

**The dynamic nature of social accounts: An examination of how interpretive processes  
impact on account effectiveness**

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**Abstract**

Social accounts are a powerful tool in influencing the behavior of organizational members during major change. Examination of their effectiveness has largely focused on the design of accounts to influence behavioral and affective responses. However, when used in real life practice, more individualized, interpretive and agentic responses to social accounts are found to influence effectiveness. Using an example of large-scale organizational change, moving from one hospital facility to another, we explore the dynamic and contextual interpretation of social accounts over time. Our findings expand social account theory by examining how potentially successful change communications are derailed by the relevance of the account in relation to an individual's past, by the individuals' ability to express agency and by temporality; how over time, lived experience can alter the perceived truthfulness of an account and alter its potency.

**Keywords:** Organizational change, social account, time, communication, interpretation

## **The dynamic nature of social accounts: An examination of how interpretive processes impact on account effectiveness**

### **1. Introduction**

Organizational theory tells us that effective change can be achieved by altering the mind set of organizational members so that their behaviors align with organizational goals and routines (Rouleau, 2005). Social accounts<sup>1</sup> are a particularly effective way of achieving this change (Cobb & Wooten, 1998; Shaw, Wild, & Colquitt, 2003; Tucker, Yeow, & Viki, 2013), in seeking to alter and contradict any initial response derived from rumor or speculation, and transform behavior to the advantage of the organization. Providers of social accounts consciously use this communication tool to explain, to control (Cobb, Stephens, & Watson, 2001), or to change and mitigate behaviors which might undermine change efforts (Rousseau & Tijoriwala, 1999). The social account specifically explains the actions of decision-makers, with the strategic aim of influencing the employment experience of organizational members (Bies, 1987; Cobb & Wooten, 1998; Folger & Cropanzano, 2001; Shaw et al., 2003). In giving a social account, the employer intentionally directs employee understanding towards a politically driven direction (Cobb et al., 2001). The aim is to create alignment between account giver and receiver (Cobb & Wooten, 1998:75), with the giver influencing the receiver's affective reactions and behavior (Bies, 1987; De Cremer, van Dijk, & Pilluda, 2010; Folger & Cropanzano, 2001).

Research has found that what information the account needs to contain (Bies, 1987; Cobb & Wooten, 1998; Frey & Cobb, 2010), and what the ideal recipient characteristics would be (Van Dijke & De Cremer, 2011) are important for accounts to successfully achieve

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<sup>1</sup> In the context of this study 'social accounts' differ from 'social accounting', which relates to the reporting and auditing of an organization's economic actions under the guise of corporate social responsibility, in that they represent explanations for organisational decisions which impact organisational members and their employment experience. The social account literature referred to in this paper focuses on the relationship between account givers and receivers within the organisational context.

their intended strategic outcome and change employee view-points. Theory is much less developed when we consider *how* social accounts get interpreted, specifically; the *recipient's active role* in this process and the influence of *time and context*. An issue we aim to address.

In social accounts literature it is often assumed that only top-down communications have the power to shape change, often conveniently separating the content of a social account from more complex human aspects of change. Social accounts are unlike other forms of communication because they are specifically given by the employer (often a manager) to the employee *for the purpose of achieving a specific strategic outcome* (i.e. reframing a change, putting a positive spin on the consequences of an action, or so attempting to legitimize an action by appealing to a shared goal valued by everyone). Hence, achievement of the desired strategic outcome (in relation to this initial intent) is integral to this form of communication.

We know from theories which take a more processual view of communication that members actively interpret information from a variety of sources, and in a variety of ways (Balogun & Johnson, 2004; Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010; Rouleau, 2005), reinterpreting available information by drawing on the messy intertwining 'of time, agency, structure, context and emergence and development' (Pettigrew, 1997:337). The complexity of this process, within social account theory has largely been ignored.

In our attempt to remedy this theoretical gap we draw on theories of organizational storytelling (Boje, 1991; Gabriel, 2000), sensemaking (Abolafia, 2010; Balogun & Johnson, 2004; Weick, 1995) and narratives (Brown & Rhodes, 2005; Dailey & Browning, 2014); these theories provide insights into how members interpret information and pay attention to how the meanings can evolve, over time and across contexts. Unlike social accounts literature, these theories do not focus on the manufactured nature of the communication; whether processes of interpretation impact on the achievement of a desired strategic intent

(for example getting staff to change their working practices). So here we are studying social accounts as specific examples of explanations, constructed with the purpose of manipulating others, with strategic intent and for political gain. By taking into account more processual perspectives, and considering how social accounts evolve and interact with the context within which they are presented, we aim to build a more comprehensive theory of how to design the 'perfect account,' in terms of getting that strategic outcome.

Social accounts literature is criticized for its neglect of contextual factors (Frey & Cobb, 2010; Tucker et al., 2013), especially when discussing the behavior of organizational members in context sensitive situations. Traditionally, social accounts have been often studied in laboratory-based experiments, with little consideration of the influence of the organizational landscape. In this paper we address this issue by studying account giving and receiving in a real-life context, over real-time. Taking a longitudinal processual approach we examine why the same account can be both successful and ineffective; examining how the reality of organizational life can impact on strategically intended outcomes. We explore: 1) How are social accounts interpreted? 2) How do they evolve? and 3) How do these processes impact on strategic effectiveness?

## **2. Interpretation of Social Accounts**

Empirical research has focused on refining the design and delivery of accounts to maximize their likelihood of manipulating strategic outcomes (Cobb & Wooten, 1998; De Cremer et al., 2010; Frey & Cobb, 2010), for example by quelling anger (Bies 1987, Shapiro 1991), or as an opportunity for impression management (Braaten, Cody, & DeTienne, 1993). The focus has been firmly on content (Bies, 1987; Cobb & Wooten, 1998; Sitkin & Bies, 1993), attributes (of the account giver in terms of status or expertise) (Frey & Cobb, 2010), style (e.g. specificity (Frey & Cobb, 2010), or apology versus denial (De Cremer et al., 2010;

Van Dijke & De Cremer, 2011)). It is acknowledged that individual differences exist, but research has not employed methodological approaches which take into account the real-world context of account giving and receiving; complex situations with numerous, often conflicting, explanations (Cobb & Wooten, 1998). We only found two social account studies which actively sought to consider the recipient's interpretation. Tucker et al (2013) measure the impact of the perceived content of accounts - rather than their intended design - on trust in management, whilst Van Dijke and De Cremer (2011) found that the recipient's stress responses to uncertainty had a moderating effect on effectiveness.

We propose that the use and effectiveness of social accounts in the real world is somewhat different to the dominant lab-based studies reviewed. Within the political context of organizations, various decisions and actions need accounting for. Take for example, a senior manager giving an explanation (account) for a decision to close down a department. The recipient would know the account giver and the decision to close the department would be complex – likely discussed and made in consultation with other members. The explanation given will likely influence behavior and attitudes for a prolonged period, as the implications of the decision for the recipient unfold. In each example we studied, the purpose of providing an explanation was to intentionally influence the reaction and associated behavior of organizational members. In some cases the strategic intent was to mitigate negative reactions, in others it was to generate support, but in all cases it was purposeful and deliberate, and given with the achievement of a specific strategic outcome in mind.

Research on social accounts has largely adopted a paradigm focused on designing explanations which are delivered by a single account giver (often a figure of authority) to a passive recipient (e.g. Bies, 1987). Knowing that there will be variation in recipients is little practical use when giving accounts to a large collective, diverse group. Although, originally focused on dyadic explanations, recent research has considered the accounts of individuals, as

representatives, who explain the actions of the organization to others (for example, the announcement of a merger (e.g. Tucker et al., 2013), or downsizing (e.g. Brockner, Dewitt, Grover, & Reed, 1990). These studies still do not elaborate on how recipients came to these interpretations. Rousseau and Tijoriwala (1999) delve more by demonstrating that account recipients do actively process information and decide whether an account is accepted. Using motivated reasoning the authors explain that recipients form explanations, which do not always conform to those desired by management, with social accounts influenced by co-workers and relationships with the organization (Rousseau & Tijoriwala, 1999).

Drawing on communication literature that focuses on interpretative processes (rather than strategic effectiveness), we see the importance of agency in determining responses to management actions (Mantere, 2008) and how individuals (usually middle managers) subjectively shape and change messages (Balogun & Johnson, 2004; Rouleau, 2005). This body of work portrays account recipients as agents, who are capable of reflecting on, transforming and influencing cues given by senior managers and that this process may impact on an accounts' effectiveness. Within this work employees are not merely passive recipients of instructions and influences of those who seek to guide or manipulate them, but are active in making their own deliberations (Mantere, 2008).

Nearly twenty years ago, Pettigrew (1997:337) argued that *"in their theorizing and empiricism most social scientists do not appear to have given much time to time. For many, social sciences are still an exercise in comparative statics"*. This appears the case in social accounts literature. Cobb et al (2001) theorize that issues of power may determine if an account will have a lasting impact, and their hermeneutic analysis of an anti-union video tape shows how managers used social accounts to attempt to produce a sustained shift in social reality, but they do not discuss how the account is interpreted by employees over time. To explore this issue we draw on literature that takes a more narrative, interpretative and

processual view of communication (Dailey & Browning, 2014; Jarzabkowski, Sillince, & Shaw, 2010). Like social accounts, within this wider literature, there is concern with the functions of organizational communication (i.e. control) (Dailey & Browning, 2014). However, social accounts are uniquely concerned with the conscious intentional, giving of communications, in order to achieve a set strategic outcome, so unlike other approaches the effectiveness of social accounts is of paramount interest. This concern with effectiveness has led to a more singular focus on the content of an account. So we sought to theoretically add more processual and more agentic views of account giving and receiving (see Cornelissen & Durand, 2012); how social accounts evolve in real time, and importantly and differentially, how these evolutionary processes impact on their strategic effectiveness.

### **3. Study context and approach**

To address our aims, we study the case of a National Health Service Hospital Trust closing two existing hospitals and moving to a new purpose-built facility. Our site moved from old-style multi-bed wards to an all-single bedroom model. This presented challenges for work practices, such as decentralization of nursing staff and reduced visibility of patients. Parallel reconfiguration of local services resulted in considerable political, community and media attention, including protest marches and a request for a Government judicial review. The Trust was no stranger to political and media attention. In the previous 12 years it had experienced a merger with another Trust and a highly publicized infection scandal, resulting in the removal of the majority of board members. There was concern about the cost of the long-term private finance contract for the construction and operation of the new hospital.

The Trust decided to manage the change internally. A project management team was created and change management training for senior management established. About 18 months prior to the change a decision was made that each of the hospital's four clinical



divisions would create a project manager role to facilitate transition planning. Project managers were seconded into the role, forming the main link between the project team managing the construction, and clinical groups. It became apparent in the early stages of data collection that this group of project managers would be crucial to stakeholder engagement and the overall change management strategy (it was also the focus of a number of the social accounts). Each division was led by a team of three divisional managers (representing medical, nursing and management) who worked with the project managers. The move to the new hospital took place over two phases in 2011.

### *3.1.Data collection*

We spent 163 hours on site at the hospital. We conducted 82 formal interviews, collected 116 documents which complemented our analysis, made daily field notes based on informal conversations with staff and the community, and observations. During periods where the research team was not on-site we regularly scanned the media (local and national) and discussion boards for mention of the new hospital and received updates from working groups and contacts at the hospital. These supplemented our understanding of the context.

Initially, formally interviewed participants were selected with the help of a lead contact; these were key members of the executive team and individuals in roles specific to the new build. The research team consisted of three members. Interviews were conducted by two members of the research team. Participants were interviewed one-to-one, face to face at a time and place of their choosing and audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. Interviewees were asked about their role, specifically in relation to the project. They were asked about their relationships with key figures managing the change and we explored with them the nature of communication between these groups and their strategic positioning. They were asked about key decisions and messages which were communicated either by them or to them, and for

their evaluations and reflections on these. We asked respondents if they felt informed or experienced challenges in understanding the decisions or actions of others. Finally, the interviews were concluded with reflective questions about challenges faced, learnings from and impact of the change. The prevalence and focus of these questions varied across different phases of the data collection (see table 1). Most respondents were interviewed at multiple stages but additional respondents were added at each stage if analysis indicated they would be theoretically relevant. Executives were interviewed at least two times, as were those closely related to the project management, front line employees were usually interviewed once, due to their availability. However, interviewees were asked to reflect on earlier stages of the project and we were guided by social accounts previously identified by others within their division.

We began the analysis process immediately, as the interviews were completed and moved iteratively between analysis and data collection (Corbin & Strauss, 2008), with additional participants selected until we felt that saturation was reached for each account studied (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). For pragmatic purposes, the data collection is organized into five phases (see table 1), when members of the research team were onsite.

*TABLE 1 HERE*

*3.2. Data analysis*

To understand how social accounts orientated around significant events an historical context was derived from documentary evidence, observations and early interview analysis. We then drew on field notes and interview data. Social accounts literature traditionally studies the specific wording and construction of social accounts and then quantitatively measures the impact (e.g. Frey & Cobb, 2010; Skarlicki, Folger, & Gee, 2004). Similar to the findings of Rousseau and Tijoriwala (1999), we found that not all accounts reportedly given were received, and those received were not always interpreted as intended. Therefore, we have

taken an alternative approach, tracing the process of interpretation by analyzing the journey of a social account from inception, to selected recollections, reactions and outcomes. The examples of social account messages presented are constructed from the perspectives of multiple reports of the account, from both givers and receivers.

We began our search by questioning key stakeholders in the change process who were likely account givers. We then sought confirmation of these accounts from various members who were intended recipients. Although, by definition, social accounts are not always top-down communications – from senior managers to subordinates – the strategic nature and political use of social accounts means they are commonly take this direction. For clarification we outlined who the account givers and receivers were (summary in table 2). Our initial analysis (consolidated at the end of phase 2) elucidated nine possible accounts. An account was selected when: (i) there was an explanation for an action or decision which had the potential to cause harm to individuals or to the organisation (e.g. distress, additional workload, anxiety) (Bies, 1987); (ii) a purposeful attempt was made by the account giver to construct an explanation for a decision or action (Cobb & Wooten, 1998), and (iii) within this process account givers identified a desired outcome i.e. it must seek to manipulate receivers and shape strategic outcomes (Cobb et al., 2001). Upon analysis three of these accounts were eliminated because we were unable to gain a coherent picture of the intentions of the account or because we were unable to gain sufficient access to the intended recipients. One additional account emerged during the third phase of the data collection, about maternity staff rotation which arose from a decision made shortly after the move to the new hospital. This additional account met the criteria above and is included, making a final total of seven social accounts studied.

The seven accounts represent a wide variety of decisions and actions taken by organizational members. Not all were planned, but all were deliberate in their attempt to

communicate an explanation for decision-making and to influence reactions of recipients. Some accounts were organization-wide and often stemmed from senior management or the project management team and affected all members in some way. Other accounts were aimed at a sub-set of members, usually those who were most affected by a specific decision. A majority of the social accounts were from senior managers, however, there are examples of middle managers using social accounts in a downward direction (to subordinates) and horizontally (to other middle managers). Unfortunately, for reasons of space, this paper is not able to describe in detail each of the accounts we analyzed, however they are summarized in table 2. We have selected two accounts to present our findings. The decision to highlight these accounts was based on the illustrative richness and power of emergent responses.

*TABLE 2 HERE*

To identify the interpretive process of account receivers we analyzed each of our seven accounts by coding for themes and comparing them for similarities and differences. At the first coding stage we were guided by our research questions how are social accounts interpreted, do they evolve, and how do these processes impact on their strategic effectiveness? We used an open coding approach in which we compared similarities and differences to create conceptually similar groupings. Some initial codes which emerged included: 'reality changes but the explanation remains the same', 'deciding not to act', and 'dismissed as unimportant' We used these to generate distinct higher-order categories addressing recipient processing. Examples of these categories include: 'constructing alternative accounts', 'relevance and saliency' and 'sense of urgency'. The wider data set was used to support the analysis allowing for constant comparison between the data and the findings (Corbin & Strauss, 2008), this included rereading the transcripts with the second order categories as a guide to ensure that our interpretation made sense for all accounts. To

develop final themes we crosschecked whether similar features appeared in the data across accounts, and constructed aggregate dimensions. At each stage, members of the research team met to discuss inconsistencies, interpretations of the findings, and compare. Any inconsistencies were addressed by referring back to original notes and transcripts.

#### 4. Findings

We often observed that the originally intended content and subsequent strategic outcome of the social account had become defused, blurred, or fundamentally altered. During periods of high upheaval, organizational members appeared to ‘edit’ and modify information (Rousseau & Tijoriwala, 1999), and then act accordingly. These observations support our premise that account receiver’s interpretation is a key element determining the impact of a social account. Here we explore two accounts as they unfolded over the research period.

##### *4.1. Work practice changes account*

This social account was given by the new hospital development team and senior managers (those who had decided the design and philosophy of the new hospital) to all staff. The organization communicated that “*clinical staff would need to change their work practices*” (e.g. nurse to patient ratios, and some clinical procedures). The social account explained that this would make them “*more efficient, reduce infections and increase one-to-one interaction with patients*” (senior manager, Project team, phase 1). Similar versions of this account were given by other senior managers and in company newsletters and documents around our entry time to the organization.

Implementation of the changes was carried out at a divisional level, with each division consisting of a number of sub-specialties or departments. In interviews with middle managers (mostly at the divisional level) ward managers (sub-specialties within the divisions), and

front line clinical staff, we asked staff to describe and explain the messages which had been given. If and when they mentioned a communication which resembled the above account we prompted them to further explore their interpretation. If they did not mention the account the researcher prompted by asking “*What was communicated to you about how work practices would change?*” This line of enquiry drew our attention due to significant inconsistencies in the amount of prompting needed between different individuals. Despite, all staff being given the same account, via the same mechanisms, with the same underlying content some interviewees immediately identified it as one of the key messages which influenced their reaction to the change, whilst others were barely able to recall receiving it – often only after prompting did they recall hearing “*something like that*” (frontline nurse, phase 3a). This demonstrated a significant variation in the interpretation of the same social account. Further analysis revealed a temporal difference; some participants in later stages of the research talked about this account unprompted even though they were unable to identify the significance of it in earlier phases. This suggests that the recipient’s view of the relevance of the account and their ability to interpret the account dynamically changed over time.

For example, for individuals in the accident and emergency department (A&E) in the months leading up to the new hospital opening there appeared little recollection:

**Interviewer:** Can you tell me about the main messages or communications you have received about the new hospital change?

**Front Line Manager (involved in the implementation of change in A&E):** Well there were lots of general messages, when the hospital was going to open, who would move on which days etc....

**Interviewer:** Did you receive any communication about how work practices would change?

**Front Line Manager:** Ummm, not really, no, not about work practices... I don’t think there will be much change to our day-to-day work practices. They [project office] sent out some information about the location of the department to others, not much else that was specific to us... There were so many operational details about the hospital flying around, most of it isn’t relevant to us, and we just needed to get on with what we are doing.

**Interviewer:** Did they communicate anything to you about single rooms or staffing ratios for example?

**Front Line Manager:** Not to us, no, that wasn’t relevant to us. It is the in-patient wards which need to change [their work practices]...

Senior managers previously explained to us that work practices in A&E would have to significantly change, and the account they sent out was targeted at everyone “*each department needed to think about how the change would affect them specifically*” (Senior manager, phase 3a). So employees in A&E were told that things would have to change and were asked to think how it would affect them. However, this missive was ambiguous and did not link to existing experiences and operational challenges in the department.

As the change progressed and the new hospital opened, it became apparent that the reconfiguration of A&E had not been understood in terms of the challenges for the staff, with little action taken. As a result, in the immediate post move period staff reported high levels of anxiety, as they came to realize that they were not as prepared as they needed to be, leading to a significant impact on patient care (e.g. increased waiting times, lack of coordination between services). We observed a significant change in the interpretation of the social account about work practice changes when we returned to the hospital a few months after the opening. Now A&E employees talked about the work practice changes they faced.

I think A&E we got wrong. We found the single room working extremely hard... We have had to put extra staff on round the clock to do some interventional rounds where we've allocated a nurse to go into the rooms every hour to check that the patients have got the call bell, that they're comfortable, that they've had a drink, so we have put extra staff on... You have no peripheral vision now as a nurse, you literally have to walk into a room, go right up to a patient and you have to say, are you all right, We had to increase staffing levels in A&E to meet the need for patient safety within five days of moving in, and then in [two months later] we increased again (Divisional Manager).

As the context changed, gaps in participant's understanding of the new work practices (and the reason behind them) appeared. When staff realized that they had an incomplete understanding they attempted to fill the gaps with previous experiences. For example in trying to solve problems, participants compared the situation to ‘how things were before’:

I don't really know how we are going to work this, I only know how it is different from what we had before... in the new hospital we can't take a patient down to surgery by ourselves. Before, when they needed to go, I just say to [name of colleague] ‘I'm taking Mr. Peters down the hall’ and she will shout out if she needs me, or I can usually hear the bell if a patient calls. It's only 50 meters away, I'd be out

of earshot for a matter of a few seconds... but here in the new place, the surgical unit is down two floors and through 13 sets of doors. I can't just pop down there to take a patient, or check up on a patient. I'm not sure how it will work... at the moment we have to have an extra member of staff to make sure we have enough on the ward when one of us is away. Maybe we will use the porters to transfer patients... I don't know. (Senior nurse, phase 2)

In the above example, we see that employees have demonstrated agency in responding to the demands of the new environment (in this case by taking on more staff) as a short term solution. She expresses uncertainty in what will happen longer term, filling this with hypothetical scenarios based on her existing knowledge. When social accounts provide an incomplete picture of the impact of a change recipient's fill in these gaps using their own knowledge, with interpretation being important in creating meaning within the account.

What changed between the initial disregard of the account and the post-move interpretations is the sense of urgency, stimulated by the contextual changes in the physical work environment. Now, when faced with the logistics of the new building, recipients are coming to realize that they need to act on the account which they were previously given. Within this department, in the aftermath of the changes, we observe that employees experimenting with potential solutions, for example, more staff, and new triage systems as a means to interpret how they should react to the changes.

The exact same account was interpreted and acted upon very differently by other groups of employees. The original account explaining the purpose of single rooms was described as having a significant and immediate impact. For an employee in the intensive treatment unit (ITU) the same social account explaining single rooms connected well with past concerns and issues, as they had used single isolation rooms previously. As a result, staff made the decision to proactively engage.

**Front Line Manager:** One of the main messages which they [project team] wanted to get across was about the way our work would be different in the new hospital... we knew that single rooms would be a big challenge for us...

**Interviewer:** Did they [project team] give an explanation for why they were moving to single rooms?



**Front Line Manager:** It was because they wanted to be able to control infections better. That's a really important issue here [ITU] because our patients are so poorly. It's something we have to be very careful about... and with the Trust history it's very important that we don't have another failure in that area... We spend a lot of time with our patients here [ITU], some of them are with us for a long time and they need a lot of care... one of the reasons for the change is so that we can spend more time with them in a way that retains their dignity and privacy... We knew we were going to have to make a lot of changes here [ITU]... they explained that right from the beginning.

It became apparent from our site visits that the challenges facing A&E were different from those of staff working the in-patient wards, but no less significant or complex. The same resources for change management were allocated to all divisions, with the same planning checks, preparations and training. The organization did not give any preferential treatment or attempt to communicate more with one group than another. The social account focused on the same issues of infection control, staffing levels and visibility. However, in the above example it is apparent that the language of the social account (infection control, dignity and privacy) is recalled and remains salient. Furthermore, the interviewee makes references to the specific history of the organization. This context (including past experiences and the relevance of the explanation) led to the account to being viewed as relevant by recipients in ITU and triggered agency, with recipients trying to proactively solve problems.

#### *4.2. Creation of divisional project managers*

Our second account concerns the decision to create a new role (project managers) and the explanation for why this was needed. Unlike the previous account (work process changes), which was targeted at all organizational members, this account predominantly targets middle management. This included divisional managers (who would recruit and select a project manager for their division) and project managers (who would undertake the role). The role was created following the realization by senior management and the project office that there was a need for information translation, communication and motivation.

We asked senior managers why they created this role (the intended social account) and they confirmed that ‘powerful champions’ were required. The idea of champions is not new (Schon, 1963). A major aspect of a champion’s role is to “*identify with the idea as their own and with its promotion as a cause, to a degree that goes far beyond the requirements of their job*” (Schon, 1963:84). Champions do this by demonstrating commitment, passion and persistence. When we interviewed project managers in the early stages of their role, there was acceptance that engaging employees was an integral part of the position:

I am really looking forward to having the chance to engage with some of my colleagues in other departments in the division and get to know them better... I need to convince people of why this change is good for them and work with them to make it work (Project manager, phase 1).

In later stages of the research this changed, triggered by the reality of the role and the agency of the recipients. About a year into the secondment, when we asked the project managers to reflect back on why the role had been created (the received social account) there was little repetition of the previous outlook. The project managers now believed the reason the role had been created was to take away some of the administrative burden from the project management team. They explained the role was not imbued with any power to make important decisions or to inspire others; that their role was basic and task orientated.

I spend a lot of time doing paperwork, minutes from meetings, filling out forms to say we comply with this... or that... that is the reality of the role (Project manager, phase 2).

The project managers set up an office for themselves on the new hospital site (3 miles away from a majority of other staff and closer to the contractors and building site) making engagement activity time-consuming and less ad-hoc.

I don’t really see the people from my [divisional] teams that often, they are all working at [name of old site] and I am here at [name of new site]... my ideas about being able to walk down the halls, and check in on people working on the wards to see if they have questions have gone out the window... I have to make a reason to go over there and see them and to be honest with you, I just don’t have the time... sure they can email or call me with questions, but that is not the same, they only do that when they *really* need something (project manager, phase 2).

Instead of acting on the account of senior managers and becoming champions, project managers developed an alternative interpretation about the purpose of their role:

The facilitator/liaison role made more sense to us... there were lots of instances where the division team and the project office were not communicating well. [Name of the division manager] just didn't have the time to organize the change on top of [their] normal day to day activities so it made sense that an additional role should fill that task... All the evidence pointed to needing this role (Project manager, phase 2).

Once an account has been given it is static, unless actively replaced by the account giver with a revision. In this case, the account was not updated and senior managers still viewed the role as dealing with front-line engagement. Senior managers gave a rather idealistic idea of champions, with champions having a somewhat magical and heroic status.

I have worked on a number of projects like this one and on my previous scheme at [removed]; we had clinical champions who by [their] very character were very powerful, very influential. There was one lady in particular; she was excellent, she knew exactly what to say to people to convince them to come on board. She would get right to the heart of their issues and make them comfortable with the idea. This was really useful for the innovation project [at the previous site] because everyone was engaged and on-board, we, as the implementation team, didn't have to do any convincing. (Senior Manager: Phase 2).

This resulted in a growing misalignment between the social account from senior managers and the way that the role was played out in practice. It became clear that the role was often '*burdensome*' and '*boring*' and this divide between what the social account espoused and everyday activity grew. For those enacting the role the interpretation of the account changed and was influenced by the agency of the project managers. Very few of the project managers had volunteered for the role, most describe the process as closer to "*being talked into it*". They did not see themselves as ambitious or courageous people, rather, they were employees who were good at their jobs and could be conveniently moved into this new role. They did not see themselves as the heroic champions senior management desired.

Browbeaten I think is the way to describe it. I didn't volunteer to take on the role I was asked to. I have to say I was very skeptical at first but then my manager phoned me and said, 'Would you please reconsider?' It took a few weeks before I eventually said yes but at the end of the day I decided it had to be done and I would end up doing it one way or another (Project manager: Phase 1).

As a result, enactment of the role was modest; gathering information, developing plans, dealing with procedural and administrative issues. Engagement with employees was through formalized mechanisms such as user groups. Over time the project managers began to doubt the credibility of the social account provided by senior managers and became

suspicious of the motives of the ‘champions account’. They came to believe that senior managers were talking up the role to try to manipulate them. Senior managers were using this language to present an ideological account of what could be strategically achieved (Cobb & Wooten, 1998) whilst allowing project managers the illusion of freedom to “*mould the role in the way they saw fit*”. The project managers were frustrated by their inability to exert this freedom (i.e. volume of menial tasks allocated to them) and questioned the veracity of the account:

They said we needed to be champions but that’s just not true, that’s not what they needed... just someone to do the nitty-gritty, the boring stuff (Project manager, phase 3b).

As this tension played out project managers commented that it was their belief that senior management were now attempting to set them up to fail. A couple believed that their selection was a means to reallocate them because they had previously been considered ‘troublemakers’. One project manager went further and expressed that they felt senior management were planning to use them as a ‘scapegoat’ if things went wrong and they suspected the role was being used as a means to remove:

Why did they pick me for this role? Probably because they had nothing else to do with me, I’ll be [on the project] this year and then after September next year I’ll be gone. They’ll get rid of me. (Project Manager: phase 3a)

This example shows how individual account recipients were able to reflect on this “*political gameplay*” and this influenced the perceived credibility of the account. Like the previous account described, we see the importance of interpretation by the account giver and how context and agency influences this interpretation over time. The influence of existing knowledge structures, how power and influence within the organization are politically maneuvered, plays a key role in the decision about whether, or to what extent, a social account leads to behavior change in the manner originally intended.

## 5. Discussion

Previous research has highlighted the effectiveness of social accounts as a management tool for influencing members during organizational change (Cobb et al., 2001; Cobb & Wooten, 1998; Rousseau & Tijoriwala, 1999). Social accounts are given in order to deliberately direct employee's understanding, affective reactions and behavioral actions towards a politically driven, strategic outcome (Bies, 1987; Braaten et al., 1993; Cobb et al., 2001; Folger & Cropanzano, 2001). In choosing to study social accounts (as opposed to other literature concerned with organizational communications) our aim was to add to theory regarding effectiveness; how accounts can achieve or derail intended strategic outcomes.

Social accounts theory has tended to draw from traditional psychological paradigms. In our goal of developing new theoretical insights, we sought to intentionally combine inputs from radically different or very similar domains concerned with communication use. Crucially, it is not the similarity or dissimilarity between domains per se that is the key here (see Cornelissen & Durand, 2012), our aim is to spotlight how new theoretical perspectives can provide the potential for theoretical change.

In exploring this aim we drew on work less concerned with the content of a specific communication, and more focused on understanding context and a processual view of the world (e.g. Dailey & Browning, 2014; Jarzabkowski et al., 2010). By blending insights from these other domains we make a number of theoretical contributions to social accounts as they are presented in practice. In this paper we highlight the active role of recipients in interpreting the account, and highlight their agency in deciding whether or not to act. Within our more interpretive turn we explore the influence of time and context to understanding how the lived reality of organizational life impacts on intended outcomes.

Our findings expand current social account theory by understanding how directive change communications become derailed by the relevance of the account *in relation to an*

*individual's past*, by their ability to express *agency* and by *time*, how lived experience can alter the perceived truthfulness and potency of an account. In doing so we provide evidence about why some social accounts will lead to organizationally intended and desired behavior, while others lead to a myriad of (perhaps organizationally dysfunctional) responses.

Our emphasis on the impact of an individual's past reaffirms the conclusions of Rousseau and Tijoriwala (1999), that previous experiences are important for filling in information gaps about a social account. We also expand previous social account theory by showing how the past not only fills in gaps but provides purchase, in offering an anchor, to which a social account may be moored. When change is intense and complex, as in our case, not every social account will be interpreted. Heckman et al (2016) have highlighted how previous experience influences an organization's capacity for change – where positive experiences can be harnessed to build support for further initiatives. Drawing on work from the narrative tradition by Naslund and Perner (2012) who highlight how existing communications can influence acceptance (by stabilizing the meaning of past events and giving them semantic meaning and purpose); our findings suggest that the effectiveness of a social account is influenced by past experience, and specifically, by social accounts given at an earlier date. We see this in the example of the ITU employee. The new social account about the purpose of single-rooms (helping control infection) took purchase and led to effective action because it presents a solution to an old, well-defined problem, one which the nurse would like to change.

Within existing literature is an assumption that accounts can be designed in a way which will produce a predictable and consistent response. As a result, research efforts have concentrated on designing accounts with optimal content and delivery mechanisms. Our results suggest it is not just the delivery or content but the external context that impacts on effectiveness. Fast-paced, highly volatile contexts (such as our organization) impact on the

predictability of a social account, because the constant re-drawing of the organizational landscape means that strategic vision and practical enactment of change are never entirely aligned (Kernis & Goldman, 2006). Time can quickly degrade and decay the veracity of an account, as lived experience clashes with organizational messages and espoused goals. Our second social account illustrates this decay. As the project manager role emerged, our newly appointed managers' work experiences evolved, changing their interpretations to a direction inconsistent with the original message.

Social accounts are by their nature static, once given the semantic context cannot be changed. Communications literature has stressed that simplicity is important for social account success (Frey & Cobb, 2010) with the importance of concrete foundations highlighted as an important strategy when introducing new ideas. Despite the static simplicity of the message, interpretations of the account receiver are more dynamic, the recipient can go on engaging with the account, and shifting their interpretations for as long as it is perceived as existing (up to two years in our examples). This finding suggests that the content of an account is important - in terms of its ability to be re-interpreted. This suggestion, that a certain amount of semantic ambiguity might be useful to social accounts, is completely contrary to existing research which highlights specificity (e.g. Frey & Cobb, 2010). In real life many senior politicians appear particularly adept at communications that using a certain amount of ambiguity to retain their credibility when the context changes. They frequently use language where the message appears to offer direction and purpose, but the meaning is open to be being constructed and reconstructed in a myriad of ways, adaptable to the particular needs of the recipient, and to the changes in the landscape. A level of ambiguity may allow for multiple interpretations to exist, whilst allowing members to agree on collective actions (Davenport & Leitch, 2005) and move towards the organizations' priorities (Jarzabkowski et al., 2010).

Most previous research in this area has relied heavily on experimental studies to isolate attributes of accounts, such as source expertise or outcome manipulation (e.g. De Cremer et al., 2010; Frey & Cobb, 2010). This can only get us so far in realizing the potential of social accounts. Situational contexts differ, and therefore no combination of words or phrases alone will achieve the desired result in every context. Through studying social accounts in complex real-life organizational environments we can fully understand the complicated and dynamic nature of their interpretation. This is an important development in social accounts theory because it draws attention away from creating the ‘perfect’ content and moves us towards the consistency of actions and behaviors which accompany an account.

Finally, we offer methodological suggestions for how we can study social accounts in a more holistic way. In conducting this analysis we have redefined social accounts in be more congruent with our interpretivist approach. We were able to analyze accounts from both provider and the recipient’s perspectives and compare versions of events. We would encourage future research to consider the account giver and receiver as active agents with their own individual experiences and contexts. In addition, in opening up a new theoretical lens through which we view social accounts, we open up new questions for future research such as: To what extent might the retelling or repetition of social accounts influences their interpretation (c.f. Dailey & Browning, 2014 - narrative repetition)? Or what level of ambiguity in content might be useful and how interpretative processes can be best managed (c.f. Davenport & Leitch, 2005)?



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Table 1 – Data Collection

Data Source	Phase 1 <sup>a</sup> (January-September 2010) (Jan-April)	Phase 2 <sup>b</sup> (October 2010- January 2011) (Oct-Dec)	Transition 1 (January 2011)	Phase 3a <sup>c</sup> (February- July 2011) (March- April)	Transition 2 (September 2011)	Phase 3b <sup>c</sup> (August 2011- January 2012) (Dec-Jan)	Phase 4 <sup>d</sup> (February - December 2012) (Oct-Dec)	TOTAL
<b>Formal Interviews:</b>								
Executive Directors	3	6		3		1	3	16
Other Trust Management	4	3		-		2	2	11
Project Management Office	7	4		1		1	1	14
Divisional Directors	-	3		3		5	3	14
Change Management Agents	4	5		1		4	-	14
Lower management/Frontline staff	-	1		5		7	-	13
<i>Total</i>	<i>18</i>	<i>22</i>		<i>13</i>		<i>20</i>	<i>9</i>	<i>82</i>
<b>Observations (hrs.):</b>								
Hospital tours	2	2		1		1	-	6
Informal observation (public areas)	-	17		4		15	9	45
Interviews and meetings	25	28		18		29	12	112
<i>Total</i>	<i>27</i>	<i>47</i>		<i>23</i>		<i>45</i>	<i>21</i>	<i>163</i>
<b>Documents:</b>								
Internal documents	6	8		2		2	-	18
Government/National documents	1	-		-		-	3	4
Media	20	2		30		22	7	81
External parties (e.g. campaigns)	1	-		-		-	-	1
Impressions/case notes	1	3		2		4	2	12
<i>Total</i>	<i>29</i>	<i>13</i>		<i>34</i>		<i>28</i>	<i>12</i>	<i>116</i>

<sup>a</sup> Data collection at this phase focused on understanding the context, drivers and strategic aims of the change. Senior managers were asked what the key messages they were giving and then we probed other interviewees for details of these accounts. Of particular interest were accounts about the drivers for the reconfiguration element of the change, the explanation for having all-single rooms, and the reasons for creating new project manager roles.

<sup>b</sup> Phase 2 emphasized accounts of the final planning stages. The project managers now in post for 12-18 months were able to reflect on their early interpretation of accounts. Several additional accounts for actions and decisions were newly identified and followed up in subsequent phases.

<sup>c</sup> The hospital opened in two stages, Phase 3 was therefore conducted in two parts. Our attention was on evaluating the change process and its planning, and the use of social accounts, perceptions of these and subsequent actions. Project managers were interviewed in the final weeks of the change, or after the termination of their secondment.

<sup>d</sup> We revisited the hospital 12 months after the change. These interviews focused on long-term consequences, evaluations of their communication strategy, and how much subsequent change needed to occur due to the failure of selected accounts.

Table 2 – Thematic Social Accounts

	Summary of intended account message	Account giver(s)	Account target/receiver	Timing of account	General comments on account interpretation
<b>Service reconfiguration account</b>	“Two Hospitals, One future” Services would now be provided across two hospital sites, reducing duplication. This would enable the Trust to <i>provide a more efficient and specialist service to patients</i> (site one would become the acute care facility and site two would become a specialist treatment and planned care center).	Executive team	Organization-wide, all employees and external stakeholders <sup>2</sup>	Throughout and strengthening towards the opening, in response to maternity relocation/ opposition	Widely accepted as a much needed strategic direction following a lack of cultural integration between multiple sites since the merger in 2000. The message was simple and effective. It related to culture distance faced by the organization.
<b>Work practice changes</b>	The decision to move to single room in patient accommodation throughout the new hospital. The account sought to influence the engagement of employees in work redesign. The account explained the single room design <i>would provide more efficient and higher quality of care to patients by increasing the amount of one-to-one interaction time between nurses and patients, reduce infection rates, increase privacy and dignity of patients</i>	Project management team <sup>3</sup> (supported by senior managers)	All employees, especially middle and lower management and front line	Phase 1 to phase 3 of the research period.	The most diversely interpreted account. One core message given across all groups but understood differently. In A&E it was ignored, in some inpatient wards it was interpreted as abstract rather than something which needed to be acted upon, whereas other wards did take action. ITU is an example where the account really resonated with staff and led them to come up with innovative solutions and detailed planning.
<b>Creation of divisional project managers</b>	The need to create resource to inspire the change management activities. Senior managers explained they needed individuals to <i>champion the organizations ideas for the new hospital and engage members of clinical divisions to embrace and support the changes.</i>	Senior managers	Role holders and other associated divisional managers	Phases 1 and 2 (reflected upon in phase 3)	Within a short space of time following this action account receivers became mistrustful of the account as it did not resonate with the reality of the role. This led to speculation about alternative explanations and a counter interpretation.
<b>Maternity staff rotation</b>	New maternity services would be across both sites (previously on different sites and not often interacting). Groups of employees would work together in the new building. The decision that maternity staff would work on a rotation between the sites was explained: <i>mechanism to improve working relations between groups of employees, to sort out procedural compromises and to reduce the perception of those moving in the first wave taking ownership of the new space.</i>	Site one divisional (middle) managers	Site two divisional (middle) managers and frontline staff from both sites	Phase 3	An example of a horizontal account from one site team to another. The account was interpreted as a gesture of friendship from the team in the new hospital to the incoming site team as well as an action which made good sense. This positive interpretation was supported by the use of ‘working together’ workshops and was pleasantly refreshing following considerable uncertainty in the build up to the opening.
<b>Changes to outpatient facilities</b>	Changes were made to the services in the new facility at various stages between the design and opening. Changes to outpatient facilities emerged as key because the implications were not fully understood until late in the building process and this led to repercussions. The account explained that these changes were due to <i>changes in the wider political environment</i> which impacted which services could be moved in community facilities as was originally intended.	Project management team	Divisional (middle) managers	Phase 2 (reflected upon in phases 3 and 4)	A majority of managers did not mention this account until after the opening (phase 3), suggesting little attention was paid to it. The account did not lead to any action. The account was not accompanied by any detail about who would be impacted or how they would be dealt with, as a result there was little action resulting from the announcements until the implications became problematic.
<b>Workforce planning</b>	There was much debate about the decision of how to staff the new facility, particularly focused on whether the staff to patient ratio would need to increase. It was eventually decided that it would not increase. The explanation for this was that <i>improved efficiency in work processes</i> would mean that extra nursing staff would not be needed.	Senior management (supported by project management)	All employees	Phases 2 and 3	This context surrounding this account was important because the discussion and announcement came at a time when financial viability of the new build was called into question by national press and the Trust. Employees did not find the account credible and believed instead an alternative account of cost-cutting.
<b>Changes to move date</b>	Nine months prior to the opening the second stage of the transition was pushed back from July to September. The explanation was the move would not coincide with staff vacations, however, senior managers admitted there were delays in the construction work and so opening.	Senior management and project management	All employees (but especially targeted second transition movers)	Phase 2	The confused nature of this account meant that the interpretation was confused. It appears to be accepted that there was some truth in both accounts. The reality of the action has very little impact on a majority of the staff we interviewed.

<sup>2</sup> External stakeholders include, ambulance services, the community, media, and local government

<sup>3</sup> The project management team consisted of senior managers in facilities functions, programme director and officers working full time on the build, move and migration, contractors and administrative support for the change project.