rather, varies according to the technological and social contexts online" (Herring, 2012, p. 2338; see also Androutsopoulos, 2006). Email, for example, has become the most important technology for business communication in recent years (Radicati & Levenstein, 2013),

leading to new norms in business interactions, such as the use of less formal language in professional settings. The development of a new, informal register, emerging discursive strategies, and email-specific communicative practices have also been found to reach beyond emails, affecting already existing discursive practices in the workplace such as for example, making professional face-to-face communication "more informal and personalised" (Gimenez, 2000).

Language use and communication norms are in a constant state of change, reflecting and responding to the status of emerging social contexts, which are constantly changing themselves as a result of developing communicative technologies and the new communicative environments these technologies create. This leads to a *reciprocally emerging communicative situation*, which, for businesses and organizations, is very hard to manage, particularly since much communication within and originating from companies has become digitized. Previously centralized channels of marketing, PR, and corporate communication have now become decentralized through professional and personal blogs, official and half-official Twitter accounts, or community-initiated fan pages – channels that reach beyond the control of organizations. Internal and external organizational interactions have become less formal, more social; previously well-established communication channels and practices, such as complaint letters, published company manifestos, or reports are now becoming redundant. The new communicative channels, contexts and situations, and resulting discursive practices have drawn heightened attention to new competencies and digital language use.

In spite of these rapid developments, and the very pressing need for organizations and communication professionals to understand digitally mediated communication practices, research addressing digital business communication is still fragmented. Although recent publications on business communication and discourse acknowledge the importance of, and provide a brief overview of, electronic media in professional communication (see, for example, Breeze, 2013; Goodman & Hirsch, 2014; Schnurr, 2013), much more work is needed to map out precisely how digitally mediated channels are changing the landscape of professional and corporate communication. This is particularly true for communication training: on the one hand, popular literature addressing digital communication tends to base its claims on over-generalized observations or netiquettes, and training material is often based on authors' personal values, not reflecting the actual usage and functions of digital practices (see critique in Skovholt et al., 2014). On the other hand, empirically based research tends to be fragmented and dispersed in specialist outlets that are often