You Get What You Ask For? Encountering Complexity and Performative Leadership on Social Media

Harri Jalonen
Turku University of Applied Sciences
Lemminkäisenkatu 30
20520 Turku, Finland
+358 44 907 4964
harri.jalonen@turkuamk.fi

ABSTRACT

Based on complexity thinking, the present study builds a new understanding of performative leadership on social media. The theoretical section sheds light on social media as a meaning-provision and framework-creation forum. Furthermore, an interpretation is constructed of the challenges and opportunities of leadership on social media that is based on complexity thinking and the performative trend in leadership research. The concluding section discusses the added value that complexity thinking and the performative leadership perspective bring to the implementation of leadership on social media.

Keywords
Leadership; social media; complexity thinking

1. INTRODUCTION

Leadership is the art of the possible, in which success is dependent on acknowledging, understanding and utilising several situational factors. Certain characteristics can be attached to good management and leadership, but one does not grow into a good leader solely by reading books, but rather by acquiring experiences and reflecting upon them. Good leadership is a value-creating process and thus always bound to the time, place and the actors, as well as the relationships between the actors. It is about leadership, not leaders [1].

Social media represents a change in socio-technological development, which has left an imprint on the expectations and demands on leadership. It has intensified the sensitivity of leadership acts to initial values – in both the positive and the negative sense. For example, a company leader with a keen sense of the customer and employee mindset is able to use small actions to influence the image that is formed of the company. In contrast, a leader who appears remiss may, through his or her own behaviour, heighten the criticism directed towards the company. While windows of opportunity open up at a fast pace in social media, they also close quickly.

It would be counterproductive to consider the abundance of leadership theories to be a symptom of a particular problem; it should rather be seen as a sign of the inherent ambiguity of leadership that we need to learn to live with. The present article relies on research literature with a focus on complexity theory [2] [3]. This approach is selected because social media has altered the operational environment of organizations in a way that forces us to also partially reinterpret leadership. In addition to offering direct contact with interest groups, social media has made organizations more vulnerable. Corporate management cannot prevent or stop discussions about the company's products, services and methods on social media, but it can impact the tone of the discussions. In this article, leadership is seen as a phenomenon – and not as a status-bound characteristic. Following the ideas of Erving Goffman [4], leadership amounts to front-stage and backstage performances. Leadership is a form of performative interaction, in which meanings focusing on the past, present and future are created, maintained and adapted.

Leadership communication has never been easy, but it has been made even more challenging by social media. The root of the complexity of communication on social media is in the manner in which social media creates all new and obscure interdependencies between things and people. What could previously be expressed within the confines of manager–employee and company–customer relationships increasingly rarely remains between the parties, since individuals are quick to seek and find peer support on social media. Any mistreatment of people and careless handling of matters easily turn into emotionally appealing and therefore self-reinforcing narratives that may attract a significant amount of attention. On the other hand, social media has provided leaders who are talented communicators with new means of encountering people. For instance, leaders who are skilled in combining rational and emotional elements may bring out sides of themselves that serve to increase their credibility. Similarly, a leader who highlights and appreciates the activities of employees can, in the best case scenario, strengthen people's trust in and commitment to an organization.

Based on complexity thinking, the present conceptual-theoretical article builds a new understanding of performative leadership on social media. The article sheds light on social media as a sense-giving and framing forum. Furthermore, an interpretation is constructed of the challenges and opportunities of leadership on social media that is based on the complexity thinking trend in leadership research. The concluding section discusses the added value that complexity thinking perspective bring to the implementation of leadership on social media.

2. SOCIAL MEDIA AS A SENSE-GIVING FORUM AND FRAMING TOOL

During the course of its 10-year history, social media has rapidly grown into a significant part of people's everyday lives. Today, it reaches as many as three billion people [5]. Its popularity can be explained in many ways, but, at the very least, it is linked to the basic human need of interacting with other human beings. Social media is not merely a communication channel, but a rationally and affectively charged forum of sense-giving and framing. Social media has changed the context of leadership, especially by

increasing transparency within organizations, as well as between the organizations and their operational environment.

Social media offers people an environment for both rationally and affectively charged activities. On social media, anyone can share the joys and woes of life or argue a point – or beside the point. One of the following motivations usually lies behind social media use: information seeking, entertainment, social interaction, self-expression or impression management [6] [7] [8].

For many, social media is an essential source of information. Among other reasons, this is understandable in light of the fact that media houses utilise social media in directing user traffic towards their own communication channels. Research organizations and individual researchers have also taken to social media, as it has offered them a channel for sharing their activities without gatekeepers. The end result is not always a rational discussion and a Habermasian pursuit of the best argumentation. Misunderstandings cannot always be avoided on social media, as is the case in life in general. Reaching a rational consensus may be difficult, since the joint effect of people's cognitive distortions (e.g. Kahneman [9] and algorithms directing the use of social media services [10] result in social media reinforcing a selective exposure to information and feeding the polarisation of opinions [11]. The consequence then may not be the kind of public spheres conceived by Habermas [12], but rather affective publics as described by Papacharissi [13] – virtually networked forums where argumentation relies on the emotions and images evoked by matters. At its worst, this can lead to large-scale undermining of the legitimacy of experts [14].

For businesses, social media offers an environment for, for instance, brand building, sales enablement and the identification of innovation targets. Agile businesses persevere in building relations on social media and creating an image of themselves as open and easily approachable actors in the eyes of their interest groups. This endeavour is not always successful, for social media has multiplied the contacts between businesses and interest groups, which has made the coordination of such communication uncontrollable and the consequences unpredictable. In addition, the disparate skills and expectations of the people within the working communities, as regards the use of the technology, are a constant source of conflict. Not all employees have what it takes to become the kind of brand ambassadors that companies hope for, since anyone involved in social media discussions is required to be a good judge of human nature and to possess self-direction and sound discretion. The organizations that do best on social media are ones that can create meaningful content and evoke trust. It is a matter of guiding employees by combining inspirational leadership and smart rules [15].

Irrespective of the field, companies also have to face the flipside of this development. Communicating on social media is easy, but quick wins are seldom on offer. Collecting likes for a brand is a low-threshold activity, but the generation of viral phenomena, memes and buzz that actually benefit the company calls for a strategic vision and an in-depth analysis of the digital culture [16] [17].

On social media, a single post by the sales, marketing or customer service department can, to an even significant extent, either increase or destroy the esteem of the organization in the eyes of its customers and interest groups. Intentionally distorted facts and attacks against a brand are an everyday occurrence for many organizations. Matters that elicit emotions [18], with negative emotions in particular [19], as well as downright lies [20] catch on and spread through social media like a virus. At the same time, it should be born in mind that, although lies and truth-altering interaction as phenomena did not come about as a consequence of social media –they have always been an integral element of, for example, political leadership – their prevalence on social media is much wider in scale.

On social media, failures should not be swept under the carpet, but they necessitate the ability and willingness to apologise [21]. In the social media era, bad service received by a customer or mistreatment of employees pose a very real risk to the reputation of a company [22]. A 'no comment' policy does not work well on social media because someone will always comment anyway. The need for a swift response is also emphasised, since the window of opportunity for ending a negative cycle in the social media era does not stay open for long. In many cases, a company dragging their heels leads to negative online word-of-mouth, and the targeted company is put through the wringer on social networking websites [23]. Furthermore, increasing numbers of consumers also expect companies and their leaders to take a stand on issues featured in social discussions [24] [25]. Corporate management is urged to walk a tightrope between the interests of shareholders and other stakeholders [26]. This is necessary, as the leadership performances executed on social media have also been noted to impact the companies' esteem in the stock market [27].

However, the affectivity of consumers should not supplant the rationality of business operations. Instead, social media challenges organizations to find a balance between rational thinking and affective activity. The finding of such a balance is also influenced by the extent to which the leadership implemented on social media focuses on the organization internally or on the external interest group and customer interface. According to Huy and Spilov [28], for example, it is easier for organizations with a positive emotional atmosphere to also build their influence on social media (outside the organization). In other words, the emotional know-how exhibited on social media is often a reflection of a similar emotional atmosphere within the organization. An understanding of emotional leadership, however, remains surprisingly scarce because of the underlying notion that good leadership is somehow uniform [29].

The relationship of rationality and affectivity with leadership is complex as such but becomes even more so on social media. Where the previous strategy was to either neutralise or silence emotions, leading people in both the online and offline environment of today is strongly rooted in an impact through emotions. On social media, the impacts of interactions and interdependencies are stronger than in traditional communications. The accessibility of posting online, the connectedness of people, the spatial–temporal distance and the polarisation of opinions create conditions in which even the smallest matters can unfold into surprising chains of events, the consequences of which are not necessarily limited to the digital realm. For example, a rash comment by corporate management published on social media can result in consumer boycotts. This is not necessarily a question of the so-called information content, but of the sense-giving related to it and of framing what is said [9] [30]. The frameworks are both cognitive structures facilitating the understanding of reality and a means to create reality [31]. Through the process of framing, people relate what they consider to be right or wrong, or who they consider to be a hero or a victim. Framing selects the sides of the matters that serve a specific purpose. Some condemn and others defend, but no-one is able to say for certain what end result the framing will have. Framing in social media discussions either builds bridges between different views or results in one side of the debate withdrawing into its own bubble.

3. COMPLEXITY THEORY-BASED APPROACH TO LEADERSHIP ON SOCIAL MEDIA

Leadership has often been described as operating amidst paradoxes [32]. Paradoxicality refers to situations in which the developments are steered by various forces pulling towards opposite directions. Among other factors, a leader must balance between activities that facilitate the creativity necessary for innovations and those that promote the efficiency necessary from the point of view of financial results. A constant juggling of paradoxes resonates well with a complexity theory–based approach to leadership. This is because the starting point in complexity thinking is that all human activity is and can be constructed via several alternative developments. The consequences of all acts of leadership are also always bound to several situational, inter-dependent factors and varied interpretations.

In the context of social media, the complexity-theoretical interpretation of leadership strongly reflects an interaction that is mediated through interpersonal communication. Interaction should therefore be observed as a dynamic, constantly shifting process in which the relationship between those participating in the communicative situation is not only based on relating information but also reflects the interpersonal relationship between these individuals. A complexity-theoretical interpretation of leadership always entails several competing views that reflect, at least to some degree, the social, political and cultural features of their time.

There are several examples of social media creating new opportunities for leadership performances. Its most significant benefits include the opportunity for swift responses and the ability to reach a large audience.

The interpretation presented in the following five sections is based on applying the central concepts utilised in complexity theory, such as connectivity, interdependency, self-organization, emergence and feedback processes (cf. Mitleton-Kelly 2003, Richardson 2008).

In this article, complexity is seen as a basic property of any organisation. Complexity is neither 'bad' nor 'good' – it is just that it helps us to understand the nature of the world – and the systems – we live in [2]. The strength of complexity thinking is that it may explain why the whole is more (or less) than the sum of the parts and how all its components come together to produce overarching patterns as the system evolves and adapts [33]. Complexity thinking is used here to describe what it means when one says "that management is as much an art as it is a science" [3].

3.1 Social Media Is Not an Island

Connectivity describes the construction of social systems from the connections between actors [2]. It impacts leadership on social media in two distinct, but interrelated ways. Firstly, connectivity is a feature of the operational environment. It is materialised in complex chains of effects formed by interactive phenomena and events. Interdependencies between phenomena and events have always existed, but the easiness of publishing and sharing content on social media has made their management more difficult. Because of connectivity, even seemingly minor events can be repeated in a surprising fashion.

In the second, positive interpretation of connectivity, social media is seen to have increased the significance of the internal and external relations of organizations. How big a resource the connectivity born of these relations is depends on the ability of the organization to recognise the actors that are essential for the communication of information and ideas. It is not merely a matter of the characteristics of the events and phenomena influencing the operational environment, for a key role in the development that is generated is played by the interpretations made of the said characteristics. While one company sees a disappointed customer on social media as a distraction, another may perceive the customer as a valuable expert by experience and product development partner.

In the complexity-theoretical interpretation, the value of social media is closely connected to its integration with other leadership performances. Perceiving social media as a communication channel that is detached from leadership runs the risk of an organization failing to develop the kind of sensitivity that enables it to recognise brewing risks and budding opportunities at an early stage.

The implementation of leadership on social media depends on the context. What is considered to be fresh in the creative industries, for example, does not necessarily work when it comes to public authorities. Conflicts between leadership performances and the expectations of the environment give rise to social media sensations, which are increasingly also being covered by conventional media. The consequence is thus not only an escalation of an uproar surrounding an individual organization but a larger development that plays a role in what kind of behaviour is considered to be acceptable or unacceptable. A good example is the #metoo campaign launched in October 2017 that quickly grew into a global phenomenon and has subsequently had an impact on the extent to which people condemn sexual harassment at the workplace. What is a problem for one person is often an opportunity for another. That is why it does not come as a surprise that the #metoo campaign has also opened up a stage for leadership performances emphasising gender equality. It is not a question of the status-bound role of the communicator, but of constructing leadership based on a meaningful message and a good narrative in interaction with the public.

Social media communications that utilise connectivity and interdependencies entail an appropriate ratio of elements that both comply with and reshape the expectations of the audience. An excess compliance easily gives the impression of ingratiating leadership, whereas an attempt to manipulate expectations that comes off too strong speaks of leadership with a tendency to control. Both erode the credibility of leadership and the effectiveness of communication.

3.2 Self-organization cannot be forced, but it can be encouraged

In linear terms, leadership and the related interaction are seen as a process in which information flows from sender to receiver. The interaction is controlled because it occurs in a cultural context that is familiar to the participants. What is said during the interaction is understood approximately as it is meant. In addition to the controllability of interaction, the linear conception of leadership entails the notion that a leader can control what goes on within the organization. In real life, however, control over interactive situations and what people do remains, depending on the point of view, either an unfulfilled wish or fear.

Spontaneous self-organization with no external control is constantly occurring in organizations. Information flows across the

internal and external boundaries of the organization, which influences the kind of opportunities that open up for the organization. Self-organization is quite commonly considered to be a source of creativity and innovation, since it involves the reshaping of the non-equilibrium caused by new information into a new equilibrium. Social media has made this type of networking between people easier. For instance, Twitter hashtags categorise discussions by theme, which makes it easy to follow them, while evaluations of the products and services of companies reveal what interests the consumers.

Leadership performances cannot be used for control, but they can be applied to influence the kinds of self-organization processes that there is room for within an organization and how an organization encourages the utilisation of social media for brainstorming and networking. Beneficial self-organization can be supported by, for instance, leadership that simultaneously encourages employees to pursue new ideas and accepts the possibility of failure inherent in the pursuit of something new. Leadership that emphasises the avoidance of mistakes prevents creative self-organization. Instead, self-organization can be promoted by showing interest in interaction as opposed to a unilateral provision of information and instructions.

3.3 Things Just Happen

Interaction on social media is inherently non-linear. Due to the connectivity of phenomena and events, almost any event has the potential to set off a chain reaction whose end result is more than the sum of its parts. Expressed in the language of complexity, what is at play here is an emergent whole that cannot be anticipated based on what is known about the details of the event [3]. The events do not adhere to clear cause-and-effect relationships, but their inherent sensitivity to initial values facilitates a development where what was originally a small issue can turn into something significantly larger than its size. The same also applies in the opposite direction, which can be seen when, for example, an organization's carefully planned and expensive social media campaign fails to win a large audience.

The spreading of social media phenomena knows no national boundaries or time zones. Given the right circumstances, a bad choice of words in a customer service situation is formed into a meme that spreads through the network like wildfire. The birth of a meme requires that there are dimensions to the event that attract people's attention. Such a dimension need not be a fact concerning the actual event, as it is actually more typical that a meme manages to speak to the public on the level of images and emotions. It appears that, in particular, events that evoke negative emotions are susceptible to a non-linear development [34] [35].

From the perspective of leadership, the arbitrariness brought along by social media does not rely solely on an overall development generated by individual events. This is because the higher-order structure formed in the so-called random emergence of events sheds an influence 'back' on individual events. Indeed, following Blitz [36], one can describe emergence as a form of downward causation. In other words, a single tweet by a leader can be both a discussion-generating act of communication and a part of a culture of communication that impacts the kinds of communication acts that others will undertake.

3.4 Feedback as a self-reinforcing mechanism

Giving feedback is considered to be one of the most important tasks of a leader. With positive feedback, a leader can acknowledge an employee's success. This is advisable because positive feedback has been associated with, for instance, the reinforcement of self-esteem and motivation. Giving and receiving negative feedback is rarely pleasant, but it is important because without feedback it is difficult to correct the mistakes that led to failure.

In complexity thinking, the meaning of positive and negative feedback is slightly different. In the language of complexity, feedback refers to an activity by which an organization adjusts the balance between creative and efficiency-generating processes. Positive feedback promotes change, whereas the purpose of negative feedback is to ensure that a change remains under relative control [2]. Feedback can, indeed, be considered as a mechanism that guides self-organization, as it is tasked with steering both towards the edge of chaos and away from it.

When it comes to feedback processes, social media is a double-edged sword. The effortlessness of posting and sharing sees to it that change-promoting positive feedback processes are constantly ongoing on social media. Anyone engaged in social media is easily subjected to new ideas and foreign thoughts. At its best, this can entail thought-provoking stimuli that lay the foundation for seeing things "in a new light". Sometimes, however, there are simply too many stimuli, in which case what follows is not new creative thinking but an entropy that hinders the understanding of matters, which organizations are ill-equipped to eliminate. Expressed in the language of complexity, an organization does not, in such a case, have enough balancing, negative feedback. The danger then is that an organization succeeds in creating a "buzz", but not the necessary efficiency needed in implementing the ideas.

There can also be too much negative feedback. One of its manifestations is the creativity-hindering groupthink in which a group of likeminded individuals resort to familiar interpretations and neglects to look for alternative ones [37]. The fear of the groupthink is not unfounded. It may actually be that the impact of social media is even stronger than that of groupthink, for several studies have found that social media causes a so-called filter bubble effect [10] [38]. The birth of a filter bubble requires the existence of algorithms that filter the social media content shown to users, but this is not enough by itself. At its core, the filter bubble effect is an example of typical human behaviour, with a negative attitude towards thoughts that do not fit one's own world view being one of its manifestations [39].

Since neither fruitless buzz nor a harmful filter bubble is inherently about technology, but rather about human behaviour, leaders are tasked with a great responsibility. There is no universal guideline for the management of feedback processes. What is essential is to realise that feedback processes easily create feedback loops in which every single piece of positive or negative feedback is simultaneously both a result of what has transpired previously and an input towards what will occur later. Put in somewhat provocative words, you get what you ask for.

3.5 Attractors in Creating a Positive Cycle

The development brought about by feedback loops depends on the degree of connectivity [2]. Although this development cannot be

controlled, it can be influenced. This requires the recognition of the nodes opening up and shedding an influence towards the feedback loops. In terms of the language of complexity, this is a matter of utilising dissipative structures. Dissipative structures refer to the breakdown in the prevailing symmetry, simultaneously opening up alternative developments. The development is unpredictable, but not without limits, as connectivity facilitates the chaotic nature of human behaviour and causes predictions to come true only in certain sets of circumstances.

Social media has multiplied both the number and extent of internal and external connections in organizations. Any measures aimed at managing and controlling them are doomed to failure. Instead, organizations can attempt to influence the development by creating attractors that limit the connections [40]. Attractors can be perceived as a type of multi-polar magnets that generate fields around themselves, which in turn steer the interpretations of the information presented. Attractors are not static, but their position is determined dynamically based on, for instance, planned and unplanned leadership performances. In practice, attractors are visible in the topics of discussion featured by leaders in the form of certain types of responses to various internal and external stimuli. For example, emphasising organisational values represents a typical situation in which leadership talk is utilised to establish an attractor. The hope is then that the attractor attached to the leadership is communicated onwards to individual encounters with customers and employees.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Social media has created a platform for varied hybrid media events [41], the characteristics of which include an avalanche-like progression and numerous feedback connections that make it difficult to predict the course of the events. For example, events such as the #metoo campaign have launched processes that have shaped our perceptions of what is right and what is not. The social discussion induced by the events has led to voluntary and involuntary dismissals of dozens of leaders around the globe. It is not merely a question of a problem faced by the leaders who have committed misconduct, but a challenge faced by all leadership – how should one lead or participate in social media discussions about highly emotionally charged themes without causing harm to the organization one represents? How should leaders defend themselves against an attack on social media?

Social media constitutes technology that moulds leadership and also has its sociological dimension. The Millennials and representatives of Generation Z in particular are more eager than the older generations to try and adopt the latest technologies. Those who have grown up with mobile devices from a very young age expect people to be available despite temporal and spatial distances in the working life as well. It is not merely a question of technical availability but of a connection that either is or is not formed between the generations. The trend of increasing discourse relating to the social responsibility of companies [42] and the opportunity offered by social media to express criticism towards companies have shaped our perceptions of and raised our expectations on leadership.

In addition to the sharing of information, interaction is always based on the building of relationships. The leadership communication occurring on social media, however, challenges the traditional means of communication in several ways. This is not only a matter of the emergence of leadership in a new communications channel; social media is altering the established practices, and the expectations placed on them, in regard to both the means of communication and the manifestations of leadership. Viewed in the light of complexity theory, social media has become a rationally and affectively charged sense-giving forum that is characterised by a stronger tendency towards performativity than previously.

While complexity requires a profound understanding of large entities and of connectivity in particular, it also calls for an ability to predict various alternative strategies and to respond quickly to the arising communicative needs. For this reason, the performative leadership occurring on social media is not only bound to status or the individual in general, but it rather shifts according to the interest of the audience. It is also not only a matter of unilateral influencing, for interactive situations also change the leaders themselves. In fact, performative leadership can be implemented by anyone who is comfortable with the functionality entailed in it. What is key here is to realise that you cannot control discussions on social media, even though you can influence them by your own behaviour. Instead of an act of influencing that complies with linear cause-and-effect relationships, this entails a non-linear development, in which small matters often have an impact that is larger than their size – in both the good and the bad.

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