

## **Imagined Corporate Communities:**

### **Historical Sources and Discourses**

#### **Abstract**

*Corporations can be conceptualized as imagined communities, in which a sense of community is created through textual media rather than face-to-face communication. Historically the press, and newspapers in particular, provided texts through which nations could be imagined as communities. By analogy, historically company magazines can be seen as texts in which corporations were imagined as communities of employees. Company magazines were ubiquitous in large corporations by the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and many continue in print or online. Three enduring discourses of ‘imagined corporate communities’ are identified from a sample of company magazines from four UK organizations for 1955, 1985, and 2005 — Royal Mail; Cadbury; the BBC; and HSBC (formerly Midland Bank) — as well as periodicals for the professional bodies of magazine editors. These discourses explain the perceived role of company magazines and can be described as: ‘esprit de corps’, in which the corporation is imagined as an extended family, public school, or tightly knit military unit with its own distinctive spirit; ‘democratic polity’, where employees are seen as citizens and the magazine represents an independent voice holding management to account; and ‘brand community’, where the magazine’s readers are imagined as ambassadors for the brand along with consumers.*

**Keywords: Imagined Communities; Company Magazines; Corporate Culture; Organizational Discourse; Organizational History.**

## **Introduction**

The concept of imagined communities starts from the assumption that, ‘all communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact (and perhaps even these) are imagined. Communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined’ (Anderson, 2006, p.6). By this definition if corporations are considered to be communities then they must be imagined, but not in the style of nations whose citizens are prepared to go to war (Anderson, 2006, p.7). The concept of ‘imagined corporate communities’ opens up historical questions about when and how the employees of corporations were imagined as communities with a shared consciousness, and puts the textual media in which they were imagined, such as company magazines, at the forefront for historical research.

The first part of this paper introduces the historical concept of imagined corporate communities and contrasts it with the management concept of corporate culture. Imagined community (Anderson, 2006) is such an important concept in history and social sciences that its neglect in organization studies requires explanation. In the second part the disparate historiography of company magazines is reviewed from the perspective of imagined corporate communities. The third part then sets out how the discourses of imagined corporate communities were traced through triangulation of multiple historical sources (Kipping et al., 2014): including company magazines from four organizations, as well as periodicals of the professional bodies of magazine editors, supplemented by six interviews with magazine editors. The explanation of methods is intended to provide the ‘dual integrity’ required for historical organization studies, meeting the expectations of both historians and organization studies (Maclean et al., 2016). In the fourth part three enduring discourses of imagined corporate communities are set out: ‘esprit de corps’, in which the corporation is imagined as an extended family, public school, or tightly knit military unit with its own distinctive spirit;

‘democratic polity’, where employees are seen as citizens and the magazine represents an independent voice holding management to account; and ‘brand community’, where the magazine’s readers are imagined as ambassadors for the brand along with consumers.

In the conclusion it is argued that although these three discourses ebb and flow in company magazines, there isn’t a clear historical progression—from esprit de corps, through democratic polity, to brand community—that might be expected from the historiography of company magazines. The enduring historical nature of the three discourses leads to the expectation that they will still be found in contemporary internal communication, including social media used by employees and consumers.

### **Imagined Corporate Communities and Corporate Culture**

Benedict Anderson’s (2006, [1983]) book, *Imagined Communities*, both comes to terms with nationalism and provides a radical critique of it. Anderson’s contention is that nations were imagined as political communities through periodicals, primarily national newspapers, more recently than nationalists believe. Other media have supplanted daily newspapers, from radio and television, to the internet and social media, but the point is well made that periodicals and newspapers were not only crucial in the history of imagined national communities but represent valuable sources for tracing that history. By analogy it can be supposed that corporations have also been imagined as communities through periodicals such as company magazines more recently than is believed in most corporate cultures.

A reappraisal of Anderson’s (2006) book in the *American Historical Review* highlights its classic status in history, sociology, and anthropology, as well as English and comparative literature (Bergholz, 2018, p.524). As the reappraisal suggests, the book’s influence can be gleaned from the number of citations to it in Google Scholar, which stood at 89,566 on July 30<sup>th</sup> 2018. By comparison there were 56,166 citations to Geertz’s (1973) *Interpretation of Cultures*, an influential text for the culture perspective in organization

studies (Denison, 1996). Anderson is usually cited in management journals to show how corporations can be affected by the discourse of nationalism (e.g. Vaara and Tienar, 2008, p.1795, Hellgren et al., 2002, Jack and Lorbiecki, 2007, Lubinski, 2018). But organizations themselves are rarely recognized as “imagined communities” in management and organization studies (Wadhvani et al., 2018, p.1668).

The possibility of considering corporations as imagined communities in organization studies usually relates to the uses of the past and collective memory in organizations (Suddaby et al., 2010, p.18, Wadhvani et al., 2018). For the most part this research focuses on the uses of the past in the present, mainly accessed through interviews and published secondary sources (Hatch and Schultz, 2017), with fewer studies of how the past was used in the past, accessed through primary historical archival sources (Maclean et al., 2018). Anteby and Molnar’s (2012) research is notable because they carried out a content analysis of 309 internal bulletins, akin to company magazines, from the French aeronautics firm Snecma from 1953 to 1999. Their focus is on Snecma’s selective representations of the past in its national identity, but they only mention the concept of imagined community in passing. However, an imagined past is only one component of an imagined community; company magazines constitute historical evidence that the employees have been imagined as members of corporate communities, whether or not there was a historical element in their content.

While the concept of imagined community may have been overlooked in management and organization studies, it is seen as a foundation for the idea of brand community in consumer research (Muniz and O’guinn, 2001, p.413). However, the contemporary imagined communities engendered by brands appear to be seen as face-to-face communities that have been transformed into computer-mediated groups. This neglects both the historical and contemporary role of printed textual media, not only company magazines produced for consumers, but numerous trade and hobbyist magazines. Following on from recognition of

consumer brand communities, marketers have turned their attention to internal communication in order to promote brand awareness amongst employees (Punjaisri et al., 2008), which suggests that employees are increasingly imagined as members of brand communities.

The conditions that allowed for the emergence of imagined national communities — capitalist productive relations; print technology; and the diversity of spoken languages being replaced by national ‘print-languages’ (Anderson, 2006, pp.42-3) — suggest historical conditions of possibility for company magazines and imagined corporate communities. It seems unlikely that corporations could have been imagined as communities through textual media unless free adult employees had replaced slaves, serfs, and child labour. Technological changes during the second half of the nineteenth century drastically reduced the cost of producing magazines (Reed, 1997, pp.44-5), making production of magazines for free distribution to employees feasible. Finally, by the time company magazines appeared widespread literacy meant that corporations could assume their employees would be able to read them.

It seems incontrovertible that corporations are imagined as communities, and the extensive literature on corporate cultures can be seen as a manifestation of this. But a distinction can be made between the conceptualization of corporations as imagined communities and corporate cultures, otherwise imagined corporate communities could be dismissed as merely historical terminology for something similar to corporate culture. The concept of imagined national communities has been counter-posed to the widespread management belief in the existence of enduring national cultures (McSweeney, 2002). By analogy it is widely accepted across the corporate and organizational culture literature that founders establish a culture (Ogbonna and Harris, 2001, 14), echoed in founder-centred business history (Westall, 1996).

The idea that ‘organizations begin to create cultures through the actions of founders’ (Schein, 1985) has been challenged both from symbolic (Alvesson and Berg, 1992, p.61, Alvesson, 1995, pp.81-87) and historical perspectives in organization studies (Rowlinson and Procter, 1999). Just as Anderson (2006, p.5) maintains that the ‘subjective antiquity’ of nationalism is challenged by ‘the objective modernity of nations’, founder-centred narratives of corporate cultures are contradicted by historical research which demonstrates how these narratives are both constructed retrospectively (Rowlinson and Hassard, 1993), and malleable over time (Boje, 1995, Boje, 2008). This means that instead of seeing company magazines as an expression of pre-existing corporate cultures, they can be seen as an important medium through which corporate communities were imagined in the first place.

### **The Historiography of Company Magazines**

There is no clear definition of company magazines. Corporations have produced a variety of publications for different stakeholders, but historically most magazines have either been aimed at customers or employees. There has been an ‘explosion in research treating magazines as historical study subjects’ (Patterson, 2015), but with a few exceptions (e.g. Rowlinson and Heller, 2015), company magazines are overlooked in magazine research (Reed, 1997, Cox and Mowatt, 2014). In the fields of public relations and media studies prescriptive reviews of the role of magazines have provided a descriptive history (e.g. Riley, 1992a, Riley, 1992b). According to Jeffers and Bateman’s (1980, p.12) historical overview the first American company magazine aimed at employees appeared around 1880, and they estimate that the number of company publications in the USA grew from 9,000 to 17,000 between 1956 and 1969. They interviewed the Research Director at the International Association of Business Communicators, who reckoned that in 1979 that there were between 30,000 and 50,000 company publications in the USA, of which about two thirds were probably internal, or employee company magazines (Jeffers and Bateman, 1980, p.12). These

estimates of the growth of company magazines in the USA provide a useful comparison for assessing the growth and development of magazines in the UK, where one of the earliest company magazines was the *Ibis* at the Prudential Assurance Company, founded in 1878 (Heller, 2008, Heller, 2009).

In a brief introduction to the history of internal communication, Yaxley and Ruck (2016, p.11) make the case for greater ‘employee involvement’ in communication. They maintain that when company magazines first developed in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century they were ‘written by and for employees’. It was only later, when ex-journalists took on the role of ‘industrial editor’, that editorial freedom was sacrificed in favor of producing company ‘propaganda’. Yaxley and Ruck trace the constant tension between producing a credible publication that allows employees a voice to criticize management, or a magazine that is firmly under management control. The argument that there is what could be called a ‘democratic deficit’ in contemporary company magazines suggests a nostalgic historical narrative of a lost past. From the internal communication field it is also clear that the role of editors has been neglected (Koch et al., 2018), which leads to recognition of the influence of the various associations of company magazine editors.

In the broader literature on internal communication company magazines are generally only mentioned in passing, with bland comments such as, ‘fantastic for building a sense of community’ (Yeomans and FitzPatrick, 2017). The more theoretical approach to corporate communication from the communicative constitution of organizations perspective (CCO) (Christensen and Cornelissen, 2010), emphasizes the significance of oral communication and social media, with history and company magazines being barely mentioned. Nevertheless the CCO notion that corporate communication constitutes a novel contemporary effort on the part of organizations ‘to communicate as whole, total, or “bodily” entities’ (Christensen and Cornelissen, 2010, p.387), is suggestive for historical research tracing how organizations

have communicated themselves as organic entities in the past.

Company magazines feature in two landmark historical studies from Yates (1989) and Marchand (1998). Yates showed how the rise of systematic management in the United States between 1850 and 1920, based on impersonal rules, processes and regulations, led to the development of internal communications in American corporations. Older methods of letters and word of mouth communication were replaced by circular letters, notices, rule-books, reports and memorandums that increased managerial control and authority. Yates characterizes 'in-house' magazines as an attempt by management to humanize work life as a corrective to the 'depersonalization of systematic management' (Yates, 1989, pp.20,65).

Marchand (1990, pp.108-114) similarly credits the employee magazine with the 'restoration of the corporate family', in response to widespread criticism from trade unions, journalists, and politicians. Both Yates and Marchand can be seen as overly functional interpretations of company magazines. In functional terms company magazines represent 'a form of downward communication, ultimately aimed at improving cooperation, control, and efficiency' (Yates, 1989, 17). But that is unlikely to explain the perceived purpose of magazines, which was undoubtedly more benign. Moreover, Yates and Marchand tend to take the pronouncements in company magazines at face value, as if the claim that a family feeling is being restored through a company magazine is evidence that such a feeling previously existed, whereas from the perspective of imagined corporate communities, the family feeling is only created as a discourse at the time the claim is made. Company magazines represent a historical repository for such perceptions of a corporation as a family, whether or not employees ever shared those perceptions.

Business historians recognize company magazines as valuable sources for examining corporate cultures. Griffiths' (1995) account of the culture at Lever Brothers, the UK branded soap manufacturing company, highlights the importance of company magazines. Lever

Brothers' Port Sunlight factory near Liverpool was one of the foremost model factories and industrial villages in the early twentieth century (Meakin, 1905). The first company magazine at Lever Brothers appeared in 1895, with several titles later running simultaneously aimed at local and international readers. Griffiths maintains that magazines were an important component in communicating the corporate culture, contributing to the feeling that Port Sunlight was a 'huge family' (Griffiths, 1995, p.32). He sums up the value of company magazines for historical research on corporate culture:

'What the historian is left with therefore is a metaphorical "window" through which the outsider can observe a past business community's culture. At Port Sunlight this culture was particularly strong. It could be argued that the magazine was one of the key instruments in defining this culture' (Griffiths, 1995, p.28).

Company magazines have also been used for more critical accounts of organizational culture. In Mills' (2006, p.10) historical account of gender in the the airline industry he differentiates his approach from corporate history, which considers the history of a company in terms of its stated purpose. Instead Mills maintains that history is a discourse, where sources can be read against their intended purpose. Company magazines may have been produced with the stated purpose of create a family feeling, but as Mills demonstrates, they also reveal changing attitudes to gender.

From the perspective of historical institutionalism Seppälä (2018) uses 'professional magazines', aimed at particular occupational groups within an organization, to study the legitimation of hypermarkets within four Finnish retail organizations (1960-75). Seppälä's (2018, p.712) research is significant because he maintains that 'the discourses of organizational magazines can also be studied on a more abstract level', rather than tracing events, focusing on underlying ideologies, even where these are not explicitly stated.

A collection of articles focused on company magazines invoked various theoretical perspectives but largely overlook the concept of imagined community (Heller, 2008). Esbester (2008) makes the case for moving beyond considering company magazines as manifestations of corporate culture. He mentions imagined communities in passing but then takes a Foucauldian (Foucault, 1977) approach to examine how the Great Western Railway in the UK used its company magazine to discipline workers through a well-meaning ‘Safety Movement’ aimed at reducing accidents.

Patmore and Rees (2008) examine the use of company magazines by the Colorado Fuel and Iron Company to promote its famous Employee Representation Plan from 1915 to 1942. They consider the relationship of a company magazine to the interests of employees, editorial staff, and management, as well as its value for external public relations. However, coming from a labor history perspective they are dismissive of magazines that focused on creating a family feeling with reports of babies and birthdays. Similarly Dredge (2008) examines the role of company magazines, along with newsletters and radio broadcasts, ‘in creating and maintaining employer dominance and employee co-operation in the culturally isolated mill villages of the American South’. The critical tone of these articles suggests that there was a democratic deficit from the outset

By contrast with the emphasis from labor historians on the instrumentalist control of workers through company magazines, Cox (2008) identifies a counter example of a magazine that arose as a result of an initiative from employees themselves. The *BAT Bulletin* was the first company magazine produced by the British American Company (BAT Co.). The magazine was originally created in 1915 to disseminate letters received by the company’s head office from some of the 3,385 employees on military service during the First World War. When the war ended staff at the London head office were welcomed home with a party. Cox (2008, p.203) observes that, ‘the importance of the *BAT Bulletin* in supporting morale and

boosting *esprit de corps* amongst the staff of the organization was a common theme developed by the various speakers’.

Reviewing the disparate historiography of company magazines from the perspective of imagined corporate communities suggests two lines of research. First, rather than being read as manifestations of an underlying culture, company magazines can be interpreted as part of wider discourses of imagined corporate communities. Whereas previous studies of company magazines mostly concentrate on the period when they were founded, between 1880 and 1940 (Heller, 2008), if the highpoint of company magazines came in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century then the discourses that were prevalent then may be more significant. Second, if there were tendencies towards differentiation and isomorphism in the discourses of imagined communities then these may be explained in part by the professional bodies of magazine editors and journalists (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983).

### **Historical Organization Studies: Sources and Discourses**

Reflecting on the influence of *Imagined Communities* in the Afterword to the second edition, Anderson (2006, [1983] p.227) described it as an attempt ‘to combine a kind of historical materialism with what later came to be called discourse analysis’. In other words it could be seen as bringing together historical studies and discourse studies, both of which are seen as genres of qualitative research with the potential for offering new insights in management and organization studies (Bansal et al., 2018). The idea that language does not simply signify but constitutes reality is central to the concept of organizational discourse, thus organizations can be seen as being composed of multiple discourses (Oswick et al., 2000, Marshak and Grant, 2008, Phillips and Oswick, 2012).

Contemporary case studies rather than historical research are generally preferred for examining organizational discourse (e.g. Halsall, 2009). ‘Historical interrogation of bodies of texts and practices’, when it does occur in organization studies, generally derives from

Foucault (Phillips and Oswick, 2012, pp.455,458, Foucault, 2002). Jacques' (1996) landmark historical examination of the discourses in management texts epitomizes the Foucauldian 'archaeo-genealogical' approach (Rowlinson, 2004). Jacques (1996) goes back in time until he finds a difference in management texts, such that there was an absence of anything that would be recognized as a discourse of management knowledge today.

Describing the research presented here as an historical interrogation of the discourses in which corporations are imagined as communities, following Anderson's (2006, [1983] p.227) reflection on the discourses of imagined national communities, probably says more about what is not being done. Thus there is no attempt to infer some imagined entity, such as a corporate culture or corporate community, external to the texts examined, nor is there any attempt to impose a narrative of events. Instead the aim is to describe the discourses of imagined corporate communities found within company magazines. As serial publications, usually appearing monthly, the extent and endurance of company magazines in itself constitutes textual evidence for a discourse of imagined corporate community, but it does not tell us what constitutes that discourse. For that an examination of the actual text is required.

As part of the historic turn in management and organization studies (Weatherbee et al., 2015, Clark and Rowlinson, 2004), historical researchers have responded to the challenge of articulating their methods in a form expected from social science (Adorisio and Mutch, 2013, Wadhvani and Bucheli, 2014), setting out a range of alternative research strategies (Rowlinson et al., 2014). Maclean, Harvey and Clegg maintain that in order to qualify as 'historical organization studies' research requires 'dual integrity,' whereby research can be seen as 'authentic within the realms of both organization studies and history' (Maclean et al., 2016, p.615). Dual integrity requires not only that all primary sources cited are listed in order to satisfy the expectations of historians, albeit within the constraints of author-date citations,

but also that an account is provided of historical methods (Lipartito, 2014, Rowlinson et al., 2014, Yates, 2014).

The research strategy for this paper adheres to the principles of ‘historical triangulation’, as outlined by leading business historians in their guide for using historical sources to study organizations (Kipping et al., 2014, p.317). They differentiate historical triangulation from more ‘social scientific approaches to the past’, which ‘often search out and value data sources that provide consistent observations about a phenomenon of interest in order to identify and test hypotheses’. A more social scientific approach, or ‘*serial history*, using replicable techniques to analyze repeatable facts’ (Rowlinson et al., 2014, p.251), would probably focus on an intensive quantitative analysis of one or two continuous runs of company magazines, preferably finding magazines that have already been digitalized. Instead Kipping et al (2014, p.317) advocate triangulation between a ‘multiplicity and variety of sources’, as well as a ‘various types of texts’.

In order to provide triangulation between a ‘multiplicity’ of sources eight archives were visited (see Table 1). In the first instance it was decided to look at magazines for four prominent but very different organizations: the BBC; Cadbury (now part of Mondelez); HSBC (and formerly the Midland Bank); and the Royal Mail. From previous research it is known that magazines played an important role in these organizations and are seen as important historical sources (e.g. Rowlinson, 2002, Rowlinson, 1995). It is also well known by business historians that the magazines for these organizations are held in well-organized and accessible archives with helpful qualified archivists. HSBC has long runs of magazines from the banks it merged with, and it was decided to look at magazines for the Midland Bank, which was one of the Big Four UK banking groups during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In addition to archival research further triangulation was provided through visits to the British Library, where books such as Meakin’s (1905) account of industrial welfare from the early twentieth

century could be consulted. For additional triangulation, as detailed below, half a dozen interviews were conducted.

**Table 1 about here**

Triangulation between a ‘variety of sources’ was possible at the Royal Mail Archives where discussions were found concerning magazines, but this proved problematic in the other three archives as it is difficult to locate such discussions. Visiting The John Lewis Partnership Archives also allowed for a variety of sources to be consulted because the important role of the company magazine in John Lewis’s distinctive form of employee ownership (Cathcart, 2013) meant there was more obvious discussion in a range of sources. The John Lewis company magazine was not interrogated as it represents an outlier, with its own distinctive characteristics that were probably less affected by the associations of professional editors.

The most significant triangulation between ‘various types of texts’ (Kipping et al., 2014, p.317) came about from finding continuous runs of the periodicals written largely by and circulated to the editors of company magazines in the archives of the Industrial Welfare Society and the Institute of Internal Communication. These rich sources appear not have been used before in research on company magazines, and given the nature of these publications the aim was to trace debates *about* the purpose of company magazines in relation to discourses of imagined corporate communities, rather than to infer the discourse itself through from close reading of the text. Reports in the periodicals held by the Industrial Welfare Society show the growth in the number of UK company magazines from an estimated 350 in 1938, to 1,500 by 1961 (*Industrial Welfare and Personnel Management*, 1946, *Industrial Welfare*, 1961). In the archives of the Institute of Internal Communication a survey from 1985 suggested that this number had increased to 3,000 with an average readership of 9,000 and an annual expenditure by British business of £33 million (*BAIE News*, 1985). As in the USA, the post-war period up to 1985 could therefore be seen as the highpoint for company magazines.

Focusing on discourses of imagined corporate communities in company magazines highlights the role of professional bodies in disseminating those discourses, in line with research that emphasizes the role of professional bodies (Hodgson et al., 2015). The Industrial Welfare Society was established in 1918 as an employer organization to promote welfare and personnel management in industry (Fitzgerald, 1988, pp.203-7) and still exists today as The Work Foundation. It played a fundamental role in the institutionalisation of company magazines from the 1920s to the 1980s, publishing numerous articles on company magazines and hosting annual conferences for editors (*Industrial Welfare and Personnel Management*, 1932), as well as offering training to organizations that wanted to set up company magazines (Industrial Society, 1974).

The British Association of Industrial Editors (*BAIE*) was established in 1949 as a professional association for company magazine editors and journalists. It exists today as the Institute for Internal Communication. It played a major role in the promotion of company magazines and the professionalization of industrial editors and journalists (Knight and Knight, 2009). Since the 1980s it has advocated a more commercial shift in company magazines, promoting brand awareness in internal communication. These associations have been instrumental, not only introducing company magazines and internal communications, but also influencing their content and disseminating the discourses in which the perceived purpose of magazines is expressed.

Finally, as advocated for triangulation (Kipping et al., 2014, p.319), as a supplement to archival sources six interviews were conducted with editors and journalists working on current company magazines in print from major British corporations (see Table 2). Since the print publications have ceased for Cadbury and HSBC they were substituted with interviewees from Jaguar Land Rover, as a manufacturing company, and Royal Bank of Scotland/Prudential as a bank. A senior representative from the agency AB Publishing, Katie

Macaulay, was also interviewed. AB Publishing writes and produces company magazines both online and in print. The interviews helped to make sense of the historical sources; for example Macaulay (2015) estimated that over half of the 250 largest UK companies still produced a company magazines in 2015, with the total number being around two thousand. All the interviewees (Cornelius, 2015, Faraday, 2015, Forfar, 2015, Hammond, 2015, Streeton, 2015), emphasized that internal communication, and magazines in particular, is not only about delivering information, but also embeds individuals within an organization.

**Table 2 about here**

The research focuses on the post-war period because it captures the high point of printed magazines, whereas previous research tended to focus on the pre-war development of magazines (Heller, 2008, Heller, 2009). For the main part of the research continuous runs of the company magazines for the BBC, Cadbury, the Midland Bank, and Royal Mail were looked at from around 1945 to 2015. Where possible the first issues were also examined, even though these predate 1945, because the intended purpose of the magazines, and by implication a discourse of imagined community, was announced in editorial material. For later issues the discourse of imagined community has to be inferred from general material in the magazines. A fairly prosaic content analysis was carried out, following the example of magazine research (e.g. Reed, 1997), taking one issue of a magazine from each of the four organizations for the years 1955, 1985 and 2005 (see Table 3).

**Table 3 about here**

1955 was selected because many company magazines were discontinued or scaled back during the War due to paper rationing, and were not up and running again until the 1950s. 1985 might well have been around the high point when more company magazines were in print in the UK than before or since (*BAIE News*, 1985), and many had shifted from a magazine to a tabloid newspaper format. 2005 captures company magazines in print before

their relative decline and the shift to online internal communication. By the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century many company magazines ceased to appear in print as they were replaced by electronic and online communication; the last printed issue of the BBC's *Ariel* appeared on December 13<sup>th</sup> 2011 for example.

The same twelve issues of the magazines from 1955, 1985, and 2005 were also used to select text in which the discourses of imagined community could be interrogated more closely. The first author identified a body of text that appeared to be predicated upon some perceived purpose of the magazines. About half of this material, identified as the most interesting, was transcribed, producing c.50,000 words from the twelve issues of company magazines. Through an iterative process of both authors reading this body of text from the actual company magazines alongside the periodicals of the editors, three discourses were identified that appear to capture the different styles of imagined corporate communities. Most of the quotes that follow are from the working document of c.10,000 words, composed of around 40 long quotes from each of the issues transcribed, selected by both authors as providing interesting illustrations of the three discourses identified.

### **Discourses of Imagined Corporate Communities**

It was clear from an initial look at the company magazines that they had changed over time, not only in their format, often from a thick glossy magazine to some kind of tabloid newspaper, but in the content and style of articles. This is confirmed by the content analysis carried out on the sample of twelve magazines from Royal Mail, Midland Bank/HSBC, Cadbury, and the BBC. As much of the content as possible was coded under three headings: 1. *social clubs, hobbies, and sports*, which drastically reduced over time; 2. *company focused* material, which increased; and 3. *employee focused* material, which remained fairly consistent (see Tables 4, 5, and 6).

### **Tables 4, 5 and 6 Content Analysis of Company Magazines About here**

Turning to the text itself there was an expectation that a close reading of the magazines would reveal a transition from an old style ‘esprit de corps’ discourse, as suggested by the historiography of company magazines (Cox, 2008, Griffiths, 1995), to a new discourse of ‘brand community’, as advocated by marketers for internal communication (Punjaisri et al., 2008). Reading the magazines did not confirm this neat progression for two reasons. Firstly, it became clear that the discourses of imagined corporate communities are not mutually exclusive, and from the outset there was recognition of the need to promote corporate brands in company magazines. Secondly, it became apparent that much of the discourse did not fit neatly into the categories of ‘esprit de corps’ and ‘brand community’. A third category of ‘democratic polity’ was constructed to capture the discourse in which the perceived purpose of the company magazine is in fact to rectify a ‘democratic deficit’, as suggested by Yaxley and Ruck (2016). It should be noted that historical actors themselves did not make a distinction between these discourses, which are abstract categories that allow the text from the company magazines to be organized without resorting to a chronological commentary (Seppälä, 2018).

### ***Esprit De Corps***

Cadbury’s *Bournville Works Magazine* started in 1902, and a free copy was distributed to all employees, informing them that:

It is the object of the paper to reflect as fully as possible every aspect of the social and industrial life of Bournville ... But above all, the aim of the paper is to promote what, for lack of a better word we may describe as the Bournville “Spirit” — to foster comradeship and good fellowship and to add one more to the links binding together the community at Bournville in mutual service (*Bournville Works Magazine*, 1902).

Similarly over forty years later, a report at the GPO commented that, ‘The purpose of the Magazine is to stimulate esprit de corps among the staff as a whole; to encourage the sense that we are all “one big family” engaged on “united operations”’ (Royal Mail Archives, 1950). The opening edition of the BBC’s *Ariel* sets out the perceived role of the magazine for a workforce that does not meet face-to-face:

You have over 2,000 colleagues in the B.B.C. You know those who are in your department or immediately concerned in the routine of your own work; but how many more? A few by sight, a few by name, a few with whom you are on sufficiently intimate terms to exchange bows in the street ... So herewith, in quarterly instalments, our ‘humanised’ staff list, which aims at telling you ... about these mysterious colleagues of yours, who they are, where they work and what they do (*Ariel*, 1936, p.20).

Explicit references to an ‘esprit de corps’ can be found in other company magazines such as the London and County Bank (Heller, 2009, p.149), and British American Tobacco (Cox, 2008). The *Industrial Editor* (1953), the journal of the British Association of Industrial Editors, stated that magazines should attempt to re-establish bonds that had been broken by growth, to create a feeling amongst staff of belonging and purpose that would overcome the negative consequences of size and impersonal management systems. The various references in company magazines to the spirit of an organization are not evidence of some metaphysical entity, binding members of the organization together, but of a discourse in which such an entity is prevalent. It seems appropriate to describe this discourse as esprit de corps, given its use in the magazines, which imagines the corporation as a community akin to a military unit or public school, but the discourse also extends to imagining the corporation as a family.

The sense of a face-to-face family community is captured in the *Midland Chronicle* (1955) with a photo of a young girl in a chef's hat making toffee magically appear. The caption reads:

The little lady in our picture was the youngest performer at the Magical Society Children's Party at Head Office on March 5<sup>th</sup>. She is Marguerite Ellis (aged 4), daughter of the well-known Charlie Ellis of Poultry Street branch.

The discourse imagines the corporation as an extended family with well-known characters. The family appears in a later example from the front page of *Cadbury News* (1985, p.1):

Joy – and trouble has come in triplicate for Bournville maintenance man Grahame Vanstone and his wife Judy – triplets born just nine weeks ago. Bubbling with excitement Grahame came to tell *News* the story a few hours after their birth.

The report inserts *Cadbury News* into the story itself, expressing the perceived purpose of the periodical imagining a corporate community as a family in which birth is an important event. The continuation of this discourse came out in the interviews. Leann Cornelius (2015) from Royal Bank of Scotland made the point that, 'we try to make people aware that the people, you know, the colleagues that you're dealing with in the bank everyday all have very different backgrounds, come from very different walks of life, have very different home lives and actually, you know, have to sensitive to those kind of issues'.

### ***Brand Community***

The brand community discourse imagines employees as ambassadors of a brand, along with consumers, with the perceived purpose of the company magazine as an aid to marketing in promoting awareness of products and services. The discourse manifests itself in marketing literature as if it is new. According to a marketing consultant, writing on the need for good internal communication, 'It is vital to get people [employees] living and breathing the brand because their behaviour will make or break the efforts to build a distinct and lasting image in

the hearts and mind of customers' (Harkness, 1999, p.88). But products and brands have always featured in company magazines. It is hardly surprising that brands feature in the magazine for a company such as Cadbury, with fast-selling consumer products, typified by an article in Cadbury's *CTB Bites* (2005, p.5) titled 'A fast start and a fanfare for Crème Eggs':

As the fastest selling confectionary product on the market from January to April every year, Creme Egg is CTB's very own 'superhero' brand.

We sell a quarter of a million creme eggs every trading hour over this period.

The brand community discourse also appears earlier in the *Post Office Magazine*, which the Post Office Public Relations Department used to address readers directly as consumers, but more than that as ambassadors. For example, in 1955 there was a campaign to ensure letters were properly addressed:

Do *you* always show *your* correct address clearly on your official and private correspondence so that people can address their replies properly? Do you tell your family and friends what difficulties they can cause if they don't do the job properly? Do you do everything you possibly can to help yourselves and to educate others so that the Post Office does not come in for unwarranted criticism? (*Post Office Magazine*, 1955, p.110)

The explicit perception of internal communication as a way to promote brands was welcomed by the British Association of Industrial Editors, as noted by the *BAIE News* (1989), 'good communications are at last acknowledged to be an essential element for commercial success; we are no longer preaching in the wilderness, but have found a ready audience'. The implication is obvious that the editors believed they had always been doing this. The dissemination of the brand community discourse is evident in a seminar organised by the Industrial Society in 1991 entitled, 'Corporate Identity and its impact on internal

communications' (*BAIE News*, 1991). At the seminar a communication consultant made the case for internal communication:

Many organisations are reshaping their strategies to provide customers with what they want, rather than the former practice of what they considered their customers ought to have ... However, it was essential that management should complete the equation by harnessing the support of their employees and making it clear what the company was trying to achieve (*BAIE News*, 1991).

The attention to internal communication appeared to be a vindication of the brand community discourse for company magazine editors, rather than the revelation that marketing consultants seemed to think it was.

### ***Democratic Polity***

The democratic polity discourse imagines the organization as a political community, with the company magazine as an independent medium between management and employees. A long report of over 400 words in the *Courier* (1985) produced by the Royal Mail epitomises the democratic polity discourse. Under the title 'Shaping Up to Secure the Future' the front-page article started as follows:

The Post Office announced last month that it is to evolve progressively into a product based organisation with Counters, National Girobank, Letters and Parcels each having its own managing director and headquarters team of specialists.

The discourse is manifested not just in the content but the style, with the magazine not making the announcement on behalf of management, but reporting on it as if it is an independent voice. Later on as more sensitive issues are touched upon it is clear how this independent voice might have been thought to soften the blow:

Plans for streamlining POHQ [Post Office Headquarters] will mean a reduction by next April of some 350 staff in London and Chesterfield, with another 130 to be dispersed to POHQ outstations.

Better communication was seen as a panacea for Britain's industrial relations during the 1960s and 70s. An article in *Industrial Welfare* (1963), the journal of the Industrial Welfare Society, commented ironically, 'Communication is industry's current catchword. A touch of this talisman is the cure, it seems, for almost all the problems that hamper good industrial relations'. The relation between the democratic polity discourse and industrial relations was exemplified by *Coal News*, the journal of the National Coal Board (NCB), which became widely known in the 1960s and early 1970s under the tutelage of its Chairman, Lord Robens. *Coal News* was a company newspaper written in tabloid form, and staffed by professional journalists who reported on the coal industry and its communities (*Times*, 1963). It was launched in July 1961, replacing the former company magazine of the NCB. The paper proved to be a success, with sales growing from 40,000 for the first issue to over 200,000 by the eighteenth issue, representing over half the coal miners in the NCB. What made *Coal News* distinct was its editorial freedom. The paper reported on controversial topics such as pit closures and wages. It regularly criticised management and positioned itself as the newspaper of coal miners. For Lord Robens such independence was indispensable. It created credibility in the newspaper. As he stated in the periodical of the Industrial Society,

The editor must have the freedom which is given to other newspaper editors – the freedom to decide the newspaper's policy, to express opinions, and he should be free to open his pages, if he so decided, to criticism of managerial policy (*Industrial Society*, 1966).

The discourse of democratic polity can also be found in non-union or less unionized contexts, as with the *Gazette* of the John Lewis Partnership. It was established in 1928 as the

principle communication channel for the newly established works councils and the staff co-ownership scheme, instigated by John Spedan Lewis, the son of the founder of the company. During the 1960s there was debate about the desirability of the *Gazette's* editorial independence. In a memo marked secret from the Chairman's conference, sent to the General Editor of the *Gazette*, 'The Chairman said that the difficulty to his mind was to reconcile with the *Gazette's* present freedom to express independent views the need for it to become more of a tool of management' (John Lewis Partnership Archives, 1966).

Nearly thirty years later the democratic polity discourse was vindicated when the *Gazette* reported that John Lewis had received an award, 'from the Campaign for Freedom of Information for the *Gazette* and its promotion of "free and open debate ... that most companies go out of their way to prevent". ... unlike conventional staff magazines, the *Gazette* encourages vigorous debate about — and often criticism of — the Partnership by staff' (Pethel, 1994). As of 2015 the John Lewis Partnership had an individual gazette for each of its department stores and one for its supermarket chain Waitrose and employed over sixty in-house journalists and editors (Faraday, 2015, Forfar, 2015).

Budgett Meakin's (1905) book presented an extensive international survey of *Model Factories and Villages*. In the opening chapter there is a discussion of 'Business Magazines', which suggests that from their inception company magazines invoked a more democratic discourse. Meakin notes that magazines could vary from:

the unaided production of the employees, not seen by the Heads until published, and in no way utilized to push the business,—to an elaborate advertising medium conducted as a business venture, but chronicling the social life of factory and "field force" at the same time, inspiring all with the feeling of a life-mission to provide the world with their particular products. (Meakin, 1905, 60)

Along with Lever Brothers' 'elaborate *Progress*' in Britain, Meakin highlighted the *N.C.R.*, produced by the American National Cash Register Company, as examples of the second type of magazine. Even though Meakin's survey was partly sponsored by Cadbury, which featured heavily, his obvious preference was for the more 'modest' publications produced by employees, such as the company magazine for the Debenham and Freabody store in London. Over a hundred years later Meakin's impressions of what could be called different discourses in company magazines still resonate: his reference to 'elaborate advertising' suggests suspicion towards the brand community discourse; the 'social life of the factory' can be read as esprit de corps; and 'the unaided production of employees' suggests a democratic polity.

### **Conclusion**

The concept of imagined corporate communities highlights how theory from history can bring a new appreciation of historical phenomena such as company magazines. Previously company magazines have been regarded mainly as sources for testing theory related to other institutions (Seppälä, 2018), rather than institutions in their own right, while the professional bodies of industrial editors have been overlooked in historical research (Koch et al., 2018). As institutions company magazines are interesting because corporations are not obliged to produce them and they have no obvious commercial imperative. As textual artefacts they appear to justify their own existence through discourses that perceive their role in relation to imagined corporate communities. From the texts of company magazines these discourses can be categorised as: esprit de corps; democratic polity; and brand community.

The impression from talking to the editors of contemporary company magazines is that they are part of a constituency of internal communications professionals in organizations who have been overlooked by management researchers. Similarly archivists, who often have a deep understanding of their organizations, and are often aligned with internal communication in organizations, seem to have been neglected in management and

organization studies. This is changing with the increasing interest in representations of history and collective memory (e.g. Suddaby et al., 2010, Wadhvani et al., 2018), but there is scope for further research on the historical and contemporary role of internal communication professionals.

Historical accounts of company magazines can now be seen as manifestations of the three discourses. The question of independence for editors and the historical increase in the ‘democratic deficit’ of company magazines (Yaxley and Ruck, 2016) arises *within* a discourse that imagines a corporate community as a democratic polity. From the democratic polity discourse the photo of an employee’s young daughter wearing a chef’s hat appears trivial, a throwback to the esprit de corps discourse. But from the brand community discourse editorial independence for company magazines may appear to be an irrelevance, or even an obstacle to a more integrated approach to corporate communication (Christensen and Cornelissen, 2010). This is not to say that these discourses are mutually exclusive, but to make the point that the narratives of change in the nature of magazines arise within these discourses, as do predictions of social media bringing greater democracy in brand communities (Muniz and O’guinn, 2001), or more brand awareness in internal communication (Ind and Bjerke, 2007).

Finally it should be noted that the neglect of such a widely used concept as imagined communities in organization studies is an anomaly in a field that is heavily reliant on ‘theory borrowing’ from other disciplines (Oswick et al., 2011). Part of the explanation is that although one of the components for ‘dual integrity’ in ‘historical organization studies’ is theoretical fluency (Maclean et al., 2016), it is historians who are required to become fluent in organization theory, whereas organization theorists are not expected to become familiar with theory from history (Maclean et al., 2017, Greenwood and Bernardi, 2014). By contrast, the idea for an historic turn (Clark and Rowlinson, 2004, Booth and Rowlinson, 2006) was

that the incorporation of theory from history would represent a ‘reorientation’ in management and organization studies, instead of history being seen as merely a supplementary research method (Üsdiken and Kieser, 2004).

The incorporation of an historical focus on discourses of imagined corporate communities would reorient perceptions of internal communication in management and organization studies. First, it challenges the primacy of the concept of culture for understanding internal communication (McAleese, 2016), and makes company magazines, and other media of internal communication, a focus for research into the history of imagined corporate communities. Second, as in other fields of management (Cummings et al., 2017), stylized historical narratives can be questioned by close reading of the discourses in historical texts. There is an emerging historical narrative from practitioners keen to explore their own history, which suggests a neat progression of internal communication, through changes in form and content, and a return to employee involvement through social media replacing company magazines (Yaxley and Ruck, 2016). This reassuring narrative can be questioned from the close reading of historical text from company magazines and the periodicals of professional magazine editors presented in this paper, which traces three discourses of imagined corporate communities that have endured despite changes in form and content — esprit de corps, democratic polity, and brand community.

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