

COMMORG Theoretical Framework:
POLITICS

E-MAIL IN ORGANISATIONAL POWER AND POLITICS

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Given the increased penetration of information technologies in private, domestic, public and working spaces and environments, the diffusion of these technologies becomes a very important issue to study. In general, theories of technological innovations analyse the mechanisms of socio-economic processes underlying diffusion (Rogers, 1983; Flichy, 1995; Valente, 1995). According to the pioneering work of Everett Rogers (1983), the eventual adoption of a technological innovation depends on the following five factors: (i) the relative advantage, which can be measured in economical terms but also in terms of social prestige and satisfaction, (ii) the compatibility with the values of the appropriating group, (iii) the complexity, (iv) the triability and (v) the observability of the innovation. Similarly, according to Rogers, the corresponding decision processes follow five stages: knowledge, persuasion, decision, implementation and confirmation. Furthermore, Rogers distinguishes five groups of users: innovators, early adopters, early majority, late majority and laggards. Through these different typologies, it is possible to follow the time evolution of the adoption rate, which, as generally is the case in economics, constitutes the essential descriptive variable of diffusion processes and turns out to be described by an S-curve (Rogers, 1983).

In particular, within the framework of information technologies, the original research was focused on the more technical aspects of diffusion (Culnan & Markus, 1987; Eveland & Bikson, 1988) and later on the social and psychological aspects of the diffusion process (Markus, 1994a; 1994b). However, one of the most important issues of research on diffusion of information technologies concerns the topic of power and politics of diffusion and implementation, as it has been initiated by the pioneering work of Rob Kling (1978; 1980) and M. Lynne Markus (1981; 1983). Furthermore, extending this pioneering research to e-mail, Celia Romm and Nava Pliskin (1998; 1999a) have studied the implications of power and politics into computer-mediated communication.

As it is remarked by Romm and Pliskin (1998, pp. 83-84), in general, power is polarised in between two conflicting interpretations: a Marxist, critical one and a functionalist, managerial another one. In an attempt to synthesise the literature on organisational politics, Drory and Romm (1991) have provided a more neutral

conceptual framework of political behaviours. These authors conceive organisational politics as a combination of (1) influence attempts, (2) conflict and (3) informal means. They also distinguish politicking at the individual, group, organisational and interorganisational levels and, thus, they introduce the idea of coalition building into organisational politics.

In his pioneering work, Kling (1980) has provided a very helpful scheme to examine theories accounting for people's resistance to the introduction and implementation of computer-based information systems. He identified six distinct theoretical perspectives: rational, structural, human relations, interactionist, organisational politics and class politics. Moreover, he showed how these perspectives differed on a variety of dimensions, such as their view of technology, the social setting into which it is introduced and their implications for the dynamics of the diffusion process.

Based on Kling's work, Markus (1983) has defined three major categories for theories of resistance to diffusion:

- o *people-determined*, such as those focusing on factors of cognitive style, personality traits and human nature,
- o *system-determined*, such as those focusing on factors of technical excellence, ergonomic design, user-friendliness, and
- o *interactionist*, such as those arising from the interaction of system with division of labour and/or with distribution of intra-organisational power.

However, Markus identified two distinct variations of the interactionist theories. One, the *socio-technical variant*, "focuses on the distribution of responsibility for organisational tasks across various roles and on the work-related communication and co-ordination around the division of labour" (Markus, 1983, p. 431). According to a second, *political variant*, "resistance is explained as a product of the interaction of system design features with the interorganizational distribution of power, defined either objectively, in terms of horizontal or vertical power dimensions, or subjectively, in terms of symbolism" (*idem*, p. 432). In a further work, Markus and Robey (1983; 1988) have elaborated on this view of power and politics as determinants of the implementation outcomes.

Applying the above perspective of organisational power and politics to e-mail, Romm and Pliskin (1998) have demonstrated how computer-mediated communication can be used for political purposes inside an organisational context. They have considered a case study describing a series of events, which took place in a university. In this case, e-mail was used by a group of employees to stage a rebellion against the university president. Romm and Pliskin have concluded that e-mail's features can affect the process of its diffusion and can make it amenable to a range of political uses. For instance, in the previous context of employees' use of e-mail to counter their top management, Romm, Pliskin and Rifkin (1996) have observed that the latter has responded by curtailing users' access to e-mail.

Moreover, Romm and Pliskin (1999a) have discussed the use of e-mail for petty tyranny by presenting a case study, in which computer-mediated communication was used by a department chair to manipulate, control and coerce employees. They concluded that e-mail features might make it amenable even to political abuse and

they elaborated on the practical and ethical implications drawn from political uses of e-mail.

In another study, Pliskin and Romm (1997) described the struggle of academic staff members at all universities in Israel to gain salary increases by adopting to communicate through e-mails during their long strike. They discussed how this virtual community has passed through a series of phases during the strike, evolving from a large disorganised group of dispersed individuals into a united virtual community.

Furthermore, Romm and Pliskin (1999b) have considered the role of leadership in diffusion and implementation of e-mail along a case study, which described the introduction of e-mail to a university community. In this case, the diffusion of e-mail was strongly supported by the charismatic president of the university. However, some turbulent side effects emerged as e-mail communication was politically used in order to undermine the leadership of the president.

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