

An Institutional History of Internal Communications in the UK: A case study of a successful ESRC grant application through industrial partnership

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Having won a small grant (£7,600) from the British Council/Leverhulme Trust in 2014-16 to study the history of British company magazines from 1945 to 2015, the research team embarked in March 2020 on a research grant proposal to the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC), part of the British state's United Kingdom Research and Innovation (UKRI) body, to research the institutional history of internal communication in the UK from its inception in the 1880s to the present day. The application was submitted in March 2021, but was rejected within weeks due to not being compatible with the remit of the AHRC's funding purview. However, the application was passed over to the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), a sister funding body to the AHRC, who encouraged the research team to submit the proposal to them. The proposal was revised to meet the application criteria of the ESRC and was submitted in June 2021. In December 2021 the research team received an email from the ESRC informing them that the grant application had been successful. Subject to possible revision, the research team won a grant for £600,00 (funded 80% by the ESRC) to carry out a major management and organizational history (MOH) project for the period of three years and three months.

The research itself is highly cross-disciplinary and grounded in principles of dual integrity (Maclean, Harvey, & Clegg, 2016). Based on a combination of business history, organizational history, and media history, and combined with organization studies, internal communications, and public relations, the project draws heavily on organizational theory to undergird its historical research and analysis. At the heart of the project is the idea that internal communication over the course of its history institutionalised itself within British companies

and organizations (Suddaby, Foster, & Mills, 2014). The organization of communication to internal stakeholders became a normative and routinised phenomenon within organizations, which became increasingly expected and infused with value (Selznick, 1957). It progressively became more regulated as professional organizations such as the British Institute of Industrial Editors (est. 1949) and the Industrial Welfare Society (est. 1918) invested themselves in its development and promotion (Heller & Rowlinson, 2020a; Heller & Rowlinson, 2020b). After World War Two, and particularly in the 1960s and 1970s with a deterioration in industrial relations in the UK, other parties such as the State and Trade Unions began to take an increasing interest and stake in IC. In addition, we argue that IC created legitimacy from organizations. By absorbing media practices from society and its broader social environment and organizational field, companies in Britain became institutionally isomorphic with their environment and thus created social legitimacy and trust (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). The history of IC can thus be seen as a recursive process of organizations mirroring media developments in broader society, the company magazines of the 1900s, for example, morphing into internal social media by the 2010s.

At the heart of the application to the AHRC/EHRC were nine projects partners. These were essential to the success of the proposal. Project partners are now an indispensable part of a successful grant application. Situated half way between researchers and the researched, they are strategic gatekeepers who provide access to data (in our case organizational archives), and assist with its navigation and interpretation. They are also strategic partners in the vital process of the dissemination of research findings, impact, and knowledge exchange, which are core requirements of research funding bodies. Project partners also provide legitimacy, feasibility, and trust to research project, and furnish core resources which can enhance the value for money of such projects that lies at the heart of success in funding applications. Our project partners consisted of Boots (Britain's leading pharmaceutical company), the department store and

retailer John Lewis, Unilever, the Post Office Museum, AB Communications, one of Britain's largest IC agencies which has customers that include the London Underground, Royal Mail, KPMG, and Hitachi, the Institute of Internal Communication, the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, the Chartered Institute of Public Relations, and the British Library. All of these partners will provide strategic value to the research, and will concurrently obtain important benefits. The presentations will discuss the mutual value that these partnerships will create, and outline the means by which they were developed and the vital part that they played in this successful MOH grant proposal.

References

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