

# COMMUNICATION & LANGUAGE at work

## **Exploring the intranet as a change agent: On the sociomaterial entanglement of intranet technology, internal branding and everyday work**

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### **Abstract**

Internal and corporate branding have become prevalent strategies in the field of human resource management. They aim to promote employee commitment and identification with the company through its brand. However, scholars in critical management studies have highlighted the exercise of normative control through these measures. Using the example of an intranet implementation in the context of a company merger in the telecommunications industry, the article examines the branding strategies on the intranet and, furthermore, shows how it prompts employees to constantly reflect on and evaluate the different types of content and related work practices on the intranet. As becomes apparent, in the way the branding content competes with other, to employees more relevant information on the intranet, it is constantly being devaluated. In this manner, the intranet becomes an ambivalent carrier of branding practices, effectively resulting in employees undermining management's call to identify with the new company brand through the intranet. Nevertheless, the article highlights the ability of employees to overlook irrelevant content as a positive quality of the intranet. It argues for a greater understanding of everyday work in addition to a further integration of employees into change management projects.

### **Keywords**

Internal communication, branding, intranet technology, merger, identification, practice, sociomateriality

## 1 Introduction

Internal communication constitutes a managerial strategy that aims to convey company goals and values to employees, with the aim of fostering employee loyalty and identification with the organization. This involves disseminating messages to employees and encouraging their participation through various communication technologies (Yeomans and FitzPatrick, 2006). From the beginning, internal communication has been closely intertwined with the use of various tools functioning as organizing instruments; that is, artifacts such as the press copier and carbon paper played a vital role in reproducing messages, while filing cabinets marked the beginning of more sophisticated archival systems (Yates, 1989, p. 21 et seqq.; Wit *et al.*, 2002, pp. 56–8). These devices facilitated company management in overseeing employees and streamlining work processes (Yates, 1989, p. 21). Nowadays, the development of internal communication has given rise to intranet technologies, social media applications, internal message boards, and enterprise software, which can all be considered as successors to these early tools.

When it comes to change management initiatives, communication approaches are understood as a viable support vehicle since they promise to involve and engage employees into the initiative which is seen as an important success factor. Thus, as research has shown, seeking input from different stakeholders involved in the change promises greater commitment and satisfaction and reduces uncertainty among them (Lewis, 2019, p. 69; see also Welch and Jackson, 2007; Kitchen and Daly, 2002; Kjærbeck and Lundholt, 2022). Especially in the context of company reorganization and integration processes, communication is labelled as a decisive strategic tool that determines the success or failure of, for instance, a company merger (Papadakis, 2005; see also Davenport and Barrow, 2009). Furthermore, scholars underline that strategic communication may foster the creation of a new company identity as well as it helps to address middle managers as important change agents (Balle, 2008; Angwin *et al.*, 2016).

Similarly, intranet literature mirrors managerial commendation of intranets as transformative tools that foster enhanced work collaboration and bolster employee engagement. Nevertheless, studies reveal that the implementation and utilization of intranets is more challenging than this depiction suggests; often, intranets are generally disregarded in the company so that employees' usage lies below expectations (Lamb, 1999, p. 2; Stenmark, 2003, 2008). Thus, despite technological advancement, intranets do not fulfil expectations in terms of usage and promised organizational change (White, 2000; Clarke and Preece, 2005).

This is why existing management and communication research aspires to single out decisive variables of the implementation process (Damsgaard and Scheepers, 2000; Eder and Igbaria, 2001; Leung, 2001; Amcoff Nyström, 2006; Martini, Corso and Pellegrini, 2009). Altogether, this research often covers questions of functionality and uptake while a closer examination of the different types of content and how specific applications are used as part of everyday work is omitted. Likewise, extant research has predominantly examined internal communication programs in a variety of company settings, but the specific situation of the intranet that carries measures of corporate culture management, in particular corporate and internal branding, has so far been insufficiently taken into account.

Against this backdrop, the starting point for this investigation into the intranet has been the perceived gap between the general appreciation of intranets in the business and management field on the one hand and their rather ambiguous use in everyday work contexts on the other. Following this reasoning, I ask: *What kind of expectations underpin the implementation of the intranet in this specific setting of my investigation? And how do they play out as part of everyday work?* Answering these questions, I propose a practice theory framework for analyzing the intranet as a 'change agent': The term usually describes executives on the middle management level, understood as a vital link between management and employees in the way they translate managerial strategies to the workforce, thereby affiliating employees into the company (Buick, Blackman and Johnson, 2018). However, in the current case, the intranet is designated a change agent as it carries practices of (post-industrial) culture management, in particular corporate and internal branding. In this way, the intranet is intended to set an example of the new company and to promote the new identity and brand to employees. As will be shown, social practice theories provide a particularly relevant framework for understanding the entanglement of the intranet with corporate and internal branding measures.

By focusing on the intranet as a change agent, this article contributes to a processual and performative understanding of information and communication technologies within organizations (Orlikowski, 2007). In this manner, communication is understood as constitutive of organizations, hence it configures the ways in which they come into being (Schönian, 2022a, p. 131). Furthermore, the article adds to literature within critical management

studies on contemporary, post-industrial forms of management and (neo-) normative control (Mumby, 2016; Costas, 2012; Barley and Kunda, 1992). In fact, by bringing together both strands of work, the article helps to understand the limitations of technologies in implementing change management initiatives, particularly in normatively managing employee behavior through identification and commitment.

## **2 Post-industrial management: Corporate and internal branding**

As a managerial concept and practice, corporate branding developed in the 1990s in association with external product marketing. Increasingly applied to employees inside business companies, it aims to create commitment to and identification with a company through its brand (Papasolomou and Vrontis, 2006; Mosley, 2007). Whereas in the beginning this management practice occurred predominantly in the service-oriented industry, it has become a common way of addressing employees in business companies (Kärreman and Rylander, 2008). It slightly differs from the idea of the employer brand (or employee branding) that attends to the organization's outstanding, particularly positive reputation on the labor market and hence foremost addresses external stakeholders in order to recruit the 'appropriate' workforce that identifies with the values of the brand (Ambler and Barrow, 1996, p. 8; Hoppe, 2018). By now, corporate and internal brand management constitute a research area within human resource management that investigates how employees' individual behavior changes in relation to increasing alignment with a company brand, thereby fostering performance and motivation (Burmam and Zeplin, 2005).

Corporate and internal branding intend to shape the symbolic meaning of the brand and the company. Therefore, authors in critical management studies underline that corporate branding can be understood as the "management of meaning" (Kärreman and Rylander, 2008, p. 107) that engages in communicative processes of generating value so as to positively attribute it to the brand. Furthermore, when it comes to the founding of organizational identities and related processes of identification, branding is understood to increase the affective connection among company members (Kärreman and Rylander, 2008, p. 105). Thus, both corporate and internal branding aim at encouraging employees to take up brand values and identify with them. However, internal branding goes even further; it does not only impose the brand on employees, but makes employees "act as 'living brands'" (Müller, 2018, p. 44) so that they adjust their behavior and hence carry and promote the brand message to the outside. Scholars have termed this notion "brand-centred control" (Müller, 2017), underlining the extension of the mechanisms of normative control when employees internalize brand messages (usually addressing the public). It encourages employees to reflect their behavior not just in the context of the company, but also with reference to external audiences.

As can be seen, in contrast to traditional bureaucratic and hierarchical forms of work, post-modern management strategies focus on shaping individuals to foster their commitment and identification with the company (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002). This approach, known as culture management, emphasizes employees' subjective experiences to increase work quality and efficiency (Morrill, 2008; Willmott, 1993; Kunda, 2006). However, scholars note that culture management emphasizes the organization's enduring connection with its employees while internal branding has emerged in response to precarious employment conditions and the brand's monetization as an asset (Müller, 2018, p. 46; see also Kornberger, 2010). Thus, by turning employees into "brand ambassadors", internal branding is seen as a means to address the flexible nature of contemporary working conditions while still controlling employees' activities and commitment to the company (Müller, 2018, p. 49).

Following this understanding, Dennis Mumby (2016) describes branding as a fundamental and constitutive feature of today's communicative capitalism that permeates contemporary organizations (see also Kuhn, Ashcraft and Cooren, 2017, p. 28). Therefore, he argues, critical management scholars have to further engage with the pervasive ways in which brand value and especially practices of corporate and internal branding have taken over the production of worker subjectivity, for instance through employee identity work and regulation (Mumby, 2016, p. 900; see also Schönian, 2022b, p. 90).

Against this background, the article first illuminates the intranet as part of the internal and corporate branding campaign introduced in the context of the merger. Among other media, the intranet was awarded a prominent role so as to advertise the company and the new brand to employees, thereby inducing identification with the new business. In the remainder of this article, I contrast these efforts with insights gained from employees' handling of the intranet. As will become apparent, corporate and internal branding on the intranet create a 'divided intranet' and a tension in employees' appreciation of it. Thus, the intranet assembles different logics, namely one that describes the intranet as an "tool of purpose" which provides access to content and applications relevant to

employees' work and one that defines it as "the management's speaking tube" that predominantly distributes messages from the Internal Communications department and company management.

Overall, the analysis suggests that the branding campaign on the intranet does not fulfil expected results as it divides the intranet into a work-relevant part and one that is devalued and considered a redundant distraction. As I argue, such contradictory logics encourage an ambivalent relation among employees to the intranet. Nevertheless, my findings also show that in its current set-up, the intranet allows employees to overlook the branding content and hence engages the 'many' users in relation to the work-relevant content and applications.

### **3 Conceptualizing the organizational entanglement of the intranet and internal branding: A practice theory framework**

Within social theory, theories of practice have received great attention in the last twenty years as a specific form of cultural theory and research program (Knorr Cetina, Schatzki and Savigny, 2001; Schmidt, 2012). A practice is defined as a 'nexus of doings and sayings' whereas the latter is seen as part of the former (Schatzki, 1996, p. 89). Also, the situatedness of activities, being very much indebted to the context and situation in which they occur, is jointly emphasized (Mol, 2002; Schatzki, 2002; Suchman, 2007). Within organization studies, the notion of practice has implicitly been part of a variety of research that moves beyond the idea of organizations as exclusively rational and bureaucratic institutions (Reckwitz, 2003, p. 285). Instead, informal routines and ways of doings are foregrounded and understood as significant insights into how organizing takes place (Schatzki, 2006). Of particular importance to this research is the so-called strategy-as-practice research group that places emphasis on the activities or doings in connection with strategy implementation projects in organizations (Jarzabkowski, 2004, 2005).

Research done in these fields raises awareness for the association of humans and technologies as part of work practices. In fact, the discussion about the contributing powers of artefacts, or more generally materialities has found its way into organization studies under the notion of "sociomateriality". The term calls attention to the traditional neglect of the material dimension of organizational life, as Wanda Orlikowski and Susan Scott have pointed out (2008). Prior to this discussion, organization studies have either "ignored" this dimension, taken for granted or in its impact "minimize[d]" (Orlikowski, 2007, pp. 1436–7). When studying artifacts, it seems that only isolated incidents are considered, as if organizations do not regularly engage with materiality – encompassing offices, desks, pens, and other technical and tangible devices (Orlikowski, 2007, p. 1435). Following Orlikowski's reasoning, the material is important, especially when it comes to understanding and theorizing contemporary organizations that emerge through a variety of information technologies.

Through the analysis of practices, social phenomena become comprehensible as they processually unfold and are carried out (Schmidt, 2012, p. 32). Thus, it is less a question of whether the social determines the technology or vice versa, but how both are brought about. Orlikowski refers to the notion of "constitutive entanglement" (2007, p. 1437) in order to underline the recursive, mutual engagement of artefacts and humans that brings about specific practices as well as artefacts. From this perspective, comprehending technologies and software applications involves not only focusing on users, but on the practices that configure both technology and users. Such a view is especially relevant for understanding the ways in which the intranet is part of the everyday work and how in particular the internal branding campaign plays out in the different settings of my investigation.

### **4 Setting the scene: Research context and methodology**

The research upon which this article is based was undertaken in a telecommunications company in Austria (Schönian, 2022b). Telecompany-X, as I call it, had just gone through a merger integrating landline and mobile communication. The new intranet, officially called "Inside-X" (X standing for the company name), occurred about six months after the official merger. At the time of my fieldwork, Inside-X had been online for about half a year, but the data migration was still not finished; employees continued to have different applications according to their previous company when, for example, managing travel expenses or pay rolls. Inside-X runs in a browser and is based on Open Text, a content management system (CMS) for business enterprises, enabling to store and organize large amounts of data. As the name already conveys, it is predominantly based on text, but allows the integration of different software applications such as Microsoft Sharepoint and SAP.

This study's research approach draws on ethnographic methodologies and hence aligns with recent forms of performing ethnographic fieldwork in organizations (Czarniawska, 2007; Nicolini, 2007; Taylor *et al.*, 2021). In

fact, scholars in organizational ethnography have already pointed at the challenges involved when studying distributed information systems in contemporary organizations which call for an increasing reflexivity and adjustment of established methods (Henriksen, 2002; Bruni, 2005; Dirksen, Huizing and Smit, 2010; Akemu and Abdelnour, 2020). Moreover, intranets are often considered the heart of a company which must be secured from the outside so that access is rather difficult (Lehmuskallio, 2006, pp. 290–1). Thus, for my research, I developed the method of company visits comprising ‘guided tours’ through the intranet which also corresponded to what was understood as a legitimate investigation of the intranet in Telecompany-X. As a methodological approach, I consider my visits and especially the tours as more informative than formal interviews because they happened at people’s workplaces and included the everyday office scenery; hence they gave an impression of and made me experience the field site.

Focusing on the practices in which the intranet is embedded, I was especially interested in how employees use the intranet as part of their everyday work (cf. Nicolini, 2013, p. 220). In addition to interviews with the project manager and the chief editor of the intranet, I undertook 10 visits in the company at employees’ workplaces. Following the ethnographic research stance, these visits extended over 10 months and were divided into two phases: the first phase comprised the interviews and five visits, mainly in the Operations Support Systems (OSS) department, team “Inventory and Provisioning”, also called technicians, and in the company’s call center. The second phase of my fieldwork started about three months later, and this time my visits extended across different departments, mostly involving employees with a background in Customer Service and Sales. While the early interview with the chief editor and the project manager of the new intranet explored the expectations towards the software, I was able to contrast these with observations I made regarding how the intranet was part of the everyday work in the distinct settings in Telecompany-X.

Each of my visits lasted between 45 minutes and 1.5 hours. The ‘guided tour’ explored the intranet along the content and applications my informants use most often. In fact, these tours through the intranet resemble what is called “Think-Aloud Method” in usability testing (Clemmensen *et al.*, 2009). But thinking aloud focuses on the individual, in particular participants’ decision-making and related cognitive processes, often initiated by prescribing specific tasks beforehand. My ‘guided tours’ had another focus, namely “observing materiality in action[s]” (Royer, 2020, p. 15) which captures the material artefact within the net of the practices it is part of. Doing so, I was able to trace how the intranet is part of staff members’ everyday work, and furthermore, how they navigate through and explore the intranet.

I recorded conversations and took notes on the work setting and how my informants moved through the intranet. This data was the focus of my investigation and formed the basis for my analysis of the work practices the intranet is part of. Also, I asked my informants to make screenshots of the intranet starting page and some applications they made use of. Furthermore, I collected various documents such as the company’s internal employee magazine and a business magazine intended for stakeholders and the industry. In addition, I also examined company presentations on the Internet and read newspaper articles, in particular in relation to the recent merger the company had gone through. The field data comprised audio recordings of formal interviews and visits in Telecompany-X as well as notes on company settings and employees’ workplaces. Altogether, my dataset encompassed 292 pages of interview and visit transcriptions (single-spaced) which constitute the main body of my data sources. I also analyzed my fieldnotes (transferred into 21 pages typed data), six screenshots and a variety of company documents.

In the beginning of the analysis, I developed codes for all possible topics (“open coding”), but at a later stage I coded selectively, that is, I concentrated on the relevant work practices and analytical themes I had already found and looked to see whether or not they appear in my data (“focused coding”) (Emerson, Fretz and Shaw, 1995, pp. 150–67; see also Glaser and Strauss, 2009). Likewise, I first read through the different articles in the internal employee magazine just in terms of getting information on the company, but once I had become aware of the internal campaign promoting a specific work attitude among employees, I noticed especially the ads for this campaign in the magazine. Thus, as part of the analysis, I applied the code scheme I had already developed also to other documents. As such, the ads on the intranet and in the magazines constituted “visual aid[s]” (Scheffer, 2002, p. 365), i.e. additional ways of making sense of the organization while emphasizing the campaign as a specific insight for recognizing and linking analytical themes across my research.

For instance, a leading code was the notion of ‘culture’, mostly in connection with ‘difference’. It became a central theme for understanding the internal discourses in the company after the merger. Also, it made apparent what was conceived as the organizational problem: the cultural separation of the post-merger company. The

intranet was expected to tackle this problem – but to my astonishment it did so not by simply distributing internal information, but by being part of an internal corporate branding campaign that promoted the new company and its brand to employees.

## 5 The intranet as a change agent: Corporate and internal branding on the intranet

In the context of the merger, a company-wide induction event was held to celebrate the launch of the new product brand. The event featured various versions of the new brand logo, including a graffiti-style design created on stage by a break-dancer. The project manager of the intranet emphasized that the “brand introduction campaign” was conceptualized as being very extensive and covering multiple steps and the involvement of staff members. This campaign coincided with the public advertising of the new brand. Following the introduction, an intranet application was implemented, allowing employees to design their own brand logos that were displayed on their intranet starting page. Subsequently, the officially designed logos were utilized for public advertising, with different versions used for different events or seasons. For instance, a logo made of fir needles was used during Christmas, and the piano player logo was utilized as part of the company’s art and culture sponsorship.

However, the emphasis on the new brand conveys the impression of a strategically well-considered undertaking, as if conflicts can be settled by means of designing and implementing the right company logo. In fact, it fades out disagreements and frictions occurring in the context of the merger and the possible power imbalances between the two companies and also between the management and employees. However, on basis of these considerations, it is not surprising that my informants mostly referred to the merger by using expressions such as “brand re-launch”, “brand implementation” or “brand changeover”.

### 5.1 The intranet’s homepage

Against this backdrop, the new intranet was primarily understood to function as an extension of the branding measures and to set an example of the new company culture. In fact, this orientation constituted a central expectation towards the intranet: it was understood as a means to bring the new brand and culture as close as possible to employees’ desks and, by doing so, make them learn about and follow the new agenda. Adhering to the new brand and culture of the company was also linked to the cohesive presentation of the intranet. The project manager stressed that employees should not be able to distinguish between content and specific applications. Thus, it remained critical to establish a unified interface or “façade,” signifying a uniform intranet appearance to integrate employees through shared identification:

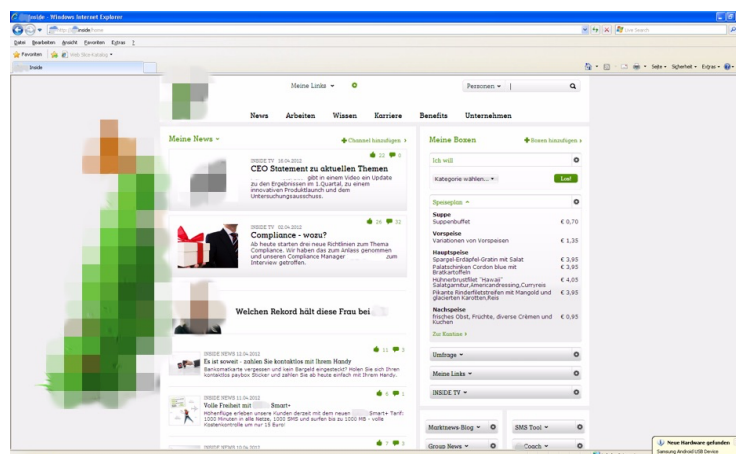


Figure 1: Intranet starting page

As can be seen, on its surface, the starting page displays the company news section – called “My News” – prominently located at the center. It features specific news on the employee’s work division, but different ‘channels’, as they are called, can be added. Each post can be liked or commented on. Apart from the news section, the intranet assembles a variety of company information as well as applications for specific work processes. The pull-down menu at the top covers the sections “News”, “Work” (“Arbeiten”), “Knowledge” (“Wissen”), “Career” (“Karriere”), “Benefits” and “Company” (“Unternehmen”). Each of these headlines stores specific information;

for instance, the headline “Career” contains the internal job market as well as information on the company’s performance management. The section “Benefits” lists all companies where staff members of Telecompany-X receive special concessions. General information on the company, that is, an organigram, business reports, information on the management, etc. is stored under the headline “Company” (“Unternehmen”). The top right of the page features a search field where people may search the intranet database; results can be further modified through pre-set categories (i.e. “people”, “content”, “application” or “general”).

But the intranet also comprises various tools and applications that access specific information or enable certain work processes. These are subsumed in several movable sections entitled “My Boxes” (“Meine Boxen”), providing direct links to the respective application. Such boxes may be removed or relocated by simply dragging and dropping them in the designated area. The daily menu (“Speiseplan”) on the right side can be adjusted according to one’s company location and the respective canteen. It is followed by a sequence of more applications; one addresses a survey (“Umfrage”) evaluating the new company brand, “My links” assembles individually defined links and the intranet’s video channel, “INSIDE TV”. On the left side there is a large version of the company logo (blurred for anonymity reasons).

## ***5.2 The intranet as an instrument of Internal Communication***

At the beginning of my fieldwork, I interviewed the project manager who was responsible for the implementation of the new intranet. Sketching the campaign, he seemed concerned about the department’s overall strategy and pointed at the distinct logics the intranet assembles. As he explained:

Well, our main goal is to increasingly synchronize things, that is, the intranet as the medium of Internal Communications, that’s us, we have several objectives we would like to achieve, and, on the other hand, the intranet is very well also an employee-portal, that is the central online entry point for all employees, if you want the operating system [laughing] of the company. Certainly, it’s also a task to access as fast as possible the various other applications. And we have the strategy to integrate things better, the different applications [...]. However, the bottom line is to make the intranet more homogenous and efficient at the end of the day.

As can be seen, when talking about the intranet, the project manager refers to the term “medium” and refines the strategy of Internal Communications. This involves, as he says, an increasing coordination (“synchronization”) of different media, namely of the internal employee magazine and the company newsletter, but also the intranet. Furthermore, besides implementing the strategic purposes of the Internal Communication department, the project manager considers the intranet to also serve employees – this becomes evident in his terminology describing the intranet as an “employee-portal”, a “central online entry point for all employees” and the overall “operating system of the company”. Apparently, the intranet not only serves Internal Communications’ strategic objectives, but is involved on a functional and very fundamental level in employees’ everyday work. Thus, navigating between these two dimensions, the project manager points out an important difference between managerial objectives and employees’ interests.

In this manner, the quote first of all sheds light on how the Internal Communication department understands the intranet, namely in the sense of a medium that spreads its messages to employees, who seem to receive them rather passively. Secondly, it also exposes a tension inherent in the intranet’s setup at Telecompany-X. On the one hand, the intranet serves as a tool for employees’ daily work, while on the other, it embodies managerial objectives and strategies. In fact, the project manager acknowledges this challenge, stating that the company’s goals may differ from the needs of individual employees: “That’s the challenge; on the one hand, the company wants to reach its goals, and on the other, each and every employee has to find what he [or she] needs. And these two things can be very, very different.” According to the project manager, this fundamental division between management and employees underscores their differing interests in the company.

As will be shown in the following, instead of integrating the different interests, the ‘divided intranet’, as I call it, creates a tension in employees’ appreciation of it, eventually leading to an ambivalent relation to the intranet. In particular, employees tend to prioritize work-related content and applications and, thereby, devalue the managerial efforts of corporate and internal branding. It divides the intranet into an ‘important’ and ‘less significant’ part, that is, one that is associated with work and one that is designated as useless playing around.

## 6 The intranet as part of everyday work

Coming back to how the new company and brand was internally advertised to employees, the new interface and setup of the intranet played a significant part – not only from the perspective of Internal Communications. It also resonated with employees, but not necessarily as expected. As one of my informants working in the Customer Service division told me, the new intranet was introduced, in fact “promoted”, describing it as “our new intranet” and the “Internet-home of our new brand”, i.e. being especially recognizable in relation to the new brand.

One of my informants, Manuel, who worked in Business Sales, explained that from the beginning, the intranet was considered “the pioneer of the shared world”, illustrating the new company and the new brand. In particular, as Manuel framed it, Internal Communications followed a certain kind of thinking, a “mind-set” he said, which directs how topics and articles were presented. When I asked him whether this thinking has been taken up by people in the company, he answered:

Well, I can’t say that it has been *the* [emphasis in original] integration-positive driver, but it surely has contributed a positive part. [...] it’s a playground, the intranet, of Internal Communications, they can live it all up there and make their messages public among employees, of course, it should be that way. It’s certainly a mind-set-forge, that’s obvious. Whether you want it or not.

The quote stands out because of its reflexive approach describing Internal Communications’ efforts on the intranet. First of all, he points out a specific way of thinking that is being put forth through the intranet and the Internal Communication department. Even though employees do not deliberately engage with the messages and applications on the intranet, they do take notice of them and also recognize a certain impact of them. In fact, his phrase “mind-set-forge” suggests that the Internal Communication department fabricates a specific way of thinking to align with their objectives. Obviously, this fabrication concerns a certain attitude about and towards the company. According to Manuel, these measures have received a response from employees since they have to look at these messages in form of the new interface every time they use the intranet.

Following his description, it seems that the fabrication of thinking has been successful and contributed to a shared understanding of the new company. His statement resonates well with the project manager above who described the intranet as a medium of Internal Communications that is intended to promote a coherent company culture. However, even though Manuel somewhat approves or almost defends this activity, I found out that work-related content and applications on the intranet receive his far more deliberate attention.

Altogether, describing the intranet as a “playground of Internal Communications” creates the impression of the Internal Communication department as a somewhat separate sphere where messages, slogans and applications are developed and tried out just for themselves, in alignment with managerial goals and less with the rest of the company. It appears as likewise detached and at the same time confined to the understandings of the department itself.

In fact, in a subsequent statement, Manuel emphasized his distant engagement with the intranet and how he focusses on the work-related part of the intranet by describing the intranet as a “tool of purpose” that he uses in the standard version without using the personalizing features. Following this framing, the intranet appears as a neutral instrument that simply serves to reach a given aim.

But what does the notion of “tool of purpose” actually mean in the context of employees’ everyday work? As I am going to show, it means that, first of all, employees do not read the newsfeed for its own sake, that is, they do not scroll around the different news entries because of the time constraints they experience during their work. Secondly, employees distinguish between content and applications relevant for their work and those that relate to the corporate and internal branding efforts which, as will be shown, they in fact dismiss. Against this backdrop, the article lays bare how the intranet’s starting page configures a user in ways that do not correspond with the existing work settings, that is, the reported conditions of work and related understandings that accompany the intranet-in-use.

### 6.1 Un-reading the newsfeed

As presented above, the intranet contains a newsfeed which is prominently placed in the middle on the starting page. During my investigation into how employees engage with the intranet, I experienced that the daily menu, located on the right side on the starting page, usually receives employees’ first attention on a work day. As I was told, it structures the workday and helps to decide whether to take the lunch break in the canteen. In contrast, the daily news section tends to be overlooked; as my informant Stephanie from the Customer Communication



department said, it “gets lost sometimes”. Apparently, whether she looks at it depends on how much time she has (“how fast I click away from the intranet”). This becomes even more evident as she explains:

But when I have time, I look into the intranet, for instance, and I see what kind of news, what has been added, ah ok [she scrolls through the news section], I haven’t read this one, I’ll look at it. And then I find it useful again.

Again, whether or not she looks at the starting page seems to depend on her time schedule. During our conversation, she indicated that she did not have time to read the very recent news entry and said she plans to read it later. I also want to underline that she refers to “the intranet” which she apparently associates with the newsfeed. A similar association becomes apparent in the next quote which is from Viktoria in the Customer Service department. Once more, a positive attitude towards the news section becomes evident, but she also notes the number of entries and information available as well as her lack of time to read them during a workday:

[...] for example, these are news channels [clicks on it], I mean, this is interesting, but you would need also time to read through it and this is simply, I think, there is so much information which is interesting, but actually the time is missing when working, well, you’d say it’s good that it’s there, it’s good that it is saved there, because, perhaps I have time and can read through it, or I need it and it’s still there, but that I inform myself through this on a daily basis – [...], no, simply because I don’t have the time [...].

The lack of time, but also the number of entries in the news section seems to prevent Viktoria from reading the entries and from subscribing to specific news channels. Moreover, she refers to the storage of news, which she appreciates since it enables her to read the articles at a later time. But in connection with the quote above we may also say that the storage of data enables her to constantly postpone the reading- “when needed”, “perhaps I have time” or, as Stephanie said, “I’ll look at it”. Thus, at first glance, the storage of data appears as a solution to the number of entries and the regular, daily update, but looking more closely, in association with employees’ lack of time, reading the newsfeed is constantly deferred and rarely happens. Indeed, the lack of time was apparent in other employees’ accounts as well, usually mentioned as a side note which made it appear even more self-evident to my informants.

The least regular reading of the news section occurred among the technicians in the Operations Support Systems (OSS) department; when I asked my informant Thomas how he actually receives information about the company, he answered that important news is mostly sent directly via email, especially those communicated by the management, and they usually comprise a link that directly transfers to the intranet. Pointing to the newsfeed, he further explicated:

[...] and the rest – not at all, because, unfortunately, it just gets lost in the masses there [scrolls through the news section], and I don’t look into it that often, I mean I don’t look every day to see what’s happening, just on the 21st there were already two [entries], one, two, and on the 22nd, I probably always look once a week, I open it [the starting page] all the time, but only up here at the top [points at the search for people], I rarely have the time to actually really look through what’s there, so that somehow it all just goes under.

Thomas appears to regularly open the intranet starting page, but does not pay attention to the newsfeed every day. Although the intranet opens automatically for employees, Thomas selectively engages with it. This quote again highlights that the newsfeed’s archival function of storing all entries does not solve the issue of not reading it, but merely postpones it. As the week progresses, the entries accumulate, making it time-consuming to read through them. As he further says, only through the message that features a direct link to an intranet page, Thomas accesses the intranet. In this manner, Internal Communications does not encourage checking the newsfeed since important updates are provided regularly by email, and newsfeed entries are often delayed.

As can be seen, the entanglement of the material feature of the newsfeed, that is, its archival function, with employees’ time constraints encourages users to constantly defer the reading of entries. Also, the routine of sending out company news via email undermines the importance of the news section on the intranet starting page. At first glance, the storage of news items seems to make up for the lack of time as it enables employees to read at a later stage. However, employees’ accounts suggest that they constantly defer reading the news. But let me now turn to another insight I received from the data, namely the hierarchization of content and applications on the intranet.

## **6.2 Ranking and de-valuing content and applications**

As said before, several applications and content areas on the intranet are thought to increase identification with the new company. For example, giving employees the ability to design their own company logos as well as the more general presentation of employee role models were some of the efforts of the Internal Communication department on the intranet. When I visited Stephanie, who I introduced above, she explained to me how she is able to design her own company logo. In fact, while doing so, she described it as “totally cute” and as a way to create one’s own brand logo.

At first glance, these observations suggest that Internal Communications’ messages have been taken up and obtained acceptance by employees, but upon closer examination of how the application and other content is part of everyday work, this impression changes. In fact, this is already discernible in Stephanie’s notion of “playing around” and “fun things”. For instance, when talking about the logo application, my informant Viktoria, also from Customer Communication, commented:

I mean, this is playing around [clicks and scrolls, shows the application], I could generate one [a logo] and could say I’d like to have this as a background there, yes. Well, the intranet is actually good for, in order to know a procedure, I’d say I have a special rate for staff members or a work phone, how do I have to proceed with certain things. And this is all saved here.

Again, the intranet and especially the application for designing one’s own company logo is associated with the notion of “playing around”. In contrast to Stephanie, Viktoria did not design her own company logo. Furthermore, she contrasts the application with what she thinks is good, that is, relevant for her work, namely stored information on how certain procedures in the company take place. The notion of play conveys the impression that she ascribes a different relevance to an application that allows her to design her own version of the company logo than a work-related application that, for instance, enables her to send messages or to call up company procedures. In addition, the quote makes also clear that because of her workload, she is not able to afford spending time on generating her own company logo.

However, prioritizing the work-related content on the starting page occurred more often among all of my informants. Coming back to Stephanie who I quoted above, she noted while looking over the newsfeed and pointing to the section “My Boxes”: “But there are indeed things that are also very applicable, for instance the HR/SAP-portal, these are very relevant things, and I have a look here.” Despite her earlier enthusiasm for the logo application, she also contrasts two types of content on the starting page: one affects the logo application and the other relates to applications that are described as useful and therefore considered of different value. In this regard, it is not surprising that the section “My Boxes” often received attention among the employees I visited; it links to applications that directly refer to company procedures such as time management, managed through a Human Resources application which is an SAP software. But apart from shifting boxes around, my informants rarely adjusted or ‘personalized’ the starting page.

In fact, this lack of personalization and the overall preference for the standard version of the starting page and news section occurred in many settings I visited. Most of my informants were often unaware of the option to receive issue-specific news and only a few adjusted the starting page by moving around the applications relevant for their work. In fact, the lack of personalization echoes the statement by Manuel referred to earlier who described the intranet as a “tool of purpose”, that is, a device he has no emotional attachment to and which he only uses, for instance, to look something up (instead of, for example, reading the newsfeed for its own sake). In addition, customizing the intranet obviously takes time which employees apparently do not have. Nevertheless, this specific disregard is remarkable since the project manager of the intranet promoted the individual adjustment of the starting page as an important new feature. It was understood to take care of individual user needs and hence to increase acceptance among employees.

Obviously, the prioritization of work-related applications and content is not neutral; rather, it was accompanied by a devaluation of intranet features contributing to corporate and internal branding. For instance, Thomas in the OSS department referred to the announcement of an internal contest by stating: “all these prize vouchers, this reminds me more of a newspaper than a company portal, even though perhaps others use it, but I don’t need it for my daily work.” Likewise, Viktoria from Customer Communication described explicitly a hierarchy between the different types of content:

[...] but I’m more interested in the professional information, more than – I don’t know, when there is a lottery somewhere, where I perhaps participate in a football game, it’s nice that the company is

offering this to me, but I'm not really interested in it, well, I don't think this is actually relevant for me as much as when new tariffs emerge, well, it's rather the professional content that's relevant [...].

The statements from my sources reveal that by bringing together Internal Communications' messages and applications with work-related content and tools, the intranet exposes the measures of internal and corporate branding in a rather negative light. This contrast highlights the two interests of the intranet, serving as both a platform for Internal Communications' messages and a portal for addressing employees' everyday work concerns. However, from the employees' perspective, the branding initiatives are seen as irrelevant and actually act as distractions, hindering their engagement with the work-related content which they perceive as relevant to their work. Thus, the intranet's uniform appearance, which was a significant concern for the project manager, fails to integrate these divergent interests and instead creates a conflict between them.

Nevertheless, despite their joined devaluation of the branding content, my investigation also shows a difference between staff members with a background in Customer Service and the technicians in terms of how they relate to some of the applications on the starting page. That is, while employees with a background in Customer Service used, for instance, the logo application (as reported above in relation to Stephanie) or the option to define so-called 'quicklinks' on the intranet, the technicians refrained from doing so, in fact even showed their disregard. As I am going to outline next, the intranet's request for employees to interact with certain content, such as management's video messages, has not only led to rejection among the technicians, it also indicates that the branding efforts on the intranet challenge what is understood as work. As will become apparent, while the company TV is considered as a means to address employees, it instead contributes to further distancing the management from employees.

### ***6.3 Playfully jesting at the company TV channel***

As described earlier, the intranet contains a section called Inside-TV which is the internal video channel of the company. As I learned during my fieldwork, the company channel shows short clips on company activities as well as statements and live events with people from the management. In light of the managerial efforts of the Internal Communication department, such live chats and videos correspond well to the idea of the intranet as a medium sending out messages to employees. However, the following analysis shows that this intent did not work out as expected. Let me make this clear by referring to a conversation I experienced among the technicians in the OSS department.

Most of my informants worked in open-plan offices which often enabled other colleagues to join a conversation. For example, in a discussion with Frederik, his colleague entered our conversation saying that "it's not so much used, the TV", and he added laughingly "It's nice, but we rarely watch TV, only at home [...] But we wonder that we are really – really forced via the intranet, to watch TV in the company." The humorous conversation displayed the technicians' rather distanced attitude towards company management and towards watching company TV. This becomes evident in the amusing tone and the way the management was made fun of. In the further conversation, we also learn that the videos feature members of the management but they are not always explicitly directed towards employees, as in the form of the live chat; sometimes they are simply recordings from a press conference. Thus, these videos are also publicly broadcasted, as employees have also watched them as part of the country-wide news program in the evening. It is therefore not surprising that Frederik described them as:

Well, quite strange, yes [...] well, in reality, more or less they talk to us, but partly also more what you can see on [...] [the country-wide news program on TV], we see sequences of it also there.

Accordingly, the so-called 'live events' are presented as a form of internal communication of the management to employees, but they are likewise directed towards the wider public. Frederik's description of them being "quite strange" points at their ambivalent character; put on the intranet, they address employees inside the company, but when shown on the public news program, they likewise speak to the wider public. Moreover, as I was told by the chief editor, in cases when they feature a chat and involve employees only, questions are preselected so that the interaction is arranged. Hence, they rather seem to be a public undertaking where emphasis is put on the management's performance. Overall, the character of such an event appears as ambivalent and the presumed intent to establish a connection between company management and employees rather fades into the background.

As can be seen, the measures of internal and corporate branding – the newsfeed and its content, several applications – make the intranet appear as a website intended not for the company’s internal communications only, but likewise as directed towards the public. This is problematic since it creates a rather hesitant, even ambivalent relation to the intranet among employees. Especially the example of the video message highlights the intranet’s indecisiveness which seems to move the intranet further away from employees.

Moreover, the conversation above also points to the fact that Internal Communications’ appeal to watch company TV at work confuses what is considered as work among employees. As one of the technicians in the conversation put it, employees are requested or even “forced” to watch these videos. But they do not do so because watching TV is an activity understood to be done in leisure time. In fact, a little later Frederik notes: “I’m here, so primarily, I concentrate on my work”. Apparently, watching TV interrupts his work and also contradicts his understanding of what he does in the office. The application of the company TV questions this understanding.

In the conversation above the technicians playfully jest at how the management addresses them through the company TV application. As literature on employee resistance has shown, humor is a way of distancing oneself from managerial control (Mumby, 2005; Ybema and Horvers, 2017). Thus, the conversation shows how humor gives the technicians space to disengage from the strategies of management, which only pretend to have a conversation with the employees, and instead creates cohesion and solidarity among the technicians.

But this conversation also highlights the difference between the groups of employees I investigated; while employees with a background in Customer Service turned out to have a sympathy towards some of the efforts of corporate and internal branding (e.g. designing one’s own company logo), the technicians showed a greater disregard towards these efforts. In fact, their overall neglect of the corporate and internal branding initiatives went beyond content and applications on the intranet; so-called “social events”, regularly held in the company, were similarly discussed and made fun of.

## **7 Discussion and conclusion: An ambivalent intranet that engages the ‘many’ users**

In this article, I have first of all outlined managerial strategies around the implementation of a new company intranet. Employees’ identifying with the new company and brand stood at the center of the conceptualization and introduction of the new intranet. The campaign coincides well with post-industrial forms of management, in particular corporate and internal branding, that attempt to normatively control and manipulate employees’ behavior, attitude and emotions towards the company in which they work (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002; Kunda, 2006).

Within this framework, the intranet was considered as a “medium” of the Internal Communications department sending out messages that align with the department’s agenda and that employees should absorb rather passively. At the same time, the project manager described the intranet also as an “employee-portal”, that is, a portal that enables access to a variety of tools and applications related to everyday work. In this manner, the intranet was designated both a change and an integration agent; that is, by initiating a shared identification with the new company brand, the intranet was understood to install a form of togetherness among employees and, likewise, to mysteriously integrate both company management’s and employees’ interests.

However, as the analysis has shown, the new appearance was recognized by employees, but nevertheless a fragmentation occurred along content and applications that relate to everyday work in contrast to the internal branding efforts. Employees treated the intranet in the sense of a “tool of purpose”, namely an instrument that primarily enables employees to complete work processes. This framing somewhat contradicted Internal Communications’ idea of the intranet as a change agent that gathers employees around the new company brand. Nevertheless, we find differences in the way the distinct groups of employees I studied relate to the applications on the starting page; that is, while, for example, employees with a background in Customer Service designed their own company logo, the technicians refrained from doing so.

These findings confirm existing literature and research on how different stakeholders across the company are involved in change management initiatives (Lewis, 2019). That is, distinct employees affected by the change hold different opinions and concerns so that integrating their views is considered as vital and hence important for the success of it (Lewis and Sahay, 2019, p. 216). Moreover, research on corporate brand management highlights that it is not simply a marketing initiative, but a dynamic process and collaborative effort that involves the co-construction of meaning by multiple stakeholders across the organization, including management and employees

at various hierarchical levels (Hatch and Schultz, 2010). As they further emphasize, management's strategic vision, the corporate culture as well as how employees view the company are all decisive for a successful corporate branding campaign (Hatch and Schultz, 2003). When it comes to the campaign on the intranet in Telecompany-X, it seems that employees were considered largely a passive audience. Hence, the campaign lacked a systematic involvement of the different groups in the company as well as a wider engagement with the organization's future development.

This understanding also corresponds to how the technicians related to the company TV; watching videos lied outside of what is considered as work, as they humorously pointed out. Apparently, the TV application contradicted established understandings of work. This idea also underpins the devaluation of content described as "playing around": most of my informants considered the playful logo application not as part of their work. In this manner, both applications further increased employees' ambivalence towards the intranet.

But examining employees' handling of the newsfeed and applications on the starting page has revealed that also specific conditions of work affect how employees engage with the intranet. That is, employees constantly postponed reading the newsfeed because of reported time constraints. Also, the storage of news entries did not initiate a later reading, as possibly intended, but instead caused a further deferral. Thus, this case is a paradigmatic example for the "constitutive entanglement of the social and the material" in practice (Orlikowski, 2007, p. 1440); that is, the content of the newsfeed and the specific materiality of the archive in connection with regular updates and employees' time constraints encourage in fact a limited engagement with it.

In light of this analysis, I argue that the engagement with specific brand messages through the intranet rather fails since the current version of the intranet prompts employees to reflect on and evaluate the different types of content. In fact, this constant comparison of content encourages a distant attitude towards these efforts and an overall ambivalent relation to the intranet. Ambivalent since, on the one hand, the intranet indeed proves itself as useful and relevant to employees' everyday work; on the other hand, within the framework of instrumentality, the measures of corporate and internal branding are considered as a waste of time. Thus, the aim to normatively control and increase employees' identification with the company and brand through applications and content on the intranet appears as limited.

But this failure is *not only* a question of employees' attitudes and interests and how they view the branding content on the intranet; rather, the branding content is detached from employees also because of the reported conditions of work so that the partial dismissal of the intranet is not surprising. That is, the branding content configures a user that, first of all, has a great amount of time to, for instance, design one's own company logo, or to watch company TV. Likewise, the newsfeed presupposes a user that has time to read the entries regularly since they add up on a daily basis. Against this background, it is not surprising that most of my informants said that they had never commented on an entry. In fact, the lack of time and, as I learned, the related understanding that too much commenting on the intranet indicates laziness, prevented employees from commenting.

As can be seen, preference for and engaging with the intranet and a certain type of content is not only based on the different stakeholder's opinion and concerns but on the existing conditions of work. Thus, the practice theory perspective makes apparent that some obstacles to change are not in the hands of individual employees or should be addressed by another communication campaign but must tackle the local working conditions. Accordingly, I argue that communication approaches tend to overlook that whether a change is taken up or rejected also depends on the everyday work in the organization since stakeholder's needs and wants are also configured through these work practices. As can be seen, this research agrees with existing literature that understands employee resistance not as an obstacle to a change project, but as an indicator of whether the changes are relevant to employees and their everyday work.

However, following this understanding, employees' refusal to engage with this content also describes the quality of the intranet; in fact, the intranet actually *allows* employees to overlook the branding content and, while doing so, engages the 'many' users in relation to the work-relevant content and applications. In this manner, the approach to normatively control employees' feeling towards the new company and brand through the intranet is not accomplished. Rather, in accordance with employees' distinction between 'work' and 'play', the branding content on the intranet appears as a playground exclusively of the Internal Communications department, simply legitimizing the managerial production of worker subjectivity.

To conclude, the case of the branding campaign as a motor for employee identification and commitment shows the limitation of such a change management initiative. Even though the intranet was intended to mediate both, the interests of company management and of employees, such an understanding overlooks the fact that a

workable technology is not only a matter of balancing or integrating ‘interests’, but of comprehending the ways in which employees engage in everyday work. Therefore, the paper argues, firstly, for a deliberate consideration of the different logics that a technology like the intranet brings together and, secondly, for a stronger consideration of local working conditions when implementing change projects. Indeed, different participation and development formats can increase employee identification and engagement without having to resort exclusively to forms of corporate or internal branding.

## List of Figures

Figure 1: Intranet starting page ..... 8

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