

# COMMUNICATION & LANGUAGE at work

## 2020 SPECIAL EDITION

### THE DARK SIDE OF COMMUNICATION

The expression “the dark side” seems to have become a portmanteau term for all things opaque, unwanted or even unlawful. There is a plethora of examples to that fact – from popular culture, where the unfortunate ones may ‘turn to the dark side of the force’, to the natural sciences, where dark matter is matter that does not absorb, reflect or emit electromagnetic radiation and therefore difficult to come to terms with. Somewhat closer to home, disciplinarily speaking, in, say, strategic communication “the dark side” pertains to (corporate) communication perceived as intentionally ambiguous – and maybe unlawfully so. In organization studies, “the dark side” encompasses deviant or even harmful organizational behavior. In interpersonal communication, “the dark side” deals with immoral, dysfunctional or malicious communication. In sum, by calling forth “the dark side” of communication we intuitively seem to evoke a sort of Manichean discourse of light vs. dark, in casu: of good vs. evil communication.

If we look at communication activities in organizational and/or professional contexts in lieu of this, it seems to be a question of whether communication is seen as manipulatory, i.e. as “dark”/evil, or emancipatory, i.e. as “light”/good. This, in turn, effectively stigmatizes dark side communication activities as vehicles for the (organizational or corporate) propagation of suppression of unwanted ethical, political, and ideological voices and discourses. While this is probably not altogether wrong, it is probably also not altogether always the case.

With The Dark Side of Communication as the theme of the 2019 conference of the research group Communicating Organizations at Aalborg University, Denmark (<https://www.en.culture.aau.dk/research/research-groups/ComOrg/>), the research group wished to explore and substantially deepen our understanding of what dark side communication activities ‘are’ and what they ‘do’ in or with reference to organizational contexts. For this conference, the Communicating Organizations research group therefore invited fellow scholars to engage in exploring and problematizing issues such as, but not limited to:

- What may constitute dark side communicating activities? And why?
- Where do we find dark side communicating activities? And why?
- How do we analyze dark side communicating activities?
- Why are organizations (ostensibly) making use of dark side communicating activities?
- How do we – as scholars as well as citizens – evaluate dark side communicating activities?

As it turned out, the conference theme certainly struck a chord with the research community, for more than 60 scholars from all over the world, and from a wide variety of academic disciplines, joined us in August of 2019 for a couple of intensive conference days.

In order to set the tone of the conference, no less than four renowned scholars gave four very different, yet all equally inspiring keynote addresses:

- Professor Dennis Mumby, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, USA, who is the world-renowned driving force behind the school of critical organizational communication, gave a keynote speech on *(Re)Branding the Dark Side: Communicative Capitalism and Neoliberalism*.
- Professor David Boje, New Mexico State University, USA, who – among many other things – is the founding father of the concepts of “ante-narratives” and “counter-narratives”, gave a keynote speech on *Water storytelling and dark side of sixth extinction denial*.
- Assoc. Professor Charlotte Simonsson, Lund University, Sweden, who is renowned for her research into roles and practices of communication professionals, especially in change processes, gave a keynote speech on *Managerialism – a threat to communication professionalism?*
- Dr. Erika Darics, Aston University, UK, who is renowned for her research into the interactional creation of employee and organizational identity and power – as well as the lack thereof – in professional contexts, gave a keynote speech on *Coming out of the dark: critical language and discourse awareness as key soft skills*.

As may be easily inferred, the conference took place against a backdrop of organizational, corporate and professional communication, critical management studies, critical discourse studies, and critical media studies. The peer-reviewed papers in this 2020 special edition of Communication and Language at Work are testimony to this diversity; and not only in terms of disciplinarity but also in terms of research interests, of ideologies, of conceptual frameworks etc. In addition, the papers are also proof that employing what is maybe best labeled the ‘prism’ of the dark side of communication to both empirical sites and theoretical fields has, in fact, paved the way for fruitful new avenues of cross-fertilized research.

This special edition of Communication and Language at Work comprises of eight papers: In *Recruitment Communication and Psychological Contracts in Start-Ups: Dark Side Challenges of Selling a Job and Creating Realistic Expectations*, Mia Thyregod Rasmussen delves into the core balancing dilemma of an organization’s employer branding activities, i.e., how to navigate convincingly between overpromising and underdelivering. Antoinette Fage-Butler presents a methodological approach that provides analytical, critical and normative purchase on nudges’ bypassing of reflection in the paper *Health-related nudging: A critical multimodal approach using Foucault and Habermas*. With the paper *A ‘dark side’ of the LEAP CCT programme in Ghana: A critique of the proxy means test (PMT) targeting mechanism*, Dennis Puorideme demonstrates that officials legitimise and translate the PMT instrument, separate individuals from families, and constitute them as objects for governmental intervention to achieve efficiency and cost-effectiveness. In their paper *The Language of Destructive Cults: Keynes Analyses of Sermons*, Raymund T. Palayon, Richard Watson Todd, and Sompatu Vunghong show that the language of destructive cults upholds extreme non-religious ideologies that cannot be found in the sermons of mainstream religious groups; and that the styles of their language focus on othering, intensifying, elaborating, and negating with the aim of controlling their followers. Maria Hvid Dille combines insights from new materialist thinking with organizational discourse studies in the development of an analytics to approach the process of identity construction – coined as identity intra-activity – in the paper *Advancing a Baradian perspective on the field of identity work: An empirical analysis of the complex discourse-materiality identity construction*. In their paper *Mimicry and artistry: Place branders’ construction of “good” branding*, Jon Bertilsson, Jens Rennstam, and Katie Sullivan provide clues to what the place branding profession constructs as “good” and legitimate expertise; the paper goes on to identify two levels of legitimate place branding expertise: Mimicry and Artistry. Based on the experiences of a large number of employees, who have experienced troublesome interactions with customers, in lieu of their customer-oriented job functions, Thomas Borchmann and Bendt Torpegaard Pedersen explore *Employee representations of customer harassment and its causes in self-reported tales – enlightening spotlights on dark matters*. In their paper *A Socio-Technical-Cultural System Perspective to Rethinking Translation Technology in Cross-cultural Communication* Mei Li, Chunfang Zhou, and Lars Bo Henriksen, discuss how translation technology drives changes in intercultural communication while highlighting the role of the translator as a cultural mediator.

In addition to the papers stemming from the above-mentioned conference, an additional three peer-reviewed papers are also published in this volume of Communication and Language at Work. Each of which breaks new ground in the ever-broadening field of communication and language at work. In the paper *(Counter-)Narrating European*

*integration: How trade unions came up with joint position on the Freedom of Services in the EU*, Martin Seeliger sheds light on the dynamics in which contested interpretations of the economic developments underlying European integration shape the political orientation of the collective actors involved. With the paper *Working and knowing in technology-mediated environments: the case of cardiological teleconsultancy*, Laura Lucia Parolin recalibrates existing analytical categories in order to account for the complexities in the mediated work environments of ITC. In *An Autoethnographic Inquiry into the Emergence of New Forms and Ways of Organizing*, Romeo Turcan employs analytic autoethnography to explore the emergence of new forms and ways of organizing; in doing so, the paper responds to extant scarcity of knowledge about internal organization of entrepreneurial ventures.

After these words of introduction, it is time that I let the papers in the journal talk for themselves. I do so with the certain knowledge that this edition of Communication and Language at Work, or CLaW for short, will spur many a good discussion in our research community – and beyond. On that note, CLaW aims at becoming the hub, as it were, for all scholars with a vested interest in communication and language at work. As will be apparent after reading this 2020 edition, the journal has taken a decisive step in exactly that direction.

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