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Email in practice: email usage, a-synchronicity and textuality in cyberorganizations

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Abstract:

The aim of this chapter is to show how looking at email as a practice and consider it as a participating to organizing processes in cyborgorganizations opens up perspectives for understanding emails as well as groups communicating mainly via email.

The chapter is so structured: a brief introduction to the concept of cyborgorganization and proximal views on organizations, the centrality of practices, and the consideration of email in cyberorganizations; a review of literature about emails; the analysis of two empirical cases; conclusions about email as a scaffold for other practices as well as the evaluation of asynchronicity and textuality in practicing email.

At the end, the reader will be provided with stories about email use, and with the suggestion that proximal views are able to open up new perspectives.

----- Original Message -----
From: Dominika
Sent: Tuesday, July 25, 2006 6:41 AM
Subject: Re: questions

Hello INHERE,
[...]
I have already read the minutes and I wonder when did we make the decision about involving Prof. Lorraine. in our internal things? I agree that we should inform her about things connected with research proposal but some other points like our meeting, responsibilities are maybe not so interesting for her. Please explain me what status has Lorraine now in INHERE. I start to think that I misunderstood the situation. (We vote concerning LOGO, but I can not remind if we voted concerning Lorraine).

----- Original Message -----
From: Martin
Sent: Tuesday, July 25, 2006 11:31 AM
Subject: RE: questions

Hi INPHERE,
I understand Dominika's concerns and generally agree with them. On the other hand in case of Lorraine, I think she made several very nice steps to get closer to INHERE and as Evelina mentioned, even used "we" several times during our discussion. It is something what, at least I think, Michael F. would never say.

From: XXX
Reply-to:XXX
To: YYY
Cc: CAB Discuss <CAB-Discuss@opensolaris.org>
Subject: Re: [cab-discuss] OpenSolaris CAB charter
Sent: Fri, 02 Sep 2005 12:04:15 +1200 (02:04 CEST)

Hi,

So, one of ZZZ's blog entries pointed out something that was a little sad to see for my liking...

On Tue, 2005-08-30 at 07:47 -0500, YYY wrote:

> What is the OpenSolaris project?
>
> The OpenSolaris project is an open source project sponsored by Sun
> Microsystems, Inc. which is initially based on the source code for the
> Solaris Operating System. It is a nexus for a community development
> effort where developers from Sun and elsewhere can collaborate on
> developing and improving operating system technology. The OpenSolaris
> source code will find a variety of uses, including being the basis for
> future versions of the Solaris OS product, other operating system
> projects, third-party products and distributions of interest to the
> community.

The first sentence includes 'is an open source project sponsored by Sun Microsystems, Inc.'. Now, I'm a bit fan of Sun, and don't get me wrong, I'm hugely grateful for what they've done. To me OpenSolaris is about the code, it's about the people, it's about the community. So many of those things are infinitely more important than whether it's a sponsored project or not. I'd like -

'The OpenSolaris project is sponsored by Sun Microsystems, Inc.'

to be the *last* sentence in that paragraph.

XXX

Introduction

What are INHERE, XXX, YYY, ZZZ, and the participants to the cab-discuss mailing list doing? They are carrying on activities: a journal special issue call; preparing a research proposal; discussing about participations; writing a legal document; questioning texts. But, how are they doing that? Using emails. So, technology is participating to these activities, and task accomplishment. At the same time what they are doing is embedded in socially recognized worlds, that of entrepreneurial psychology and Free/Libre and Open Source Software (FLOSS) development. At the same time we know, from our studies, that the use of email is reproduced everyday, and at the same time is changing, like the content of the emails before have shown. According to Gherardi (2005: 34 - 36), what is symmetric, involving humans and non – humans entities, being at the same time socially recognized, having a goal, and being reproduced can be conceptualized as a practice. In this sense, the use of email in our groups is a practice.

How is the email technology participating to that practice? Is it a *per se* entity or has to be considered in an hybrid network of objects, activities, operations, and people?

With this chapter we want to underline the hybrid nature of the organizational teams working through email systems. For us these *email based groups* are the main great evidence of a proximal point of view about organizations, which bring us to use the term cyborganization (Cooper, Law, 1995). These view take as problematic in terms of the ontologies involved: organizations, from this point of view, and groups and communities as well, are not ready-made concepts with finished effects and outcomes of thought and action (Cooper, 1992), but they seem to be continuous and unfinished. Looking at the texts above it is easy to note how proximal can be the email use inside organizations. Rather than being a perfect technological device, with linear and reassuring features, the email practice is very engaging. It drives people to the uncertainties of the borders rather than certainties of the centre. Even the word ‘we’, so reassuring and in-grouping featured, could become a matter of dispute. Even members’ group perception could be broken and continuously re-negotiated as well as identities.

The aim of our chapter is, then, to take a look at this kind of cyborganizations, that we labelled *cyber-organizations*, from this point of view. Taking this perspective, the questions about emails are: how do email participate as a medium in the organizing processes? Or more specifically, how do the *asynchronous* and *textual* character of emails participate to the processes of coordination between participants in cyberorganizations?

The chapter will be organized as follows: a brief discussion about research on research emails; the presentation of two different empirical cases; a closing part about emerging email usage pattern and email participation to organizing processes.

Proximal and distal views in research on e-mail and CMC

Bethan Benwell and Elizabeth Stokoe start the ‘Virtual identities’ chapter in their ‘Discourse and identity’ book (2006) with this following quotation from a public Internet discussion site: ‘We go on coach trips to Narnia and have Mary Poppins round for tea on a regular basis’. These authors have chosen this phrase because it seems to embody, in a tongue-in-cheek way as they say, many of the utopian possibilities of virtual identity. It is over known that in cyberspace, space, time and identity have some peculiar features, but there are some difficulties in defining what these features actually are. Because it is true that inside informal, unstructured and free-access big virtual communities, identities could be very unpredictable, erratic and volatile, but what is the same story inside organizations? What are the social issues of computer mediated communication inside organizations? Is it still possible to have Mary Poppins round for tea on a regular basis?

More than two decades researchers have given us just the dichotomy and not what is in the middle of the dichotomy itself. The Reduced Social Cues model (Sproull, Kiesler, 1991) told us something about the good side of organizational CMC. CMC, for them, is intrinsically democracy driven, pushing people to achieve egalitarian interactions inside more organizational levels. In this view the Internet is depicted as full of free-riders who usually do not mind to their and other social belongingness, basically because they are alone in the cyberspace.

From the other hand the SIDE (Social Identity De-individuation Effects) model (Spears, Lea, 1994) shows us the bad side of the story. Anonymity and de-individuation, a brand new and an old concepts in social psychology tradition, are not barriers to social identities and related features development in cyberspace. Paradoxically they seem to be the real source of identification and normative behaviour instead of being fertilizing devices for flaming or similar unkind behaviours.

To go back to Narnia and Mary Poppins in cyberspace, RSC model tells us that I could say these things in the Internet because I am alone with my computer and I feel free to be and to perform everything I want. The opacity of technology will protect me in this business. On the other hand SIDE model tells us that my particular language and my fantasy world storytelling is due to a salient categorization I have just switched on to mirror myself inside this group. So Narnia and Mary Poppins became key concepts to sustain this group's social identity.

In this chapter we want to go over this dichotomy between technology and individual, focusing our attention to organizational settings in which discourses about identities become more problematic than classical and dispersed virtual communities. We want to do that with some reflections about the main discursive device in CMC, the electronic mail. In the last two research tradition, email is nothing more than a tool.

Is really the email an instrumental issue? Or is it an issue *per se*? Researchers have considered it in a very broad view, from genres repertoire (Orlikowsky, Yates, 1994) to organizational memory device (Brown, Lightfoot, 2002), but it is still quite difficult to summarize what email is or seems to be. We will try to give an answer to these questions late in our chapter

'INHERE': performing identities between on and offline

From a broad point of view INHERE (a just invented name substituting the original acronym) is a network created in 2005 by researchers/educators from six European countries with the aim to promote and develop entrepreneurship from a psychological perspective. As stated in their website homepage, all the members strive to advance academic research by increasing the visibility of entrepreneurial research through the organization of joint symposia at international conferences, promoting discussions between researchers through on-line forums, and developing an international research project that will have global implications. They strive to advance education of entrepreneurs also by creating an Erasmus Intensive Programme to facilitate the sharing of knowledge between the member countries, conducting international summer schools where educators and students can exchange ideas and learn from one another and holding workshops with entrepreneurs that promote self-discovery and development.

The INHERE members daily computer mediated interactions occur via email mostly, and people engaged in this business is a formally organized small group, called 'the council'. The council is a committee composed by nine senior academic members plus three junior ones. During one year of shared work activities they have sent more than one thousand emails to organize and fulfil their activities, although they met just four times in presence, two of them during international conferences, for a total face-to-face time of two weeks (in a year).

On one hand, looking at daily communication practices, they seem to be a 'virtual team', on the other hand, looking at mid-term communication practices, they are 'just a team' working on developmental activities to sustain entrepreneurship culture all over Europe. So, conceptualize them as a cyberorganization allow us to consider their eternally unfinished character and to look at emails like one of the mean of the organizing.

They refer to 'promoting discussions between researchers through on-line forums', but this is not a description of what they are actually doing in their practices. This seems to be a kind of cyberscaping aim, looking at the next, imaginary, and world wide present step of their network, entering a process of envisioning, taking steps and adapting (Hakken, 2003). Let's take a look at their history brief description in their website:

network meeting in Marburg, Germany in September 2005. The ambitions of INPERE members are to develop themselves within the frame of an international group involved in furthering the psychology of entrepreneurship».

They tell us something about the off-line places in which their group was born and grown-up. The 'real' places in which some official issues usually happen and where voting procedures can be more reliable. They want to inform us about their ambitions of personal and group development, but they forget to talk about their daily cyberspace interactions occurring inside a continuous process of on-line towards off-line, and again towards on-line stress. The relevant thing is their aim to develop a group. How does email practice participate at this goal reaching?

We began to study this group just after their start up. So we have not available electronic material before their first in presence meeting, but from the information they gave us and from the information coming from their subsequent electronic exchanges we can state that email practice comes before 'real places' meeting in this case. There is a good camera shot of this meeting in the website, showing people very comfortable in their group brand new clothes. They seem to be at the higher level of their starting point, in which a lot of written words have been spent before to organize face-to-face meeting they can do.

Mostly we know, thanks to our cyberethnography, that email practice has always been 'there' in their cyberspace, ready to sustain the organization of off-line meetings or simply to cycle on their cyber-team life (Brown, Lightfoot, 2002).

So if we try to put it in this way we can find four in presence meetings and a plethora of computer mediated interactions that are in part connected to the real world ones and in part they apparently are not. Team members used to employ the email as a work practice *per se* or and as a part of a wide cyber-work practice with both on and off-line features. In this case they used to make a sort of 'pre-post' treatment to their off-line meetings. They set the ground for information they need before the meeting and at the same time they prepare the social path they are going to use in presence, just to be closer to fight the impact of a on to off line status momentary passage. All these things are done during the email practice.

From: Evelina
Sent: Wednesday, July 12, 2006 6:58 PM
Subject: Re: invited symposium entrepreneurship ICAP

hi marjan,

i have a single room and staying in the same hotel as you are, so if you would like to arrive earlier, you are welcome to stay with me. just let me know and i will ask them when i arrive if we can have a roll-away bed (my room is likely a single).

Once the in presence meeting has been done it is time to reflect about it on more levels, varying in complexity and insightful. Usually they write a sort of formal report to describe what they have done and in which way in 'real world'. This is the less deep level of reflection about their off-line activities and it is usually written by one member with turn over time per time. At the same time they used to strike more deeply thoughts through their personal email they send to every other members. This personal one is aimed to comment some parts of the formal report and to comment other affairs standing outside it. The personal email is mostly a way to catch some positive feeling about being group together thanks to common practices and with less frequency a way to depict some critiques about team trends in working activities.

From: Ute
Sent: Monday, July 24, 2006 1:30 PM
Subject: minutes, please revise till thursday

Dear INHERE's,

I hope everybody good home alright? I really enjoyed seeing you all at the conference and thought that we had a very productive time!
Attached the minutes of our meeting. I wasn't aware that it was my job to do the minutes (I

rather only made notes for myself). Consequently, there is some information missing. I put '???' where I wasn't sure whether I got things right. So please, everybody have a look at the minutes as soon as possible, because that will ensure that you still remember details. (Psychology of learning applied :-)) Also, Lorraine was interested in getting a copy of the minutes, which I'll send to her on Friday. Please make your changes and send them back to me by Thursday evening, so that I can send her a more complete version of the minutes.

Extract from a short INHERE member's report on the Athens meeting:

Wednesday, July 19th 2007
Kasia, Dominika, Juan Antonio, Adalgisa, Martin, Marjan, Evelina, Ute (minutes)
Research Project
- we agreed on the business-process model put forward in Verona (but see Friday)
- next steps we agreed on: make a two-page summary with policy implications and one-page summary of theory application

As we can see the 'email practice' seems to be a powerful device to scaffold the ground to incoming interactions and to re-frame the meanings after the main gigs have been done, but at the same time it is an interaction matter as well, characterized by asynchronism and textuality.

The OpenSolaris Community: email as the space for control and identity

In the previous paragraph, we have seen as practicing email is involved in a constellation of practices that belong to cyberspace in its more wide conceptualization, a space of cyborgs, with the mixture between on-line and off-line activities. In that sense, practicing email acts as a scaffold (Woerner, Orlikowski and Yates, 2005) for other practices, like papers writing and meetings organization. Talking about the OpenSolaris Community¹, and especially the mailing list Cab-Discuss, connected with the governance part of the community, we will show how the practice of email not only scaffolds the participation of actors to the community itself, but also that the content of the discussions is strictly related to what the community is and how they can be defined open. The OpenSolaris project was officially opened during June 2005, to the extent of being, according to the project website, "an open source community and a place for collaboration and conversation around OpenSolaris technology." OpenSolaris is the part of the code base of a Unix-like operating system, Solaris, which has been developed and commercialized by Sun Microsystems, Inc. (later Sun)². With the opening of the OpenSolaris project, Sun released part of the code of the Solaris operating system under an Open Source Initiative³ approved license, the Common Development and Distribution License⁴. At the same time, they set up the project website and a certain number of mailing lists, called "Discussions"⁵, inviting people to join them.

As shown also by other researchers, FLOSS communities rely on mailing lists as one of the organizing technologies in their life. In this chapter, what we want to underline is not only how practicing email participate in the organizing of FLOSS communities (Lanzara, Morner, 2005), but also how do that practice is involved in the construction of what open means and how the community is and lives (Scacchi, 2005). Our choice of the Cab-Discuss mailing lists is quite simple, because this list is that of the governance body, set up by Sun at the beginning of the project, involving two Sun people, two people elected by the participants to the Pilot program⁶ and one chosen by Sun between

1 <http://www.opensolaris.org>

2 Solaris and OpenSolaris are trademarks or registered trademarks of Sun Microsystems, Inc. in the U.S. and other countries. UNIX is a registered trademark in the United States and other countries, exclusively licensed through X/Open Company, Ltd.

3 <http://www.opensource.org>

4 http://www.opensolaris.org/os/licensing/opensolaris_license

5 <http://www.opensolaris.org/os/discussions/>

6 Between the end of 2004 and the official opening, some organizations, close to Sun software development activities, were involved in a pilot program, a pre-opensourcing phase, with the sharing of the code and the set up of some of

recognized member of the wider FLOSS community. The Community Advisory Board (CAB) was formed with the goal of setting up the governance documents for the community and observing and guiding the first months of life. The process is now reaching an end, a year and a half later than the CAB was nominated. This process has been carried on via a community of objects (Bruni, 2005), involving not only the mailing list, but also phone, for usual conference call between CAB members and other informed or interested people (the decisions on who can participate had always been taken/communicated via the mailing list), as well as a wiki, set up to manage modifications to the drafted documents. The phone call have been reported to the mailing list with the submission of "CAB meeting notes", summarizing the positions expressed and the decisions taken. The aim of this look for transparency can be interpreted as the try to avoid the feeling that:

- ">the governing body was
- > merely a puppet organization controlled by Sun. The community at
- > large must have a sense of ownership of the project, its decision
- > making apparatus and its overall goals and direction. They must
- > experience a freedom from the constraints of a corporate cubicle or
- > from technical management who don't understand or appreciate the
- > technicalities of the demanding work they perform or the code they
- > develop. They must also sense that they can influence the direction
- > of the project - especially the technical direction(s). And, most
- > importantly, that every community participant is treated honestly
- > fairly and without preference, regardless of which corporation they
- > work for (if they even work for a corporation), or any other non
- > technical factor."

I think this paragraph above would work better if the following was removed" [cab-discuss, 4th September 2005]

The first part (the quoted one) is also in accordance with the view expressed by two Sun engineers, Goldman and Gabriel (2005), who consider the loose of control one of the ingredient of pursuing FLOSS as a business strategy. So, practicing email can be considered one of the way of how controls is enacted in FLOSS communities and the email technology is the scaffold for this control by community participants. At the same time, the mailing list considered is also the space for discussions about the community itself and its regulating processes. We can see that a strong declaration (with a flavour of independence, we can say) like the quoted above, with term like "puppet" which aren't usual part of the legal language to which the document refer, had been put in discussion only after a period longer than two weeks, by one of the Sun employees participating to the same discussion. No debate about that followed. The asynchronous and textual character of email is here completely understandable: not only two weeks had passed, but also the debate was punctual in quotation. Also in this case, email is the space where control takes place, power positions are enacted, but in sometime different and unfinished ways, in cyberways to re-use the Cooper and Law suggestion. Following more this discussion, which had been going on for around six months, we found that post:

"[...] we discovered that the basic assumptions about collaboration were not shared by the most vocal folks in Sun Engineering. Instead, Sun's process will drive the basic goals and ideals of this new community, and we needed to wait until this process could be described to us outsiders because there really is no point in trying to impose self-governance. [...] Well, a few weeks passed, and, instead of a simple answer, what we received back was a rewritten document that some committee within Sun apparently believed would make a nice charter. :([...] However, the pattern is painfully clear: the CAB is free to discuss all it wants and write what it wants, but what we decide has no binding effect on OpenSolaris at all. [...] We aren't creating an open community. Sun is creating a window into their own process so that code fixes can be directly contributed by customers to workers at Sun who will be tasked with shepherding their fixes. [...] I have to allocate my time on the basis of how productive I think it will be, and right now I don't think it is productive for me to work on CAB issues. Heck, just writing this e-mail has cost me \$600 in lost time. [...] I am not even going to read the documents again until that happens." [cab-discuss - 2005/12/20]

As we can see, not only the theme of control is performed, in the sense of the lost ones by the CAB,

the technologies which later would have constitute the official project.

but also the identity of participants to the entire community, including Sun, engineers, CAB members, pattern of practicing, documents and technological activities are involved and redefined through the email practiced as the space for organizational discussions and decision-making. Take a look at this couple of posts:

“Unless something's gone awry in the mail system, there's been virtually no discussion of any kind on this list for the last several months. The Draft_02 wiki discussion page was last edited in July. So I think it's safe to say there hasn't been much naysaying for some time now. Neither, however, has there been any support for the product we see today. At most, it's fair to say that most people have simply lost interest, if indeed they had any at the start.” [cab-discuss – 2007/01/03]

“I was actually referring to nay sayers outside the community who might claim that OpenSolaris is being "run by Sun" and "not a real community-driven project”” [cab-discuss – 2007/01/04]

In this case, the debate was around the Community Constitution, the Governance artefact, which has been recently approved by Sun (discussions in the community are still ongoing). Also in this case, the identity of the community is performed and discussed through the email, and it is also directly connected with the mailing list life, and frequency of discussion. Categories of participants are defined, “naysayers” and “supporters”, as well as some kind of motivation for the mailing list low level of discussion is considered, the “lost interest”.

In conclusion of this case, we have shown how email practice is strictly connected with organizational identity, that of the CAB and of the OpenSolaris community, as well as form of control inside the organization are performed and recognizable in the email practice, both in its time related feature, the time passed between the “puppet post” and its put in discussion, as well as the frequency of discussion and the driving force in the community life; and in the content of discussions and posts, but this can be related to the peculiar mailing list we have chosen (although the analysis, not presented here, of the general mailing list, osol-discuss⁷, make this emerge in the same clear way, beneath less frequently).

After these two cases, we have a picture of email practice which is connected both with the organization of other activities and with the identity and control in cyberorganizations. In the next, and last, paragraph, we will complete this picture with better connections.

Conclusions: email technology as an asynchronous and textual scaffold for organizing

We discuss two empirical cases of task-oriented cyborg organizations, INHERE and the OpenSolaris CAB, and their practices of email use, trying to show how the technology act as scaffold, an unfinished structure, for the organizing processes connected with this two organizations. We showed how this scaffolding operates blurring the boundaries between on-line and off-line activities, as well as being the space for the enactment of control relationships and identity discussions. So, looking at email as a practice, allowed us to overcome the dichotomy between email as a technology *per se* or email as a tool, showing that the asynchronous and textual character of email are part of processes of organizing taking place in cyberspace, the space of unfinished and blurred cyborgs (Haraway, 1991).

In this sense, if INHERE showed us how email participate to the scaffolding of different activities, the OpenSolaris Cab-Discuss lists underlined that this scaffolding involve relationships of control and identity; in both cases, the asynchronicity and textuality of communications make peculiar the enactment of this relationships, characterized by different time - adaptations and uses of the interaction material, like the quoting exemplified.

In conclusion, we argue that thinking at email as a practice, looking at organizations as cyberorganizations, and focusing on the peculiarities of this practices and views, is a powerful instrument to study and organize processes mediated by computers.

7 <https://www.opensolaris.org/jive/forum.jspa?forumID=13>

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Glossary:

Cyborgs: unfinished entities participating to the cyberspace constructions. They have blurred boundaries and are hybrid, with both human and non-human characters.

Cyberspace: social formation in construction, characterized by the diffusion of automated information and communication technologies.

Cyborgorganizations: term to stress the eternally unfinished character of organizations, with an accent on proximal views, the means are more relevant than the goals.

Cyberorganizations: cyborgorganizations which rely mainly on Automated Information Technologies for their everyday activity.

Practice: I define a practice as a mode, relatively stable in time and socially recognized, of ordering heterogeneous items into a coherent set (Gherardi, 2005: 34).