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Corporate communications and its receptions: A comment on Llewellyn and Harrison

Lars Thøger Christensen, Joep Cornelissen and Mette Morsing

ABSTRACT

This article critiques the conceptualization of corporate communications in a recent study by Llewellyn and Harrison. We argue that their analysis of the reception of corporate messages is one-sided and partial and fails to advance a comprehensive understanding of corporate communications and its role in contemporary organizations. Llewellyn and Harrison suggest that blue-collar employees share a class-based anti-management attitude which together with their ‘folk’ linguistic competences leads them to read corporate communications texts in a strictly cynical way that reinforces a class distinction between ‘managers’ and (blue-collar) ‘employees’. In the hope of advancing a more sophisticated view on corporate communications, we challenge Llewellyn and Harrison’s position by questioning the methods and arguments brought forth in their analysis.

KEYWORDS

- corporate communications
- identification
- message reception
- voice

In a recent Human Relations article, Llewellyn and Harrison (2006) discuss and examine how employees at the shop floor level, that is, blue-collar employees, read corporate communications texts (a report, an opinion piece...
and an authored letter) that are issued and disseminated by managers within their organizations. Llewellyn and Harrison’s discussion of this particular topic is timely as a study into the reception of corporate communications and resonates with the ongoing interest in issues of employee involvement, identification and engagement with their organizations (e.g. Haslam & Ellemers, 2005). Llewellyn and Harrison (2006) begin their study from the position that there is a ‘class-divide’ between managers and employees. In addition they suggest that employees and people in general have ‘folk’ linguistic competences, by which they mean that employees have a ‘lay’ competence (as opposed to an ‘expert’ linguistic ability and understanding) that allows them to understand speaker intentions and linguistic utterances of texts.

Llewellyn and Harrison’s overall argument is that blue-collar employees employ a class-based logic in relating to corporate texts, leading to cynical readings and levels of resistance: a logic which they claim is affirmed and reproduced in an ongoing cycle that ‘reflects and reproduces social structures’ (p. 588). According to Llewellyn and Harrison blue-collar employees share ‘uniformly critical interpretations of “slick” corporate communications’, which ‘were underpinned by a coherent and shared anti-management discourse’ (p. 570). The implication that follows is that ‘concerns must be raised about the value and character of such [corporate communications] practices’ and that where such activities may be ill-conceived or misguided, they need to be rethought and redesigned to make an ‘important step in the right direction’ (p. 591).

In this comment, we take issue with Llewellyn and Harrison’s conceptualization of the enterprise of corporate communications and in particular how it is being received, or read, by employees. Following a brief overview of contemporary corporate communications that provides a context for our critique, we point to the one-sided and partial way in which Llewellyn and Harrison refer to the subject. More importantly, we unpack Llewellyn and Harrison’s claim that the anti-management attitudes that they find among the blue-collar workers in their study necessarily demonstrate a class-based attitude. To do that, we consider the shortcomings of their analysis and suggest alternative readings that draw on writings on employee commitment, identification, and engagement.

### The enterprise of corporate communications

Corporate communications refers to the efforts of organizations to communicate as whole, total or ‘bodily’ entities (‘corporate’, from Latin corpus). In contrast to other types of organizational communication – for example,
advertising, employee communication or technical communication – that typically address very specific audiences with discrete messages, corporate messages speak to many audiences at once in the hope of establishing and maintaining favourable and coherent corporate reputations across different stakeholder groups (e.g. Cornelissen, 2004; see also Christensen et al., 2008). The reasons why organizations embark on corporate communications programmes are many, but often centre on issues of identity and legitimacy. While the practice of corporate communications is not new (Marchand, 1998), contemporary organizations seem to believe that in a globalized world of increased complexity, their visibility and social accreditation hinge on the ability to communicate consistently across internal and external audiences. Consequently, corporate communications as a field hopes to subsume the expertise and practices of multiple communication disciplines, including public relations, marketing, organizational communication, and human resource management, in order to handle and integrate different messages under one banner.

Clearly, this type of communication is not equally relevant to all types of organizations. And obviously, some organizations manage to communicate this way more convincingly than others. Thus, we fully acknowledge – in line with Llewellyn and Harrison – that some pieces of corporate communications are glossy and superficial, shaped by fads and filled with buzzwords and fancy images. To reduce the field of corporate communications to such messages and publications, however, is to ignore the larger development of the field, which today stretches from linear messaging to interactive processes of dialogue and policy-making (van Riel, 1995; Cornelissen, 2004). To suggest that corporate communications is a misguided practice that consists of producing materials that employees typically resist, ignore, and in lots of cases further alienate them, is a limited perspective of the field. Any scholar addressing corporate communications in an article title needs at least to cite or propose a contemporary definition that acknowledges the complexity and advancement of the field. Llewellyn and Harrison do not seem to find this endeavour worthwhile. Apart from mentioning that the body of corporate communications activities is growing, the authors provide no reference to the vast amount of corporate communications literature. Their depiction of corporate communications as an exclusively top-down activity keeps them from recognizing that today corporate messages are crafted not for managers alone but also for employees who increasingly expect their workplaces to be represented as professional organizations envisioning and communicating interesting and inspiring futures for their members (e.g. Albert & Whetten, 1985; Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Hatch & Schultz, 1997; Smidts et al., 2001).
The reception of corporate communications

It has been convincingly argued and demonstrated multiple times in the organizational literature (e.g. Alvesson & Wilmott, 2002; Hazen, 1993; Humphreys & Brown, 2002) that management cannot control in any simple way the reception of corporate messages – neither inside nor outside the organization. Llewellyn and Harrison’s contention, however, that this lack of control can be explained by a class-based logic that shapes the reading of corporate texts in a way that affirms and reproduces class divisions between managers and employees cannot be safely deduced from the presented material. For that purpose, their analysis – a linguistic analysis and a set of focus groups interviews – has too many methodological flaws.

Starting with the linguistic analysis, Llewellyn and Harrison discuss some linguistic forms (pronouns, transformation, transitivity and modality) as representative of speaker (i.e. manager) intentions in three texts (a mock ‘report’, a front-page ‘opinion piece’ or news item, and an authored letter). These linguistic forms are then taken as a guide to recognize whether in a similar but ‘lay’ sense blue-collar employees recognize these linguistic forms and read them in the way intended. We share with Llewellyn and Harrison the basic premise that linguistic meaning does not reside in content alone, for people are able to construe the same content in alternate ways, resulting in substantially different meanings. Their linguistic analysis, however, is problematic for two reasons. First of all, it neglects the role of image schemas (Johnson, 1987) and metaphor, which are both fundamental to linguistic semantics (Langacker, 2000). Image schemas include such notions as source–path–goal, container–content, centre–periphery, linkage, force and balance which are highly abstract, embodied conceptions that are instantiated through metaphors. For example, the news item (appendix 2) includes many metaphors (‘being driven’, ‘move up’, ‘go at their own speed’, ‘have to move with the times’, ‘the way forward’, etc.) that describe an ongoing ‘journey’ towards National Vocational Qualifications within manufacturing. A potential reading of this text, then, does not just hinge on selected items of passive transformation (which are common forms of reference shifts to ‘impersonate’ the authors and other managers involved), but a wider linguistic analysis of how the text seems to construe the process of NVQ as a ‘journey’ that is ongoing and that has a logic of its own – that is, the journey has started (regardless of the intentions of managers – and this is where the passive transformation comes in!) along a path (with no return) and will be completed (the end-point) when a full-force NVQ amongst manufacturing employees has been achieved. A second problem with the linguistic analysis is that employees were not probed and studied...
in a work-context (i.e. the natural setting of receiving and reading these texts) and importantly on an individual basis. The fact that the study did not ask individuals alone about the construal of the linguistic content presented means that Llewellyn and Harrison did not record the actual understanding of these texts at the appropriate level of analysis.

The authors’ main conclusions are based on the analysis of focus group interviews with blue-collar employees who are asked for their readings of the selected corporate texts. (Interestingly, there is no control group, for example, white-collar workers in the same organization.) The main problem with focus groups is that they tend to capture a ‘leveled-off’ (that is negotiated and therefore shared) discourse within a group – a discourse that may not surface if employees are interviewed individually. Toward the end of their article Llewellyn and Harrison indicate some awareness of this problem: ‘The singular, coherent and shared character of the [anti-management] attitudes discussed may have reflected the method employed’ (p. 590). Unfortunately, however, Llewellyn and Harrison do not pursue the implications of this important observation any further. Focus groups are not neutral experiments in which participants simply comment on material ‘injected’ from the outside. They are dynamic social settings in which participants simultaneously position themselves vis-à-vis each other, seeking, for example, to demonstrate competence and identity in relation to the group. The tendency of the focus group to ‘produce’ shared attitudes as an artefact of the method is not confined to blue-collar workers. If, for comparison, a group of university professors were asked to comment on communication material issued by the management of their university, chances are that also they would produce a more or less shared critical discourse. In Llewellyn and Harrison’s case, much of the ‘resistance’ and the associated class-based logic to reading of corporate communications texts may well have been engendered by the group setting itself where participants seemed eager to excite each other to deliver and produce critical opinions and comments. This tendency is quite clear in the situation where the focus group participants are having fun talking about knocking [the manager] over (p. 583). In spite of these limitations, the authors go on to suggest that the focus groups ‘were examples of resistance’ (p. 590, italics in original), and treat a potential ‘cynical’ reading of corporate communications as the actual one, and what is more as one that can be generalized. Hence, over and beyond the limitations of their method, Llewellyn and Harrison’s arguments have gone full-circle and have become completely self-referential; they end up in the position where they started; namely, that there is a class-divide between managers and blue-collar employees. This position was already ideologically given, rather than empirical and open to empirical inquiry. As we argue
below, alternative readings of how employees respond to corporate communications are empirically possible, as a wealth of empirical research has demonstrated.

Corporate communications and employee identification

The ideological position taken by Llewellyn and Harrison, and the arguments that they furnish, contrast with prior research on organizational identity and identification that demonstrates how employees at various levels within an organization are able to extract positive feelings of belonging, pride and identification from corporate communications texts (e.g. Ashforth & Mael, 1989, 1996; Cheney, 1983a, 1983b, 1991; Corley & Gioia, 2004; DiSanza & Bullis, 1999; Dutton & Dukerich, 1991; Fiol, 2002; Pratt, 1998, 2003). In some cases employees actively seek to narrow the gap between managerial rhetorics and perceived reality (Dutton & Dukerich, 1991; Morsing, 1999) and occasionally take charge in defending managerial rhetorics when it is criticized by external stakeholders (Elsbach, 1999; Ginzel et al., 1993; Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991).

While such findings, of course, do not negate the critical attitudes towards management that Llewellyn and Harrison found among blue-collar employees, they remind us of how context-specific such attitudes and opinions are. Thus, the critical workers in Llewellyn and Harrison’s study may well be among the ones who defend their workplaces when it is being criticized by outsiders. Hence, rather than assuming that blue-collar workers define themselves once-and-for-all against management, we should be open to the possibility that contemporary employees identify themselves in multiple ways and with different referents, including (sub)cultures and groups inside and outside the organization.

Representing the voice of the employee?

Given their ideological position, the authors seem to equate their own voice with that of their research subjects. Apart from the fact that it makes it difficult for readers to see exactly whose opinions are aired and where the support for those opinions lies, it also reduces the variety of corporate communications and its (potential and actualized) readings to a value-laden discourse of ‘slick corporate communications’ (pp. 568, 570, 583), ‘corporate bullshit’ (p. 570), ‘cynicism’ (p. 570), ‘spin’ and ‘managerial cunning’ (p. 571). One
particularly telling example of this is the sentence on pages 569–70, where the authors claim that ‘managerial power may operate by articulating subjects to specific cultural formation, but “knowledgeable and capable” actors recognize such efforts and discuss with colleagues the futility of such corporate bullshit’. This is a very strong assertion that is indicative of the authors’ own ‘reading’ of corporate communications, a reading that is not necessarily underpinned by the work that they quote and definitely not by the data that they report.

While Llewellyn and Harrison often side with their research subjects in their view of corporate messages, they demonstrate a quite different attitude towards blue-collar employees through condescending or patronizing language. On the bottom of page 567 they say that ‘. . . employees display an ability to recognize, discuss and critique linguistic practices.’ This wording is repeated several times through the article, for example, p. 586: ‘What struck us was the ease and skill with which recipients were able to play this game . . .’. On p. 588 in particular, the authors’ attitude comes out in full force: ‘Participants displayed an ability to distinguish between inclusive and exclusive uses of the first person plural, passive transformation, [. . .] Participants displayed an abstract knowledge of textual practices when they produced comparative examples [. . .] revealing potentially surprising lay competencies.’ We don’t know what the authors had expected, but this way of talking about the abilities of recipients is condescending – almost as if they were kids or animals (chimpanzees, for example – ‘The ability to spontaneously generate illustrative examples of contrasting grammatical practices is striking’, p. 586). At the same time, the repeated use of the term ‘displaying the ability’ seems to suggest a high-ground and an examiner-posture where the authors are in the possession of the correct interpretation of corporate messages against which the reading competencies of the employees are evaluated.

Toward the end of their article, Llewellyn and Harrison envision alternatives to the persuasive or manipulative types of corporate communications analysed in their study. More specifically, they suggest that ‘removing the more obviously promotional aspects of “glossies”’ is a ‘step in the right direction’ (p. 591). Such a step, however, may make corporate communications even more manipulative – masking, in an even more sophisticated manner, the fact that managers are employed to motivate, persuade and seduce employees to regard the organization as one coherent entity. Thus, rather than representing the interests of their research subjects or bridging the assumed divide between managers and employees, Llewellyn and Harrison’s suggestion may actually make matters worse.
Conclusion: The role of the employee in the corporate communication project

While remaining critical of blatantly self-serving corporate messages, we would favour a more open attitude (rather than a fixed ideological position) towards the field of corporate communications (see, for example Cheney & Christensen, 2001; Christensen & Cheney, 2000). Such an attitude must recognize the complexities facing contemporary organizations in their efforts to communicate to many different and often critical audiences in today’s world while remaining sensitive to the different points of identification available to organizational members. Rather than deciding in advance how (blue-collar) workers interpret corporate messages, we need to keep an open empirical attitude that allows us to see both resistance and acceptance, both distance and involvement.

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