Foreword

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AND ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION: ICTS FOR MOBILITY – SOME REFLECTIONS FOR GLOBAL RESILIENCE

Since the presentation of the World Commission on Environment and Development report *Our Common Future*, ‘sustainable development’ has become an area of practical, theoretical and political importance (WCED - World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987). How we should live in order not to endanger the possibilities of future generations is a crucial question, not only important for economic and environmental reasons, but also for ethical reasons. And even though there are many different political opinions regarding the implications, there seems to be a broad agreement about the importance of the question.

So far, most of the attention to ‘sustainable development’ has been given to issues regarding economy and the natural environment, which of course is good. Social or cultural aspects of ‘sustainable development’ that have been studied concern many different aspects such as the distribution of economic and material resources (i.e. welfare issues from a global perspective); the way we interact on a workplace or between suppliers on a global supply-chain; how crucial studies and knowledge in language and culture are to a sustainable development (Packalén, 2010); or public health issues, both regionally and globally (Rosling *et al*., 2006). To me, an important way of approaching social aspects of ‘sustainable development’ is to talk about values, confronting yourself and others with what is important in life, for humanity and for you personally. To me as a privileged citizen of a materially wealthy Western country, a good and respectful dialogue is an important cornerstone for understanding the culture and life circumstances of people in other parts of the world than the privileged West and thereby become and stay connected with those in less materially wealthy countries.

The question raised in this book, how organizational communication can be understood from a sustainability perspective when ICTs are involved, is new and interesting. What does the good conversation of two people sitting in the same room have to do with ICTs? We know that ICTs have involved great possibilities and led to improvements in organizational life, for instance the added possibility of staying connected in real time with people around the world without having to travel so much physically. We know today that we travel more despite such ICT advances, that such technologies still promise more than they can deliver, and that they have had not only positive effects. Instead, ICTs seem to have increased our exchange with people, making us travel even more. It has also affected our communication patterns – today we seem quite careless with what we write, how much we write and to whom we send our e-mail messages, which is a huge difference compared to the ‘art’ of writing letters by hand, only fifteen years ago.

And even though technology is constantly improving, the ‘killer application’ is yet to come, because there always seem to be a bug in the technologies we use, turning our hopes to despair when not having enough knowledge of how to fix it. The greening of the ICT-industry has only begun, and there is still a
long way to go before we have solutions to problems regarding energy and the scarcity of raw material used in for example computers.

Google is maybe the most prominent and largest service provider on the Internet and I think it may serve as a good illustration of why the topic of this book, how organizational communication can be understood from a sustainability perspective when ICTs are involved, is important. (Google has company, however, by Microsoft, Apple, Yahoo!, the search engine of Ask and many more.)

As one of the dominant factories of the information age, the server and computing halls of Google consume much more electricity than the industrial brick-and-mortar factories of the early 20th century. In The Dalles, a city at the Columbia River in the north of the US state of Oregon, there used to be an aluminium plant that was heavy on its electricity consumption. This plant is shut down, but just next doors two factory halls, as big as soccer fields, have recently been raised for Google. In each hall, several thousands of servers work 24/7 to provide us with YouTube videos, weather forecasts, daily news or photos of friends and family, but also to enable business transactions of money transfers, contacts throughout value chains, or the route planning of planes in the air. Each server hosts many processors that use as much energy as a fast hot plate. (Another astonishing figure is that a ‘life’ on Second Life is said to use as much energy as an average person in real life in Brazil…). Estimations name about 3 million server halls in use worldwide that is increasing exponentially through the social networking of people. Early 2008, 65 million users were part of the digital meeting point of Facebook, more than 200 million traded on eBay, and 280 million had e-mail accounts in Hotmail alone (Rohwetter, 2008).

Processors, servers and server halls need to be cooled, and air-conditioning work hard to keep them at low working temperature. When planes are flying into or leaving Silicon Valley airports, around the headquarters of Google in Mountain View, Yahoo! in Sunnyvale and Apple in Cupertino, it is well known that they feel bumps when flying over the hot air of the air-conditioning parts of server halls of these corporations.

The effect of this increase of digital transactions through ICTs is an electricity use that equals the emission of greenhouse gases by the global air traffic; that also equals the electricity production of Vattenfall, one of the dominant electricity producing companies in the world. This has made the ICT industry aware of their environmental burden and initiatives for sustainable development appear; one example is that Green IT has become an important aspect of the yearly CeBit, the world’s largest trade fair showcase for ICT solutions for home and work environments; another example is the Climate Savers Computing Initiative that by 2010 wants to half the electricity use of computers.¹

So far, the illustration of electricity-consuming server halls of Google and the like has linked the ICT industry to sustainable development, but what about organizational communication? Well, many of these corporations are stuck in managerial incentives programmes that focus on economic dimensions only. While Chief Information Officers (CIO) are developing server halls, their electricity costs are more often than not identified as indirect costs of building or maintenance managers. CIOs thus prefer cheaper rather than green servers low on electricity use. Also, green thinking has yet to become part of the agenda of CIOs. Internet business cases have to rethink their environmental burden and take more responsibility for sustainable development and the way ICT can help reducing the environmental load and reaching global resilience². Thus, the agenda of sustainable development and corporate social responsibility (Dobers, 2009a; Dobers, 2009b) should clearly become part of management and organizational communication.

In order to find answers to these pressing questions, the international community of academia, business, politics, administrations and the big volunteer corps must work together, taking shared responsibility in thinking, communicating and acting. Areas of ‘sustainable development’, ‘organizational communication’ and ‘ICTs’ have an advantage since they all are transdisciplinary in character. This means that they build not only on interdisciplinary theoretical grounds and on many different knowledge interests (Dobers et al, 2001), but that they encompass a number of practical fields, having the possibilities of drawing from all of these. In fact, the responsibility for solving the problems within each area – as well as within the area at their intersection – is a common responsibility.
So is ICT the answer to a more sustainable world? Does ICT improve organizational communication from a social, cultural, environmental and economic perspective? The three areas that this book aims at bringing together—‘Sustainable development’, ‘Organizational communication’ and ‘ICTs’—are three interesting and rapidly expanding fields of scientific inquiry, and their intersection provides several challenging questions, both for scholars and practitioners. The three fields share a common interest for normative claims, which can be explained with the fact that they more or less are driven by the common vision to solve problems; globally as well as locally. Since the three areas draw from a wide range of fields, scholars sometimes find it difficult to find room in the established scientific community. This is why publications like this book are important; they bring together scholars and practitioners from various fields, building a common ground that is necessary if we are to succeed in creating a fair, just and sustainable development.

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REFERENCES


ENDNOTES

1 http://www.climatesaverscomputing.org

2 For the concept of ‘resilience’, see for instance the Stockholm Resilience Center at www.stockholmresilience.org