

# A COUNTER INTUITIVE VIEW OF THE ROLE OF THE COMMUNICATION MEDIUM IN LEADERSHIP AND CHANGE

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## ABSTRACT

*We draw from psychological theories of leadership and literature on computer-mediated communication to challenge the received wisdom of the organization change literature about the need to match communication media richness to the equivocality of the task or change situation. We make the counter intuitive proposition that leaner forms of communication can be linked to higher perceptions of leadership charisma and effectiveness even in equivocal situations, and therefore can be more potent in effecting change than richer forms, under certain conditions. We discuss these conditions and the implications for organization change communications.*

In this chapter, we consider the link between leadership communication, in particular the medium of such communication, and organizational change. Communication has been seen as fundamental in creating readiness for change, where the aim is to create dissatisfaction with the status quo, and

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Research in Organizational Change and Development, Volume 20, 37–58

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ISSN: 0897-3016/doi:10.1108/S0897-3016(2012)0000020005

foster confidence that the organization can indeed change; what Armenakis, Harris, and Mossholder (1993) respectively describe as discrepancy and efficacy. The organizational discourse literature has addressed the links between discourse (in its various guises such as conversation, rhetoric or metaphor), and organization change, recognizing the constructive, recursive, and interlinked nature of discourse and its potency to effect change (Grant & Marshak, 2011; Heracleous & Barrett, 2001).

In addition to the content of communication, the medium and timing dimensions have also been recognized as crucial, as noted for example by Smeltzer (1991). With respect to the medium of communication, it is believed that it should match the equivocality of the situation. That is, richer media such as face-to-face communication should be used for more ambiguous tasks or situations, and leaner media such as electronic communication or memos should be used for routine tasks or situations (Daft & Lengel, 1984, 1986). In this chapter we focus specifically on the communication medium in order to address what we see as a fundamental misunderstanding in the received wisdom of the organization change literature; that richer media are generally more effective, especially for non-routine situations such as organization change.

We link these considerations with leadership, regarded as fundamental in leading a social system toward successful change through influencing followers. Smircich and Morgan (1982) for example note that the “framing” aspect of leadership guides follower interpretations, and subsequently their meanings and actions, in effect shaping their social reality. The leadership literature recognizes the essential role of communication in enacting charisma and leadership effectiveness (Conger, 1991; Conger & Kanungo, 1987; Hartog & Verburg, 1997). So far this literature has overlooked the role of the communication medium, preassuming what we regard to be a debatable view of the relationship between medium richness and communication effectiveness.

Drawing from psychological theories of leadership we make the counter intuitive proposition that leaner forms of communication can be linked to higher perceptions of leadership charisma and effectiveness, and therefore more potent in effecting change than richer forms, under certain conditions. Our argument draws from the Social Identity and De-Individuation theory of computer-mediated communication (Spears & Lea, 1994; Spears, Lea, & Lee, 1990); and Hogg’s (2001) social identity theory of leadership. The former suggests that the lack of interpersonal cues that is characteristic of mediated, leaner communication situations leads to an accentuation of perceptions of common characteristics, an increased identification with the

salient group and a higher degree of acceptance of the norms that are characteristic of this group. The latter suggests that leaders who personify the norms and characteristics of a salient group – who are prototypical – will be attributed with charismatic leadership characteristics, and a lack of contextual cues characteristic of lean communication media can enable this process since this lack provides higher levels of control and predictability of what the leader communicates and how the message will be interpreted.

The implications for organization change communications are potentially far-reaching. Rather than following the logic of “richer is better” for non-routine, equivocal situations endemic in the organization change literature (Daft & Lengel, 1984, 1986; Trevino, Daft, & Lengel, 1990), we suggest that leaner communication channels can be more effective than richer ones, even for nonroutine situations, under certain conditions. Further, under these conditions cognitive processes on the part of the recipients can lead to an accentuation of a “lean” message deprived of context cues, as well as accentuation of perceptions of leadership charisma beyond what a rich medium could accomplish. Finally, we suggest that lean communication can strengthen group identity, crucial to the efficacy dimension of organization change, if the social identity is salient to begin with.

## **THE BLESSING AND THE CURSE OF MEDIATED COMMUNICATION**

The debate about the impact of communication technology on communication outcomes between individuals and in-group contexts is perennial. Developments in communication technology continue at high speed, which makes it difficult for empirical research to keep up. The structure of the debate seems almost cyclical, swinging between an enthusiastic response to technological advances and gloomy predictions about the alienating and dehumanizing effects of technology.

A significant part of the literature has used the term “computer-mediated communication” (e.g., Spears & Lea, 1992, 1994; Sproull & Kiesler, 1986), with some confusion as to what this term means (Spears, Lea, Postmes, & Wolbert, 2009). We define computer-mediated communication, or CMC as a form of either synchronous or asynchronous communication between a sender and one or more receivers, and involving a computer or other electronic device on both sides (Fischer & Manstead, 2004). Possible forms of input and output range from text-based communication to video conferencing, and from anonymous one-to-many to individual one-to-many

or group settings (Boos, Jonas, & Sassenberg, 2000). The term CMC is in some respects similar to that of 'Advanced Information Technology' (AIT), as used for example by other authors like DeSanctis and Poole (1994). Both terms include technologies such as e-mail systems, message boards, groupware and group support systems (GSS). The main difference between AIT and CMC is that the literature on CMC places particular emphasis on the personal transmission of a message from a sender to one or more receivers.

Mediated forms of communication, as opposed to face-to-face interactions, have been a common feature of communication in organizational contexts for some time. As distributed forms of working and the use of mobile communication devices have become almost standard, the implications of media use for change management and leadership are of increasing significance (e.g., Avolio, Kahai, & Dodge, 2000; see also Avolio & Kahai, 2003; for social media see Grenny & Han, 2011). The possible effects of mediated forms of communication, and e-mail as a particularly common form of computer-mediated communication (CMC), have been the subject of interest in academia for over a decade. Studies differ with respect to basic assumptions and methodology, but importantly, also with respect to the predictions they make as to whether the outcome of mediated forms of communication is better, the same, or worse than that of the unmediated face-to-face communication (Fischer & Manstead, 2004). In an overview and classification, Fischer (2005) suggested that the difference in basic assumptions and methodologies means that theories of mediated communication should be classified as belonging to one of three paradigms (Kuhn, 1977): The "deficit paradigm," which assumes that any form of technological mediation leads to communication deficiencies, the "contingency paradigm," which posits that the impact of media technology depends on task and context, and the "meta-communicative paradigm," which focuses predominantly on how media are perceived, socially reconstructed, used strategically to obtain social influence, and on how the use of new communication technology develops in social contexts.

When it comes to considering the implications of mediated communication, much of the thinking is either implicitly or explicitly informed by theories belonging to the deficit paradigm. In other words, mediated communication is in principle considered inferior to face-to-face communication (Kiesler, Siegel, & McGuire, 1984). We argue that, by taking account of the context in which communication takes place, predictions of communication effectiveness can be very different than received wisdom. For example, there are situations in which the complexity of the message that

has to be communicated to effect change is low, contrary to the view that the richness of the message must match the complexity of the situation. Under these circumstances, using a “lean” channel can help avoid “surplus meaning,” that is unnecessary baggage that complicates what would otherwise be a relatively straightforward act of communication. Second, through additional cognitive effort and learning, seemingly “lean” channels can be used more effectively and, as a result, subjectively “expand” (Carlson & Zmud, 1999). Third, due to lack of context cues and direct, immediate feedback, lean media can invite projective processes on the part of both sender and receiver. As both parties encourage each other’s perceptions, strategic impression management can lead to a process of “iterative inflation” of personality perception, or what has been termed “hyperpersonal communication” (Walther, 2007). The fourth, and we would argue most potent argument, is that the very leanness of a channel can boost social identity salience and processes of social categorization, thereby increasing identification with the in-group. Lean communication channels, in other words, can trigger and boost social processes that could be dampened in a more personal and individual communication setting (a richer medium). When combined with Hogg’s (2001) social identity of leadership theory, this means that the use of a lean communication channel can increase perceptions of leader charisma.

*Use of Communication Technology is Information Deprivation and Hampers Change – The Deficit Paradigm*

Theories belonging to the deficit paradigm tend to assume that any type of mediation leads to an impaired form of interpersonal communication, and that the face-to-face situation should be considered ideal (Kiesler et al., 1984). Some of the work in this area is driven by soft- and hardware engineering interests, in an effort to create an experience of technology as similar to “real life” as possible. Concepts such as interactivity, immersion, and telepresence (e.g., Draper, Kaber, & Usher, 1999; Held & Durlach, 1992) attempt to empirically capture the experience of using a certain technology. The two deficit theories that have had the most significant impact on management-related research, however, are “Social Presence” theory (Short, Williams, & Christie, 1976) and the “Reduced Social Context Cues” approach (Kiesler et al., 1984). Both theories follow a similar logic, namely that mediated communication removes specific elements of the communication process, and that this removal has specific – and generally

adverse implications for the communication outcome. The difference between the two approaches is that social presence focuses mainly on the subjective experience, while the social context cue approach looks at the function of cue systems, in particular nonverbal cues.

When Short et al. (1976) introduced the concept of social presence, it was becoming increasingly apparent that communication technologies would have a lasting impact on how individuals interact. While landline telephony had become widespread, there was considerable uncertainty as to what new technologies would be and what impact they would have. The pivotal concept of social presence is defined as “the degree of salience of the other person in the interaction and the consequent salience of interpersonal relationships” (Short et al., 1976, p. 66). This concept has had a lasting impact and still informs much of the research in this area. According to social presence theory, media differ with respect to the degree of social presence they make possible. Although Short et al. (1976) maintained that this experience was related to the objective characteristics of the medium, they conceptualized social presence as a fundamentally subjective perception, which has a real impact on interpersonal relationships. The significance of the task, or the communication objective, was not addressed systematically in this research, nor was the specific importance of cue systems.

Building on social presence theory, Sarah Kiesler and her colleagues later developed the “reduced social context cues approach” (e.g., Kiesler, 1997; Kiesler et al., 1984; Sproull & Kiesler, 1986). The key proposition is that the loss of nonverbal channels in mediated communication deprives the interaction of social context cues. This was the element that social presence theory was lacking. This loss of social context cues, Kiesler argues, will lead to a reduction in the salience of social norms. The outcome of this is not necessarily negative, she argued, as a reduced salience of social norms can make communication more equal. Group processes would then be more democratic and participative, and domination by a single member would be less likely (Weisband, Schneider, & Connolly, 1995). In organizations, this purportedly equalizing effect has occasionally been heralded as the end of traditional hierarchies. However, Sproull and Kiesler (1986) pointed out that the absence of norms could equally lead to uninhibited behaviour, a phenomenon these authors considered much more likely: “When social context cues are weak, people’s feelings of anonymity tend to produce relatively self-centred and unregulated behaviour. That is people are relatively unconcerned with making a good appearance. Their behaviour becomes more extreme, more impulsive, and less socially differentiated” (Sproull & Kiesler, 1986, p. 1495). There is some anecdotal support for this,

as Walt Disney's Michael Eisner then remarked that "e-mail had served to increase the intensity of emotion within this company and become the principal cause of workplace warfare" (*The Economist*, 2000, p. 11).

Sarah Kiesler's work has been challenged, and empirical support is not exactly unanimous (e.g., Reicher, Spears, & Postmes, 1995; Spears, Lea, & Lee, 1990; Walther, 1996, 1999; Walther & Parks, 2002), but the hypothesis that media deprive the communication of specific cues which in turn has a predictable effects on communication process and outcome on both task and socioemotional levels is still widely accepted and applied to other settings such as distributed working. Geographical distance, it is argued, reduces social presence, makes social facilitation less likely and reduces social impact (see Kiesler & Cummings, 2002; Kraut et al., 2002). These approaches, we would argue, overemphasize the negative impact of mediated communication, and do not take into account the degree to which a lack of cues can be compensated, or perhaps even be beneficial. However, these approaches do inform much of the thinking in the area of mediated communication, probably because they are so intuitive.

The implications of the deficit paradigm for the management of change are clear: As information technology causes communication to be deficient, the use of any communication medium will have an adverse influence on the communication outcome when compared with face-to-face communication, whether this is related to task, the socioemotional aspects of communication, to understanding of the message or to motivation to act accordingly.

*Appropriate Use of Communication Technology Depends on the  
Nature of the Task – The Contingency Paradigm*

As it became progressively clear that mediated communication would remain a central feature of work, the focus of research, especially in the area of management, shifted away from merely reflecting on its negative aspects (especially Daft & Macintosh, 1981). Instead of lamenting the loss of the personal characteristics of communication, there seemed to be a need to understand under which circumstances mediated communication might be less of a problem – or perhaps even more appropriate than a face-to-face interaction. This marked the birth of those theories that can be classified as belonging to the "contingency paradigm" (Fischer, 2005). The key assumption is that the appropriate medium and the outcome of mediated communication, as opposed to unmediated face-to-face communication, depends on the nature of the task and other situational features. Of all these

approaches, media richness theory is still the most popular. It was originally introduced by Daft and Macintosh (1981) and later developed further (Trevino et al., 1990; Trevino, Lengel, & Daft, 1987). The key proposition is that media vary in their suitability for accomplishing different tasks – a significant change from social presence theory, which only focused on the presence of the social relationship enabled by the medium. Daft and his co-workers argued that tasks involve different degrees of equivocality, which the authors define as: “Information that is clear and specific and that generally leads to a single, uniform interpretation by users is considered unequivocal. Information that lends itself to different and perhaps conflicting interpretations about the work context is considered equivocal information” (Daft & Macintosh, 1981, p. 211).

The authors suggested a hierarchy of “media richness,” ordered along a single dimension, with face-to-face communication being the richest of all communication settings (Rice, 1993; Trevino et al., 1990). At first sight, this hierarchy appears to be almost identical to the one that results from social presence theory, but there is one very significant – and counter intuitive-difference: While rich media are considered appropriate for tasks that are high in equivocality, Daft, Lengel, and Trevino (1987) suggest that unequivocal tasks are best addressed using “lean” media. The reason for this recommendation is that rich media are hypothesized to add “surplus meaning,” that is room for subjective and potentially unintended interpretation of meaning that could be detrimental to the accomplishment of

**Table 1.** The Contingency of Media Richness and Task Equivocality  
(Based on Trevino et al., 1990).

		Task equivocality	
		High	Low
Media richness	High	Efficient communication Media richness matches task complexity	Inefficient communication Unnecessary media richness creates confusion and “surplus meaning”
	Low	Inefficient communication Cue-system too simple for complex task	Efficient communication Low richness is sufficient for message and avoids confusion



what is effectively an unequivocal task. Table 1 portrays this “task-media-fit” contingency relationship of computer-mediated communication.

While media richness theory is less pessimistic about the impact of lean communication technology than the social context cues approach, it still assumes that the richness of a medium is an objective and constant characteristic. This is where more recent, cognitive approaches disagree, with Walther being the most relevant protagonist (Walther, 1992, 1993, 1994, 1996, 1999; Walther, Anderson, & Park, 1994; Walther & Burgoon, 1992; Walther & Parks, 2002). Although Walther would not question that the physical characteristics of a medium do have a measurable effect on communication outcome, his “social information processing model” posits that individuals use computer technology creatively to compensate these effects. Those users who have sufficient skills, motivation, and time can compensate for any potential deficit created by the medium. All it takes is good knowledge of what the medium can and can’t do, a high level of motivation to achieve a specific communication result and the extra time needed to achieve it. Net-specific language, such as emoticons for example, may seem an inappropriate surrogate for nonverbal cues, but they nevertheless convey facets of emotionality.

A similar approach is the theory of “channel expansion” (Carlson, 1995; Carlson & Zmud, 1994, 1999), which effectively posits that the perceived richness of a medium increases with the user’s experience. Empirical data support the idea that users of technology compensate for the possible shortcomings of the technology. Tidwell and Walther (2002) report that, when engaged in a task that required uncertainty reduction, participants engaged in more direct and intimate strategies when their communication was mediated than when participants met face to face. Participants also felt more confident about the effectiveness of the conversation as a result.

Walther later went one step further, arguing that mediated communication enabled what he called “hyperpersonal communication.” Walther argues that an important element of creative media use is that users present themselves selectively, often to achieve a particular purpose. Instead of focusing on the limitations, Walther emphasizes the technical affordances that mediated communication provides for selective self-presentation (Walther, 2007). Cues that might otherwise interfere with this form of impression management (Döring, 1999; Goffmann, 1959; Schlenker 1980), such as facial expressions that might involuntarily “leak” information that is incompatible with the sender’s intentions (e.g., Ekman & Friesen, 1969), or posture and gestures (Wiener & Mehrabian, 1968), are not available. The result is that the receiver’s impression of the sender is therefore skewed

toward the strategic presentation, for the simple reason that no other cues are available. In a reciprocal interaction using similarly lean media, the receiver may in turn reinforce the selected bit of self-relevant information, which can lead to an inflation of the strategic self-presentation, making the communication “hyperpersonal” rather than just “personal,” or even “impersonal” (Parks & Roberts, 1998; Walther, 2007).

The concepts we have discussed so far, ranging from a strong focus on the deficits caused by mediation of communication to Walther’s theory of hyperpersonal communication, are indicative of the direction research has taken. While none of the approaches questions that mediated communication differs from face-to-face communication, it now appears that, on the content side, these differences can help avoid unnecessary complications that might occur when simple messages are transmitted using rich media. With respect to person perception, it appears that the possibility for a sender to present information selectively and the tendency on the part of the receiver to rely on what little information is available in forming an impression, can lead to accentuations of this person perception. The key implication is that, while “richer is better” is more likely to apply in situations in which the main objective is to convey a complex message, create common ground, and reduce equivocality, it is unlikely to apply across the board.

When bringing about change involves the communication of a relatively unequivocal message, or primarily the careful self-presentation of a leader or change protagonist, a lean medium can be a powerful tool to increase communication impact. It is the latter effect that Fischer and Manstead (2004) refer to as “hypercharismatic communication,” arguing that perceptions of leader charisma on the part of the receiver can, if a lean medium is used skillfully, increase as a result of the communication process. The results of these processes can outweigh the formal roles that have been assigned: A study by Wickham and Walther (2007) showed that, in a CMC setting, leaders who were perceived as intelligent were more likely to emerge as leaders – irrespective of whether or not a leader had previously been formally assigned.

*Use of Technology in Communication Directs Attention to Group  
Commonalities and can Boost Change – A Social Identity Approach*

One very important element, however, has not yet been addressed, and that is social context. The SIDE theory of computer-mediated communication addressed this concern, and it is of key significance for the argument we will

be making with regard to change. The theory Russel Spears and Martin Lea (Spears & Lea, 1992, 1994) put forward is a counterbalance to the negative predictions that resulted from deficit approaches. SIDE stands for a theory of Social Identity and Deindividuation Effects (SIDE). As the name suggests, it is grounded in social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) and its sister, social categorization theory (Turner, 1985, 1987). The key argument Spears and Lea make is that the “visual anonymity” (Lea & Spears, 1995), that is the lack of nonverbal cues that is a typical feature of mediated communication, can cause a cognitive shift from an individual’s personal identity to the social identity that is shared with the other members of a group. It does not, they argue, make communication less personal, but instead makes it more social, because attention is directed away from the individual and toward the social norms, shared goals and common group characteristics. Building on the core assumption of social identity theory, the authors propose that belonging to a social group is an essential part of human identity, and a source of positive distinctiveness. When an individual evaluates a group positively and considers group membership desirable, it is more likely to adopt the group’s norms, an approximation process that self-categorization theory (Turner, 1985, 1987) labels “depersonalization.” In an attempt to maximize “meta-contrast,” that is the difference between the positively evaluated in-group and the less positively evaluated out-group, the individual minimizes differences between the members of the group to which the individual feels it belongs, while intergroup differences are accentuated.

This is precisely why the SIDE theory argues that mediated communication, although deprived of certain facets of the communication spectrum, can be more social than conventional face-to-face communication (Spears, Lea, Corneliussen, Postmes, & Ter Haar, 2002; Spears, Lea, & Postmes, 2001; Spears, Postmes, Lea, & Wolbert, 2002). The social qualities of an interaction do not rely exclusively on what is transmitted down the wire. These depend on how individuals perceive – or, to be more precise, categorize – themselves to begin with. If they think of themselves primarily as part of a positively evaluated group, visual anonymity tends to increase the salience of the virtual group, enhancing the individual’s social identity, and thereby leading to a significantly higher level of conformity to norms and commitment to the group than might be observed in face-to-face interaction.

There is ample empirical support for the hypothesis that social influence is particularly strong under conditions of visual anonymity. In a  $2 \times 2$  design, Spears et al. (2002) manipulated the salience of a common group identity

(as opposed to its members' personal identity) and the communication medium (terminals in separate rooms versus communication in the same room). As social identity theory would suggest, groups polarized in the direction of the progressive norms (these had been established in a pretest) when group identity was salient. This effect was stronger under conditions of visual anonymity. A seemingly lean medium, in other words, served to increase the salience of the group's identity.

The implications of the SIDE model for effecting change are far-reaching. If the key hypothesis of this model applies, depriving communication of specific cues can have a positive impact on an important facet of the communication outcome: The absence of individualizing information and the presence of cues that refer to common group membership can lead to an increase in social identity salience, which would strengthen group identification and coherence. Avolio and Kahai (2003) refer to the relevance of the SIDE theory in the context of workforce diversity. The authors argue that the risks associated with diversity can be addressed by a modern form of e-leadership, that is the conscious and strategic choice of electronic communication media for positive purposes, and that 'e-leadership could emphasize the group as a whole and de-emphasize individual differences, using references to "we" and "us" in their electronic communications' (p. 333). Further, recent work by Spears et al. (2009) addresses the implications of CMC for the gender divide in organizations. Rather than celebrating the equalizing effect of visual anonymity, the authors indicate that CMC can increase the salience of an existing group – and if this social identity is linked to gender, such differences may be even more pronounced.

*Use of Communication Technology can Increase Perceptions  
of Leader Charisma*

The final step in our argument is based on a theory of leadership that was proposed by Hogg (2001). Hogg argues against person-centered leadership approaches. Instead, his social identity theory of leadership posits that, first and foremost, leadership is a structural property of what social identity theorists refer to as an in-group. As group membership becomes cognitively salient to in-group members, he argues, followers' perceptions will be primarily influenced by whether potential leaders personify the group's norms and distinct characteristics. A follower's perception of the leader, in other words, is influenced by a cognitive prototype, and this prototype is an in-group prototype, rather than an individual leader prototype. Just as

the SIDE theory discussed above, Hogg's (2001) work draws heavily on social identity theory and its sister, social categorization theory (Tajfel, 1982; Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner, 1987). Assuming a universal need for self-evaluation (Hogg & Abrams, 1993) and self-enhancement (Turner, Brown, & Tajfel, 1979), individuals identify with a salient group and categorize themselves as its members.

Hogg then refers to a concept first defined by Rosch (1978) when he describes a cognitive structure that represents what a member of this group is like. According to Hogg, prototypes are fuzzy cognitive categories defined by exemplars that share a set of key common characteristics. Hogg accepts that individuals have different leadership prototypes of which the in-group prototype is only one. Any follower will also have an individual leader prototype, but this prototype is not systematically related to the group. The in-group prototype emerges from the group members' interaction and reflects the distinctive characteristics that differentiate the group from other groups. In a process of depersonalization, the characteristics of all group members – including one's own – are perceptually assimilated to resemble these in-group prototypes. At the same time, members of other groups are perceived as different from the in-group prototype. Meta-contrast, in other words, is maximized. There is ample research on the effect of this on variables such as sympathy between group members (Hogg, Cooper-Shaw, & Holzworth, 1993), and it seems clear that feelings of sympathy become increasingly based on how typical an individual is of the in-group prototype (called social attraction), while idiosyncratic preferences (referred to as personal attraction) become less important. Members that epitomise the in-group prototype will be socially most attractive – and as social attraction and social influence are directly linked, prototypical group members will also increase their influence and will eventually be in charge of the group.

This is the core of Hogg's argument: He posits that leaders who personify the specific characteristics of a group, and who are perceptually closest to the in-group prototype, will be most socially attractive and therefore perceived as influential and, given time, be in a position to exert this influence in a sustainable manner. This effect is heightened by cognitive effects known as attributional and correspondence biases. As socially attractive leaders attract more attention than other group members, it is to be expected that, due to correspondence bias (Gilbert & Jones, 1986) and the fundamental attribution error (Ross, 1977), group results will be attributed to the perceptually salient leader and his or her personal dispositions, even when they are in fact the result of a joint effort. This, essentially, is Hogg's counter intuitive explanation of charismatic leadership: Rather than focusing

on the characteristics of the individual leader, and the willingness to perform beyond expectations on the part of the followers that result from the leader's outstanding individual qualities, Hogg posits that in-group prototypicality, social attractiveness and specific attribution patterns can lead to an ascription of leader success and charisma – even if the result is predominantly the outcome of a collective effort.

The combination of the SIDE theory of mediated communication discussed above and Hogg's social identity theory of leadership lends further strength to the argument we have been making so far. Technology, we argue, should not be seen as a channel that simply deprives communication of the stimuli, or the richness, that is typical of face-to-face communication. Such a perspective would be physicalistic, would underestimate the relevance of creative and compensatory use of technology on an individual level, and more importantly, would fail to take into account the social context in which technology is used, and the specific effects that result from the lack of individualizing cues on the social dimension of media use.

The counter intuitive hypothesis we put forward is that seemingly "lean" channels, such as e-mail, can make communication more social and, if used strategically and effectively, increase perceptions of leader charisma, at least to the extent that this charisma results from the leader's conformity with the in-group prototype. If the group the individual follower belongs to is of any significance to begin with, that is if the social identity is salient, using lean communication technology will direct more attention to the common characteristics of the group, because of the lack of individualizing cues. This increase in social identity salience will not only lead to a higher degree of conformity with in-group norms and a stronger sense of belonging – it will also mean that the leader of the group will find it easier to personify these in-group norms. If the leader communicates consistently in a way that makes them appear prototypical of the key features of the group's identity, they will appear more socially attractive and more influential. Achievements of the group will, as a result of fundamental attribution and correspondence biases, be attributed to the leader to a higher degree than they would be if the same communication had taken place in an unmediated face-to-face setting.

## **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

Contrary to received wisdom in the organization change literature about the need to match media richness with the equivocality of change, and theories

within the “deficit” paradigm which assume that mediated communication is inferior to nonmediated one, we have argued that lean communication channels can in fact have effects that are more positive than richer ones such as face-to-face communication, under certain conditions.

In particular, we argued that media richness, while a useful and intuitively attractive approach for describing the potential appropriateness of different media for addressing equivocal situations, does not take into account the dimensions of selective self-presentation and of social identity salience. The technological capabilities of lean communication media provide leaders with an opportunity to present themselves selectively and strategically. Given the lack of alternative information, receivers’ perceptions can be directed toward this selective presentation. If sender and receiver engage in longer interactions using lean media, the reciprocal inflation of perceptions can lead to hyperpersonal (as opposed to impersonal) communication. If the leaders selectively and effectively present themselves as charismatic, this communication can be described as “hypercharismatic.”

We argued that the visual anonymity that is a feature of lean communication channels can increase the salience of the positively evaluated group to which the communicators feel they belong. Using lean communication channels, in other words, can increase the sense of belonging to a particular group, rather than inducing a sense of isolation. If a leader is seen as personifying a group’s salient norms, a decrease in contextual information brought about by the use of lean media, can increase followers’ perceptions of leader in-group prototypicality. As the leader is perceived as even more typical of the group, the leader will also appear more attractive, influential, and charismatic. This effect will also make attribution of group outcomes to the personal characteristics of the individual leader more likely.

The implications for change agents are significant. The importance of the message itself needs to be supplemented with an understanding of the role of the medium, which goes beyond conventional wisdom of richer is better when it comes to organization change. When there is a salient group identity and the leader is perceived as prototypical, then communication using lean media may be more effective in increasing perceptions of the leader’s charisma, and belief and action in accordance with their message.

This means that the communicative approach of change agents, including OD practitioners, must be based on a robust diagnosis of the situation that goes beyond conventional factors mentioned in the organization change literature. [Kotter and Schlesinger \(1979\)](#) for example suggest that change agents must understand such contextual features as the level and type of anticipated resistance, the power bases of change agents versus those who

resist, and the urgency and degree of change needed. These would be important factors to diagnose, but might not be as helpful in designing a communication strategy as understanding the factors we refer to in this chapter.

Further, our arguments would have interesting implications for external OD practitioners versus internal change agents. Whereas an internal change agent might be regarded as prototypical, that is as representative of group norms and other characteristics that are important features of a common social identity, an external OD practitioner who is brought in to act as a change agent or catalyst, is less likely to be perceived as prototypical since they are an outsider. This implies that it would be more effective for external change agents to employ richer media in their efforts to create readiness for change and to foster implementation of initiatives, while internal change agents may prefer to use lean media strategically to induce a particular perception. It would be an interesting empirical question to examine whether this is indeed the case, and what the effects of such a communication approach are on the level of success of organization change initiatives.

Something we must clarify in this context concerns the relationship between strategies for change and richness of media used. Even though it is assumed in the literature that collaborative modes of change involve more extensive communication than coercive modes (Dunphy & Stace, 1988; Kotter & Schlesinger, 1979), this does not necessarily equate extensive communication with richer media. Neither do coercive approaches to change leadership necessarily assume a prevalence of lean media. The arguments we make in this chapter relate to media richness and such aspects as the existence of a salient group identity and values, leader prototypicality and capabilities of technological media; rather than collaborative or coercive modes of change leadership.

In other words, a coercive mode of change might in practice be mostly communicated and effected face to face (rich media), whereas a collaborative mode of change may be mostly communicated through lean media such as shared documents online, intranet bulletin boards, blogs and e-mails. It would be enlightening to examine empirically the level of media richness employed in collaborative versus coercive change leadership modes. A related question is how video clips (e.g., CEO speeches relating to change initiatives), which could be seen as being less rich than face-to-face meetings but richer than documents or emails, are perceived by individuals with respect to their level of richness; and whether this perception is consistent with other empirical findings relating to the level of media richness employed in collaborative versus coercive modes of change.



To the critically minded reader, the argument may appear slightly one-sided. Surely, there must be a potentially dark side to the social identity related effects of visual anonymity. We agree that it is important to consider whether similar processes are likely to occur when the group fails. In particular, the tendency on the part of followers to attribute group results to the leader as a result of correspondence and fundamental attribution biases is equally true for negative results. There is no doubt that leaders are, for the very same reasons, sometimes blamed for outcomes over which they had little or no control. But while cognitive biases apply across positive and negative events, social identity processes are more complex. Individuals share a desire to achieve positive distinctiveness, and belonging to a group with a distinct identity can help achieve this objective. Negative group outcomes do not necessarily mean that the group will become irrelevant, but it may become less attractive over time if negative outcomes persist. If the leader personifies the group norms, and if the group is still regarded as positive, negative effects on the leader will be limited. If, however, the leader deviates significantly from the salient group norms, it becomes more likely that they will be identified and stigmatized as the cause of the undesirable result.

We do not argue that lean communication has the described positive effects under all circumstances, and we would certainly not recommend lean communication as a panacea for situations in which leader charisma is lacking and change seems difficult to achieve. If group identity is weak or nonexistent prior to the communication, lean communication channels can make the emergence of a common value set and shared identity more time consuming and more difficult to observe and shape. We recognize that the emergence and communicative validation of an in-group prototype and the reciprocal process of identity construction is one that usually involves non-verbal communication. [DeRue and Ashford \(2010\)](#) recently highlighted that the process of giving and granting that leads to the coconstruction of reciprocally accepted roles as either leader or follower relies on a broad range of stimuli, and we would agree that not all of these can easily be communicated in a lean medium environment. Communication using what media richness theorists would describe as “lean channels,” in other words, can have effects that are much more positive than those predicted by media richness theory alone. To the extent that leadership, social influence, and social attraction are linked to structural properties of the group to which both leader and follower belong, the use of lean media can make communication more social and leaders more influential.

In addition to the future research directions mentioned above, there are some other fundamental questions that remain and could be addressed

empirically. In particular, it would be of interest whether leaders who are perceived as charismatic in organizations, and who are seen as successful in bringing about change, do indeed use lean communication media strategically, either to direct individual followers' perceptions of their person in a favourable manner, or to personify group norms more effectively and to appear even more influential and attractive as a result. If they do, what is the extent of the use of lean versus rich media, and what are the factors influencing this employment in practice? We have no clear answers to these questions as yet.

Further research in this field could also employ social theory and organizational discourse concepts to lend a deeper understanding of the effects of lean media such as texts on organization change and on social systems more broadly. These are fields where the notion, nature, and functioning of texts within organizations has been debated extensively. According to Ricoeur (1991), for example fixing spoken discourse as text extends the potential readership and the potential range and effects of the text, since texts can be decontextualized and recontextualized in different situations. A text is an inscription of the intentionality of the author which even though in some conditions might be lost, in organizations there is a certain degree of shared context which helps to preserve it. Texts can therefore act at a distance to project the author's intentionality. In this sense, the lean medium of the text can be more effective than the rich medium of face-to-face communication.

The idea of "textual agency" (Cooren, 2004) is relevant here, where the text is seen as having a kind of derivative agency which stems from its author; the text can accomplish things on behalf of the author or of the organization the author belongs to. The potency of a text's agency depends on a variety of factors, such as to what extent it draws and is aligned with other influential texts; the persuasiveness of its narrative; its authorship; and its genre (Hardy, 2004). Therefore, social theory and organizational discourse concepts such as textual agency can not only lend support to the arguments made in this chapter, but they could usefully be incorporated in further research to gain deeper insights to the relevance of lean media to change processes and the functioning of social systems.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENT

We would like to thank Richard Woodman for his helpful comments on an earlier version of this chapter.

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