

Secondary Publication



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On ideologies, micropolitics, and realpolitik : toward a political perspective on integration in corporate communications

Date of secondary publication: 13.07.2026

Version of Record (Published Version), Article

Persistent identifier: urn:nbn:de:bvb:473-irb-116115x

Primary publication

Winkler, Peter; Hoffjann, Olaf (2025): On ideologies, micropolitics, and realpolitik : toward a political perspective on integration in corporate communications, in: Corporate Communications : An International Journal, Bradford: Emerald, Vol. 30, No. 7, pp. 79–94, doi: 10.1108/ccij-12-2024-0221.

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On ideologies, micropolitics, and realpolitik – toward a political perspective on integration in corporate communications

Corporate
Communications:
An International
Journal

79

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Received 10 December 2024
Revised 16 April 2025
Accepted 16 April 2025

Abstract

Purpose – While there is a persistent call for integration in research and practice of corporate communications (CC), differences in the underlying ideals, forms of internal resistance, and the enforcement of integration against this resistance have been widely neglected in academic inquiry. The aim of this conceptual article is to elucidate these differences in integration ideals, resistance, and re-enforcement, drawing on a growing stream of research arguing for an explicit political perspective in organization and management studies.

Design/methodology/approach – Applying theory adaptation of this stream of research, the ideologies, micropolitics, and realpolitik underlying different ideals of integration in CC are systematically elaborated.

Findings – We distinguish four ideal types of integration and their distinctive forms of micropolitical resistance and realpolitik re-enforcement: authoritarian, libertarian, solidary, and liberal integration.

Originality/value – Our conceptual contribution provides a first comprehensive explanation of recurrent integration ideals in CC, their respective resistances, and re-enforcement from a political perspective. This perspective not only sensitizes research and practice to the underlying ideologies that often remain implicit in the pursuit of various integration ideals, but it also illuminates that every integration ideal entails its genuine form of disintegrative resistance and, consequently, the necessity of re-enforcing integration to assert corporate power interests.

Keywords Corporate communications, Ideologies, Integrated communications, Micropolitics, Power

Paper type Conceptual paper

Attempts at integration in corporate communications (CC) have undergone numerous variations, ups, and downs in the past 30 years (for recent overviews, see [Einwiller et al., 2022](#); [Tafesse and Kitchen, 2017](#)). Yet, one thing has not changed: What typically starts with high hopes in integration fostering CC, in which “the total is more than the sum of its parts” (e.g. [Ang, 2021](#), p. 7) often ends in disillusionment facing the various resistances turning integration into “a total nightmare of a process” ([Smith, 2013](#), p. 71). Integration in CC, hence, seem to be trapped within two recurrent, contradictory forces: on the one hand, integrative efforts “aimed at preserving good control, coordination, and unification of all organizational processes, units,

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Corrigendum: It has come to the attention of the publisher that the article, Winkler, P. and Hoffjann, O. (2025), “On ideologies, micropolitics, and realpolitik – toward a political perspective on integration in corporate communications”, *Corporate Communications: An International Journal*, Vol. ahead-of-print No. ahead-of-print. <https://doi.org/10.1108/CCIJ-12-2024-0221>, was submitted by the authors with formatting errors in Figure 1. This has now been corrected in the online version of the paper. The publisher asks that figure be entered correctly at submission and confirmed at article proofing stage. The authors sincerely apologise for any inconvenience caused.



Corporate Communications: An
International Journal
Vol. 30 No. 7, 2025
pp. 79-94
Emerald Publishing Limited
e-ISSN: 1758-6046
p-ISSN: 1356-3289
DOI [10.1108/CCIJ-12-2024-0221](https://doi.org/10.1108/CCIJ-12-2024-0221)

connections, and interactions”; on the other hand, disintegration as “a tendency toward fragmentation, loosening, erosion, weakening, and disorganization of the integrity, coordination, and controllability of an organization” (Aksom, 2024, p. 423).

In that, integration in CC can be understood as a genuine political endeavor (Hoffman and Ford, 2009), here defined as the implementation, negotiation, and enforcement of structures (polity), processes (politics), and content (policy) pursuing an overarching ideal of common order against various resistances (Fuchs and Roller, 2007, p. 205). Indeed, this political dimension of integration has found consideration in the early days of the concept in CC: “structural arrangements, organizational culture, and political power applied in the context of interorganizational and intraorganizational struggles will all have a significant impact on the development of the content of the integrated communications program. Although structure, culture, and politics may be analytically distinct, they are strongly interrelated” (Prensky *et al.*, 1996, p. 175). However, this political perspective has not been subject to closer inquiry since then. In this conceptual article we contend that this presents a sincere omission. We argue that a political perspective is indispensable to comprehend what scholars and practitioners in CC actually mean by integration as ideal, why formal integration inevitability entails informal disintegration, and why corporate integration efforts nevertheless persist unabated.

Indeed, the field of CC has been inundated with a plethora of integration approaches from various fields of business and communication scholarship (e.g. Christensen and Cornelissen, 2011; Bruhn, 2008; Kliatchko, 2015; Zeffass, 2008). While the explicit label of integrated (marketing) communications may have lost some of its appeal in recent years, this certainly does not apply to the general call for integration – one needs only consider current approaches such as agility (Einwiller *et al.*, 2022), polyphony (Schneider and Zeffass, 2018), or CommTech (Brockhaus *et al.*, 2023).

The persistence of calls for integration in CC is partly understandable given the continuous validity of the concept’s problem diagnosis: complex communication environments lead to an increased complexity in CC, and thus to the understandable desire to nonetheless ensure a coherent communicative corporate appearance. What remains far less tackled, however, is that the underlying ideals of integration have varied considerably over the last thirty years. Moreover, the critical retrospective shows that each hype accompanying a new integration ideal inevitably has been followed by disillusionment due to the difficulties in its implementation. And yet the general idea of integration is far from dead, but a constant point of reference for research and practice in CC.

Existing scholarly inquiry on the fluctuating ideals, implementation problems, and persistence of integration in CC, remains scarce and fragmented. Single studies posit that the cyclical fluctuation and constant recurrence of integration ideals in CC can be attributed to the ambiguity of the concept itself (e.g. Cornelissen *et al.*, 2006). However, this still leaves the question unanswered as to where these different ideals of integration come from in the first place. Also, empirical studies on the implementation of integration approaches in CC have consistently demonstrated that implementation attempts encounter resistance and disintegration in various ways (e.g. Bruhn, 2008; Ots and Nyilasy, 2015). Nevertheless, extant scholarly interest in these forms of resistance and disintegration are mainly on their avoidance, while the crucial questions of what triggers them and how they differ regarding the concrete integration approach at hand remain unconsidered. Ultimately, the very question of how integration, particularly in view of its unabated persistence, is executed in practice in the face of resistance and disintegration, has not yet been considered at all.

To tackle these open questions regarding the origins of different integration ideals, their specific forms of disintegrative resistance, and enforcement in CC, this article applies theory adaptation as an established approach to generate new conceptual knowledge in the social sciences (Jaakkola, 2020). Theory adaptation is employed in conceptual research to inform one theoretical field (domain field) by another field (method field), which is stronger in explaining aspects problematized, but unresolved in the domain field. Concretely, we identify as a method field politically oriented organization and management scholarship (OMS) (O’Doherty *et al.*, 2024). In this field, O’Doherty and de Cock (2024) have recently systematized three vibrant, yet dispersed streams: a stream of ideology-oriented capitalism critical OMS investigating the so called “interstice” between ideals and programs; a stream of

micropolitics-oriented OMS investigating the interstice between formality and informality; and a stream of discourse analytical realpolitik-oriented OMS scholarship studying the interstice between fiction and fact. In our theory adaption, we integrate and transfer core definitions and conceptual premises of these three streams of research to the domain field of CC research for the first time. On this basis, we are able to explain (1) the ideological origins of integration ideals and programs in CC; (2) the micropolitical resistance that the formal implementation of these ideals and programs engenders at the informal level; and (3) the realpolitikal re-enforcement of integration beyond ideals and against informal resistance. This provides a theory-informed, comprehensive overview of four recurrent ideal types of integration in CC, their specific forms of micropolitical disintegration, and realpolitikal re-integration: authoritarian, libertarian, solidary, and liberal integration.

In that, our findings contribute to a more reflective understanding of the persistent idea of integration in CC in three main ways: First, it spurs critical reflection on the ideologies implicitly underlying integration approaches. Second, it enhances the micropolitical insight that every formal attempt at integration inevitably triggers specific forms of informal disintegration. Third, our contribution highlights how integration is pragmatically implemented in everyday practice, beyond ideals and in the face of resistance. Finally, we argue that an adequate understanding of integration in CC requires an integrated consideration of how its ideopolitical, micropolitical, and realpolitikal conditions interrelate. In the following, we unfold this argument through examining section by section the ideologies, micropolitics, and realpolitik of integration in CC.

The ideologies of integration in corporate communications

At the most general level, ideology is understood as “a set of ideas, beliefs and attitudes, consciously or unconsciously held, which reflects or shapes understandings or misconceptions of the social and political world” (Freeden, 2016). Political inquiry of ideology (e.g. Heywood, 2021), then, is particularly interested in two questions: First, which ideologies are how influential in society at what moment in time? Second, what programmatic actions are taken to maintain these ideologies? In politically oriented OMS research (O’Doherty and de Cock, 2024), it is capitalism critical scholarship which shows most interest in ideological inquiry (e.g. Banerjee, 2008; Chiapello and Fairclough, 2022; Mumby, 2016). This research focuses, first, on how certain ideologies are privileged in different variations of capitalism, and second, on how these ideologies are supported by programmatic ideas of organization and communication in specific management approaches. We now theoretically adapt (Jaakkola, 2020) this ideology-focused perspective to recurrent ideals of integration in CC. To do so, we distinguish between *market-oriented understandings* of integration in CC mostly put forward by representatives of advertising, branding, and marketing research (e.g. Burmann et al., 2023; Bruhn, 2008; Schultz et al., 1994). On the other hand, there are *society-oriented understandings* of integration, which, in addition to the capitalist profit goal, also strive to consider corporate social and ecological responsibilities in their integration claims, and are mostly proposed from the ranks of communication and social science scholars (e.g. Christensen et al., 2008; Gulbrandsen and Just, 2016; Zeffass, 2008) (see Figure 1, line 1).

In both market- and in society-oriented approaches, we identify two ideal types of integration each – market-orientated *authoritarian* and *libertarian* integration on the one hand, society-oriented *solidary* and *liberal* integration on the other. We follow a Weber (1922) understanding of ideal type as a synthesis of the most salient characteristics inherent to an understanding of integration. Given our particular interest in ideology, these ideal types of integration are to be interpreted as idealized, hence: normatively desirable, and as supported by a programmatic understanding of organization and communication. Accordingly, the presented ideal types, particularly with the terminology employed here, do not necessarily appear in this pure form in concrete approaches to CC. However, their typical characteristics recurrently appear in and shape these approaches. Line 2 and 3 in Figure 1 provide an overview of the subsequently discussed four ideal types of integration and their underlying programmatic understandings of organization and communication.

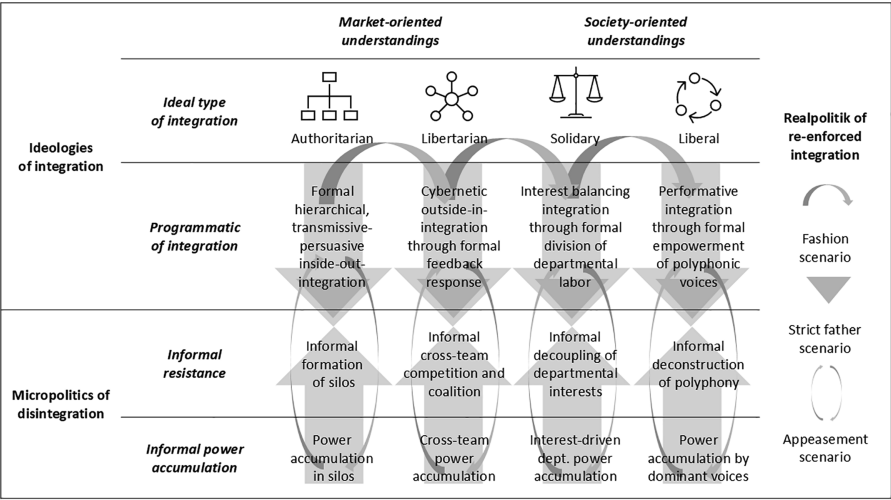


Figure 1. Ideologies, micropolitics, and realpolitik of integration in corporate communications. Source: Authors' own work

Authoritarian integration

While *authoritarian* thinking has a bad reputation as anti-democratic in the political context, in the context of classic modern organization and management thinking, it represents the epitome of integration. Early modern industrial capitalism and bureaucracy theory (Bendix, 1957; Weber, 1922) share the argument that the most efficient and effective way to accomplish integration is through authority – by bundling visionary, decisional, and resource control at the top and by delegating their execution and reporting to the base. This authoritarian understanding of integration is supported by a hierarchical understanding of organization and a transmission understanding of communication. The contemporary academic and practical criticism of the *hierarchy and transmission* view (e.g. Christensen and Cornelissen, 2011) should not obscure that its long-time programmatic dominance is by no means the result of a misjudgment or lack of reflexivity. By contrast, it presents a central success factor of *industrial capitalism* (Mumby, 2016, 2019): The programmatic nexus of hierarchy and transmission does not only allow for rational justification of a rigid separation between formally decision-making management and the executing workforce, despite evident power asymmetries. Moreover, it justifies a centralized, inside-out-focus in planning, the internal promise of meritocratic promotion opportunities, and the external promise of providing the most effective and efficient market offer.

However, as markets become increasingly saturated and the psychological insights of the human relations movement become widely accepted (Hassard, 2012), industrial capitalism increasingly evolves towards what Illouz (2007) aptly terms *emotional capitalism*. The programmatic nexus of hierarchy and transmission remains untouched, but its previous rational emphasis is supplemented by a psychologically informed emotionally *persuasive* level of justification. Internally, this is achieved by introducing the concept of corporate culture, which is intended to ensure affective identification, commitment, and loyalty among the workforce (Endrissat et al., 2017). In the direction of the market, this creation of desire, identification, commitment, and loyalty is accomplished by identity-forming unique brand promises, or selling propositions (Kornberger, 2015). Strong global brands, paradigmatically McDonald's (Bryman, 2003; Ritzer, 1983), represent authoritarian integration both in its rational sense of hierarchical control of all CC structures, processes, and content, and in its persuasive sense of promoting to a highly emotionalized and committed global brand culture.

Accordingly, integration approaches in CC that follow this authoritarian ideology and program, are most pronounced in corporate identity, identity-based marketing, and branding approaches (e.g. [Balmer and Wilson, 1998](#); [Burman et al., 2023](#)). With his approach of “integrated marketing communications”, [Bruhn \(2008\)](#) presents, perhaps, the most prominent and detailed approach, by defining integration “as a strategic and operative process, which involves analysis, planning, organizing, implementing and monitoring, and which aims to communicate a coherent and consistent image of a company or reference object by integrating the company’s distinctive sources of internal and external communications” ([Bruhn and Zimmermann, 2017](#), p. 9). Integration, here, is clearly understood as a hierarchically planned and executed process; communication remains strongly rooted in an inside-out logic and thus in an understanding of transmission; and rational and affective arguments mutually support each other in maintaining an overarching promise of integration in the sense of a unique, coherent, and consistent corporate identity.

Libertarian integration

Though authoritarian integration is still prominently anchored in CC and branding practice today, it is increasingly also confronted with challenges ([Kornberger, 2015](#)). These arise, first, from the fact that the attribution of brand value is increasingly shifting from the material to the symbolic level and, second, that a transmissive understanding of communication can be maintained less and less in a responsive digital-technological communication environment. Brands are thus, as Kornberger aptly points out, increasingly less hierarchically controllable, but rather a “semantic space [that] makes values visible, providing a platform upon which claims, calculations, and categorizations compete, collide, and sometimes coalesce” ([Kornberger, 2015](#), p. 105).

We are thus approaching a variant of capitalism that [Dean \(2005\)](#) has termed *communicative capitalism*. In this variant, the creation of value is shifting from the production process to the process of communicative meaning making at various touchpoints. Success, then, becomes contingent upon catering to the needs of those attributing meaning and value, hence the potential consumers themselves. This comprehensive shift is further accentuated with the rise of another variant of capitalism, which [Zuboff \(2019\)](#) has prominently described as *surveillance capitalism*. Its object is no longer only to meet consumer demands, but to produce surplus value based on behavioral data to anticipate individual needs, to trigger, and to target them at all relevant contact points.

This shift is accompanied by a significant transformation in the underlying ideal of integration and corresponding programmatic understanding of organization and communication. The dominant trajectory of integration is no longer inside-out, in the sense of centralized, hierarchically controlled authority. Instead, integration is now reflected *outside-in*, promoting a *libertarian* ideal of contributing to the greatest possible development of individual flexibility and freedom. Accordingly, the programmatic nexus of hierarchy and transmission must give way to a *networked* understanding of organization and a *cybernetic* understanding of communication ([August, 2021](#)), the performance of which is formally controlled relentlessly in key performance indicators (KPIs) indicating the success of targeted user satisfaction and feedback response at all contact points. Steven [Galloway’s \(2017\)](#) critical analysis on “the four” influential big tech companies, today operating as Alphabet, Amazon, Apple, and Meta, continues to provide an exemplary reconstruction of libertarian integration, as their disruptive global success builds on directing all communication structures, processes, and content towards the optimized identification, flexible satisfaction, and retention of fundamental emotional user needs.

Radical outside-in-orientation, however, also necessitates a decentralized organizational structure, which is typically achieved by flexible team cooperation. The concept of “integrated marketing communications”, as proposed by Northwestern University scholars (e.g. [Kliatchko, 2015](#); [Schultz et al., 1994](#); [Tafesse and Kitchen, 2017](#)), can be considered an

early precursor of this ideal. More recently, this libertarian ideal is formative in agile approaches to CC (e.g. [Einwiller et al., 2022](#)) and the concept of CommTech in particular (e.g. [Brockhaus et al., 2023](#)). Inspired by digital marketing and business approaches, these concepts envisage the future of integration in the comprehensive embedding of digital monitoring, feedback processing, and automated response in a decentralized organization of CC.

Solidary integration

In society-oriented understandings of integration, in addition to profit, also social and increasingly also: ecological interests are considered and integrated. Capitalism critical scholars ([Banerjee, 2008](#); [Boltanski and Chiapello, 2007](#)) distinguishes between two late capitalist ideologies in this regard, which, ironically, thrive from their integration of two established lines of capitalism critique – the call for solidary distribution on the one hand, and the call for individual political articulation on the other.

The ideal type of *solidary integration* summarizes approaches in CC that have gained momentum in the wake of *socially responsible capitalism*, as expressed in stakeholder approaches, corporate social responsibility, corporate citizenship, or corporate sustainability (see critically, [Banerjee, 2008](#); [Ergene et al., 2021](#)). These attempts are united by the central integration ideal of fair distribution and balance of interests – which is specifically reflected in the fact that, in addition to the unquestioned profit interest, other societal and ecological interests are included. This finds reflection in CC approaches aiming at a differentiated and balanced coordination of profitability and legitimacy ([Zerfass, 2008](#)), stakeholder demands ([Gronstedt, 2012](#)), or broader social and ecological goals ([Diehl et al., 2017](#)). These approaches share the commonality to support the translation of the originally capitalism critical idea of redistribution and balance into business digestible vocabulary and metaphors – as reflected, e.g. in concepts such as triple bottom lines or environment, social, and governance (ESG) standards (e.g. [Brown et al., 2008](#); [Carollo and Guerci, 2018](#)).

Integration, hence, is re-envisioned as an ongoing distribution and mediation task. This is typically reflected in a formal *division of labor* in the organizational structure – different communication departments functionally represent and engage with different interests – and a *deliberative* understanding of communication ([Scherer and Palazzo, 2007](#)), in the sense of an omnipresent, yet little formalized call for balance and mediation between different, partly competing interests.

Liberal integration

The ideal type of *liberal integration*, lastly, is driven by the ideal of enabling and integrating the situated articulation of individual political claims. The seminal work of Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello on “the new spirit of capitalism” ([2007](#)) continues to prove instructive as an explanatory background here. The authors argue that increasing capitalism critique over the last four decades has not so much led to an orientation towards solidary distribution. Rather, capitalism has started to embrace the liberal “artistic critique”, which is not about distribution, but the ability of self-determinacy and creative contribution to labor and transaction processes. This critique has not only been incorporated, but also transformed into a capitalist value creation factor. Accordingly, individual responsibility, participation, and co-creation no longer only represent noble ideals or options, but rather requirements for various stakeholders in contemporary capitalism ([Bröckling, 2016](#)).

This is accompanied by another shift in the underlying ideal of integration: society-oriented integration is now less about solidary distribution, but the animation of *liberal* contribution to and participation in the communicative representation and embodiment of the corporation. It is this new ideal of integration that underlies more recent process-oriented and polyphonic approaches to integration in CC (e.g. [Christensen and Cornelissen, 2011](#); [Christensen et al., 2008](#); [Gulbrandsen and Just, 2016](#); [Schneider and Zerfass, 2018](#)). Integration, in doing so, departs from the old idea of unity, coherence, and consistency. Instead, integration is now

envisioned as an emergent result of a plurality, diversity, and procedural unfolding of corporate voices (Letiche, 2010). This is accompanied by a new programmatic nexus of an explicitly postmodern, little formalized *process-oriented* understanding of organization (Gulbrandsen and Just, 2016) and a *performative* understanding of communication as a form of action in its own right (Christensen and Cornelissen, 2011). Scandinavian companies such as IKEA exemplify represent this type of liberal integration, as their branding strategy heavily relies on continuous and situated membership voicing to make corporate values tangible (Christensen and Christensen, 2022).

In the following section, we theoretically adapt (Jaakkola, 2020) a micropolitical perspective from critical OMS to better understand why these four ideal types of integration, despite their considerable differences, are all ultimately confronted with specific forms of resistance and disintegration.

The micropolitics of informal disintegration

Besides ideology, a second politically oriented stream in critical OMS (O'Doherty and de Cock, 2024) is interested in micropolitics, defined as the interest-driven interventions, power games, and conflicts in organizations (e.g. Burns, 1961; Friedberg and Crozier, 1980). This stream points out the limits of plannability and control through formal programs and structures (Brown and Humphreys, 2006). While micropolitics in a narrow understanding engages with the informal everyday interventions of individual actors (Meyer and Rowan, 1977), in our contribution, we follow a broader understanding of micropolitics focusing on more durable forms of informal resistance against formal structures.

While foundational research on informality has emphasized its deeply ambivalent impact on modern organizations (Burns, 1961), general interest in informality has abated over the last decades (for a recent call for rediscovery in CC research, see Hoffjann, 2024), and a positive interpretation is dominant today. This becomes evident in the pervasive affirmative interpretation of informality as “organizational culture” (Alvesson, 2002) as well as the vital role that practice-based research dedicates to informality as a source of creativity and experimentation to tackle formal strategy gaps (Regnér, 2003). However, informality also has an evident “dark side” (Horak et al., 2020) – one may think of bullying, nepotism, or bribery – which, despite never formally decided, still can evolve into routines, and hence turn into powerful, yet unspoken structures with a high potential of corporate destructivity (Kühl, 2013). Moreover, Diefenbach and Sillince (2011) point to an interesting indirect relation between formal and informal structure. The authors argue that the prevalent emphasis on formal de-hierarchization does by no means lead to a complete dissolution of hierarchy in contemporary corporations. By contrast, it is accompanied by the rise of new forms of informal hierarchy. Relatedly, Brown and Humphreys (2006) highlight that in case of mergers and change, formal integration attempts towards joint organizational identity inevitably entail informal resistance – either to preserve established and situated privileges, or due to conflicting situated interpretations of what identity actually means.

We now theoretically adapt (Jaakkola, 2020) these the general insights on the inevitability of tensions between formal and informal structure to specify how micropolitics manifest in terms of informal resistance and disintegration for each of the four ideal types of integration, depending on their respective formal implementation efforts. Lines 4 and 5 in Figure 1 provide an overview of the central forms of micropolitical disintegration and power accumulation per ideal type.

How silo formation resists authoritarian integration

Authoritarian integration represents the ideal type with the strongest degree of formal structure. This applies not only to the hierarchical coordination of all integration efforts, but also to the regulated handling of disintegrative resistance to their implementation. Bruhn (2008), for example, as a particularly prominent representative of authoritarian integration,

addresses informal disintegration problems in detail and counters these with concrete formal guidelines for prevention. However, despite this foresight, Bruhn concludes that, in practice, integration in CC often fails primarily due to informal resistance.

Taking micropolitics seriously means accepting that even the most rigorous formalization of integration cannot prevent informal deviation and thus disintegration. In formal hierarchical structures, this is primarily the case because informal networks are typically strongly linked to a formal hierarchical position, and thus most informal power accumulates at the top levels of hierarchy (Diefenbach and Sillince, 2011; Friedberg and Crozier, 1980). Accordingly, authoritarian integration in terms of central coordination and subordination of communication departments inevitably triggers a feared loss of influence by powerful departments in particular and the micropolitical formation of *departmental silos* (Neill and Jiang, 2017), as we unfold below:

After all, prior to authoritarian integration, each communication department pursued its own communication strategy of satisfying the needs of its target groups. This is no longer possible in case of authoritarian integration, where all departments are demanded to pursue a consistent communication strategy. This appears inefficient and ineffective to many departments because they first must coordinate their efforts with others, now formally equalized departments and subordinate themselves to central planning, only to end up addressing their own target groups less promisingly with streamlined integrated communications. This can lead to individual departments deviating from the formal integration guidelines and focusing more on the needs of their target group, either subversively or in open rejection. The greatest resistance is to be expected from powerful, resource-rich communication departments such as key accounts or media advertising. Not only do these departments pay a higher price for integration than less resource intensive departments. The more, their budget size or relevance to overall sales also gives them a great deal of informal power, which has previously also been displayed in a higher position in the formal hierarchy, which is now jeopardized. The risk of informal *power accumulation* in the departmental silos and resistance against top integration management is thus ever present. Cornelissen (2004, pp. 43–47) uses the example of Barclays Bank to illustrate the risks of disintegrative power accumulation: While public relations efforts aimed to explain and justify the closure of numerous stores in rural areas, the resource-rich marketing communications ignored and glossed over this issue by launching a major campaign promoting a “more human” brand image.

How cross-team relations resist libertarian integration

Libertarian integration pursues market-oriented outside-in integration by means of decentralized team cooperation and KPI-based cybernetic feedback management. While outside-in monitoring and the workflows of decentralized teams are well formalized in approaches representing this ideal type, overarching strategic consistency is usually only mentioned as a formal goal, yet minimally operationalized (e.g. Einwiller et al., 2022; Tafesse and Kitchen, 2017). A goal conflict between outside-in orientation, flexible team cooperation, and strategic consistency thus becomes apparent.

This goal conflict can lead to two opposing forms of informal resistance and disintegration at a cross-team level (Stark, 2009): On the one hand, it can lead to informal *coalition* building across teams aiming at strategic consistency and synergy effects. Yet, in doing so, these coalitions oppose the primacy of flexible outside-in orientation and forfeit flexibility in cooperation with teams outside the coalition. On the other hand, and even more likely, outside-in orientation can spur fierce informal *competition* across teams if data-driven KPI success becomes the only currency that is pursued without regard for the overall corporate strategy or other teams, which in turn undermines strategic consistency and team cooperation.

Micropolitical *power accumulation* against libertarian integration is therefore achieved primarily through informal competition or coalitions at a cross-team level. Again, the risks of

this type of informal resistance and disintegration can be observed best in the Big Tech sector, which ideally represent libertarian integration, yet is equally notorious for its toxic sharp-elbow- and bro-culture (Phan *et al.*, 2022).

How interest-driven decoupling resists solidary integration

Solidary integration aims to realize society-oriented integration by balancing economic and social interests. Representatives of this approach (Diehl *et al.*, 2017; Gronstedt, 2012; Zerfass, 2008) devote a great deal of attention to differentiating between different spheres of interests – profit and legitimacy; people, planet, profit, etc. – by reflecting their representation and engagement in different communication departments. The focus of formalization is consequently on the division of labor and autonomy of these departments, while the overall orientation towards balancing interests is named as a formal goal yet is little operationalized. This leads to the well-known problem that competing interests are carried into the corporation (Brunsson, 2003) and, in our case, into the communication departments responsible for representing and engaging with specific interests. This, again, can lead to micropolitical disintegration in terms of informal *decoupling* (Meyer and Rowan, 1977) of communication departments in their functions: Internal communications, public relations, or marketing, for example, then, only focus on lobbying for the interest they represent, while renouncing the overarching ideal of solidary distribution and balancing interests.

Micropolitical *power accumulation* from departmental decoupling can play out in various ways: The marketing department can, through informal, successfully lobbied profit-orientation effectively undermine any serious balancing effort in the direction of social or ecological interests – which often backfires in notorious “washing” accusations against social and green marketing (Lyon and Montgomery, 2015). Conversely, it can also be the case that successful activism for employees or sustainability interests (Carollo and Guerci, 2018; Holtzhausen, 2012), by the public relations or internal communications department, lead to a privilege of socio-ecological bottom lines over profitability. Accordingly, in the case of the solidary integration, micropolitical resistance is always equally at the expense of the formally prescribed ideal of solidarity and other departments representing competing interests.

How dominant voices resist liberal integration

Liberal integration is based on the ideal of facilitating the articulation of individual political concerns, as is the case in process-oriented and polyphonic approaches to CC (e.g. Christensen and Cornelissen, 2011; Christensen *et al.*, 2008; Gulbrandsen and Just, 2016). Formal specifications are usually limited in these approaches to defining a few common boundary conditions and the warranty of individual rights of articulation.

However, wherever there is little formal guidance, there is plenty of scope for emergent informal structures (Diefenbach and Sillince, 2011), which in the case of process-oriented, polyphonic approaches typically manifests in micropolitical *deconstruction*. Deconstruction can happen, as Letiche (2010, p. 267) points out, because “behind any [corporate] identity, definition, meaning, or strategy, there are innumerable assumptions, definitions, circumstances, and vocalizations. [...] Polyphony is ultimately self-contradictory”. This means that if we take polyphony seriously in the sense of a comprehensive and equal articulation of voices, chances are high that these voices do not integrate into one overarching corporate identity, but rather end up in cacophony. This is why authors on polyphonic organization (Sullivan and McCarthy, 2008) and CC (Schneider and Zerfass, 2018) typically emphasize the distinguished role of the author in polyphony. This “profoundly active” author is then usually equated with leadership and management and made responsible for the coordination of polyphonic voices in terms of an ongoing “questioning, provoking, answering, agreeing, objecting activity” (Sullivan and McCarthy, 2008, p. 539). Yet, particularly in case of little formalization, it becomes evident that the question of who becomes the author of polyphony is by no means limited to the formal leadership or management. Rather, regarding

liberal integration, there is a constant risk that the greatest beneficiaries of polyphonic openness are those voices most adept at articulating their concerns in the most compelling, persuasive, and populist manner. This, then, results in informal *power accumulation* by the most supported and dominant voices, which suppresses other, less assertive voices, and ultimately undermines the ideal of polyphonic integration. Diversity scholars (e.g. [Trittin and Schoeneborn, 2017](#)) are aware of this risk, and, quite paradoxically, need to argue for strong, responsible leadership and hence: authority as a prerequisite of corporate polyphony.

The following section addresses the question of how integration can still be successfully enforced in corporate practice despite these various forms of micropolitical resistance.

The realpolitik of re-enforced integration

Inquiry of realpolitik (e.g. [Emery, 1915](#); [Humphreys, 2014](#)) approaches politics in terms of the preservation of power interests within given pragmatic conditions. As early as 1915, Emery made two necessary distinctions regarding realpolitik: “first the distinction between practical politics and theoretical politics, and secondly the distinction between real politics and ideal politics, or to use a better English phrase, between political realism and political idealism. This second distinction is quite different from the first, since political realism and political idealism are both found in the field of practical politics” ([Emery, 1915](#), pp. 450–451).

[O’Doherty and de Cock \(2024\)](#) identify a third stream of critical politically oriented OMS that has its focus on this very tension between idealism and realism, or as they call it: the interstice of fiction and fact. This realpolitikal perspective is primarily utilized in critical discourse analytical OMS (e.g. [Chiapello and Fairclough, 2002](#)), which is interested in the question of how the corporate power interests underlying ideological facades are implemented against informal resistance.

Three realpolitikal scenarios are central in this literature: First, corporate power can be accomplished through “discursive closure”, summarizing all efforts to “normalize” the formally prescribed view as the only legitimate view, including sanctions ([Deetz, 1992](#)). Second, e.g. [Ban \(2020\)](#), through building on Deetz, argues that, from a longitudinal perspective, discursive closure is often combined with comparatively low-threshold appeasement policy in terms of situated “discursive openings” towards informal critique and resistance. Third, research in the field of management fashions elucidates how those in power manage to switch management ideals and programs – either by discursively stretching the meaning of ambiguous management concepts ([Giroux, 2006](#)); or by proclaiming an urgent need for reform and thereby justifying the implementation of new management ideals and programs ([Brunsson, 2009](#)). In the following, we theoretically adapt ([Jaakkola, 2020](#)) these three scenarios from politically oriented OMS to the formal re-enforcement of integration in CC. Icons 1, 2, and 3 on the right-hand side of [Figure 1](#) visualize the three scenarios outlined below.

The strict father scenario: how discursive closure re-enforces integration

In the strict father scenario, those formally in charge of integration respond to informal resistance through *discursive closure* ([Deetz, 1992](#)) by normalizing the existing ideal of integration and its specific formal program as the only valid and legitimate way to go. This can manifest in different ways in the four ideal types. In case of authoritarian integration, formal re-enforcement of integration will most likely find expression in ever stricter formal rules and negative sanctions – a practice in which formal integration is then often perceived as “branding police”. As in increasingly authoritarian political systems, a spiral of rules and sanctions is conceivable. In case of libertarian integration, in turn, a formal re-enforcement and speeding up of the outside-in-orientation and KPI-based monitoring across all teams is most likely – a practice that is particularly dreaded in Big Tech as “crunch mode”. In case of solidary integration, given its limited formal operationalization of how to balance competing interests,

the most likely form of formal re-enforcement will be positive sanctions, for example, in the form of material or symbolic gratification of particularly exemplary employees and departments – e.g. the notorious corporate sustainability “champions” of the month or year. In case of liberal integration, lastly, formal enforcement of polyphony is most likely through encouraging voice and strengthening individual rights of articulation and participation, however, at the risk of depriving these voices of their much desired authenticity (Christensen and Christensen, 2022).

In all the above-mentioned variants of the strict father scenario, however, it must be noted that formal enforcement and normalization of an integration ideal by means of discursive closure can only temporarily suppress informal resistance. Accordingly, in the temporal unfolding of this scenario, similar to a diet, a *yo-yo effect* is conceivable, in which formally enforced integration is followed by the expansion of informal resistance, which again leads to formal re-enforcement, etc. – integration, hence, needs to be envisioned as the result of a continuous pendulum of integrative and disintegrative movements over time (Aksom, 2024).

The appeasement scenario: how tactical discursive opening re-enforces integration

In the appeasement scenario, those formally in charge of integration attempt to find a solution to this uncontrolled pendulum movement by making concessions to particularly successful micropolitical actors through situated *discursive openness* (Ban, 2020) to their concerns, all the while maintaining the established formal integration ideal and program at the overall strategic level. Again, this plays out differently in the four ideal types of integration: In case of authoritarian integration, this is typically reflected in awarding particularly successful departments the formal status of a *primus inter pares* in the integration mix, as is often the case with marketing of strong global brands (Tafesse and Kitchen, 2017), to counteract informal silo formation. In the case of libertarian integration, a privileged status is rather granted to those who prove to be particularly successful in their outside-in orientation, awarding them with special roles in agile teams, e.g. as SCRUM master, or by promising formal promotion in the still existing rump hierarchy of top management (Diefenbach and Sillince, 2011). In case of solidary integration, again, the formal establishment of management support functions and consultative units for powerful micropolitical actors is a common way to go (Zerfass, 2008), while for liberal integration, the formal upgrading of dominant voices in the corporate polyphony is common – as in case of brand advocates and ambassadors (Endrissat *et al.*, 2017).

However, the appeasement scenario also comes to its limits in case of persistent informal doubts and resistance regarding a specific integration ideal and program. In this case, those formally in charge for integration will need to find ways how to maintain the fundamental idea of integration, while transforming the underlying ideal and program.

The fashion scenario: how discursive stretching and switching re-enforces integration

If an integration ideal and program no longer appear tenable or up to date, a formal transformation seems unavoidable, but must not lead to a loss of face for those formally in charge of integration. This can be accomplished by situated *discursive stretching* of the ambiguous concept of integration (Cornelissen *et al.*, 2006; Giroux, 2006), i.e. a process of semantically expanding an established ideal and program of integration towards more fashionable understandings. Such practices of discursive stretching are common in the adaptation of new management fashions in CC practice and research alike: arguably, there is hardly any CC approach rooted in the ideal of authoritarian integration today that does not comprise a plea for outside-in feedback orientation as well (Bruhn and Zimmermann, 2017). Likewise, society-oriented understandings of integration today typically seek to complement their core ideal of balancing societal interests with the ideal of situated polyphonic articulation (Schneider and Zerfass, 2018).

Besides discursive stretching, the more radical variant of the fashion scenario presents the discursive justification of *switching* to new ideals and programs. In this case, usually inspired

and supported by academic fashion setters, external consultancy, or both (Kieser, 1997), the need for a fundamental reform (Brunsson, 2009) goes along with the proclamation and enforcement of a new integration ideal and program – which, of course, often does not seem so new to those who have been following the development of the idea of integration in the CC for some time already: In the end, it is four ideals, which are recurrently (re)introduced under various names: authoritarian, libertarian, solidary, and liberal integration.

Conclusion and discussion

In this conceptual article, we have theoretically adapted (Jaakkola, 2020) a political perspective from critical OMS literature (O'Doherty and de Cock, 2024) to explain ideals, informal resistance, and practical re-enforcement of integration in CC via the concepts of ideology, micropolitics, and realpolitik, and we have explained their interplay based on four recurrent ideal types of integration – authoritarian, libertarian, solidary, and liberal.

In doing so, this article contributes to three previously unanswered puzzles of integration in CC research and practice, as outlined in the introduction. First, it answers the question of where ideas of integration originate in the first place (e.g. Cornelissen *et al.*, 2006) by developing a typology of four fundamentally different ideals of integration, each anchored in distinct variations of capitalist ideology. This not only supports research and practice in identifying and critically evaluating ideological views that often remain implicit behind the fashionable adoption of certain integration concepts. Moreover, it also helps to better understand why different integration ideals are subject to different cycles of attention as they resonate with different underlying ideologies that influence CC practice and research alike.

Second, our article provides an answer to the question of why even the most divergent integration ideals in CC share the challenge of resistance and disintegration in their implementation (e.g. Ots and Nyilasy, 2015). By adapting the concept of micropolitics, we reconstructed how specific formal integration efforts trigger distinct forms of informal disintegration – silo formation resisting authoritarian integration; team competition resisting libertarian integration; decoupling resisting solidary integration; and deconstruction resisting liberal integration. This not only sensitizes researchers and practitioners to the unavoidable dialectics of formal integration and informal disintegration (Aksom, 2024). The more, it also provides guidance on the identification of which kind of formal integration typically triggers which kind of informal disintegration.

Third, our contribution provides an answer as to why the idea of integration in CC manages to persist so tenaciously over the years, despite the ever-present risk of disintegration (e.g. Einwiller *et al.*, 2022). By adapting realpolitik thinking, we show how integration is enforced to preserve power interests in everyday CC practice against informal resistance – either by discursive closure and re-enforcement of integration (strict father scenario), by situated discursive opening (appeasement scenario), or by discursive stretching and switching of integration ideals and programs (fashion scenario).

In sum, we argue that a comprehensive understanding of integration in CC requires integrated political thinking. As with integrated communication, the *total is more than the sum of its parts*, necessitating an interrelated understanding of the underlying ideologies, micropolitics, and realpolitik of integration in CC. We are aware that such integrated political thinking is challenging for CC research and practice. Obviously, most of the CC research and practice is still prescriptive, hence firmly focused on the formalization of integration ideals and programs, while frequently overlooking the inevitability of micropolitical disintegration (Bruhn, 2008; Tafesse and Kitchen, 2017). Conversely, CC research on informality, is often limited to affirming the importance of corporate culture without considering its ambivalence and “dark sides” of informal resistance (Horak *et al.*, 2020). Lastly, critical inquiry in realpolitik has so far been left to a niche (Christensen and Christensen, 2022; Smith, 2013).

Nevertheless, we would like to encourage fellow scholars and practitioners to further pursue the integrated political perspective presented here to achieve a more comprehensive

understanding of the total beyond the parts of integration in CC. Our conceptual considerations have necessarily been limited to examples from extant literature to illustrate the usefulness of this perspective. Future research, however, could take our considerations as a point of departure for rich empirical inquiry: Specifically, our conceptual reflections invite for longitudinal discourse analytic as well as comparative case study designs that elucidate how specific integration ideals in CC rise and fall in resonance with dominant capitalist ideologies; how these ideals trigger distinct forms of micropolitical disintegration; and how the realpolitik of re-enforcing integration plays out in different realities of everyday corporate practice.

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