University communications as auto-communication: the NTNU ‘Challenge Everything’ campaign

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Abstract

Purpose – This article offers an in-depth exploration of university communications practice by describing and analysing a publicity and recruitment campaign, called ‘Challenge Everything’, carried out by the Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU) in 2018. By providing insight into internal sense-making around the campaign it contributes to literatures in science communication and communication management.

Design/methodology/approach – This qualitative research uses semi-structured interviews and informal organisational ethnography, mobilising concepts of sense-making and auto-communication to guide analysis. The focus is on how organisation members made sense of the Challenge Everything campaign.

Findings – The analysis focuses on four key themes within organisational sense-making about the campaign: the openness of the campaign meant that it was readily picked up on and personalised by university staff; its meaning was always contextual, shaped by organisation members’ roles, interests, and concerns; its controversy seems to primarily derive from questions of representation, and specifically whether organisation members recognised within it their own experiences of university culture; and its development points to the rise of new forms of expertise within university organisation, and the contestation of these.

Research limitations/implications – The research offers only a partial snapshot of one instance of university communications. However, in demonstrating how public campaigns also operate as auto-communication it has important implications for strategic communication within complex organisations such as universities.

Originality/value – The research has particular value in offering an in-depth qualitative study of university marketing practices and the effects these have within an organisation.

Keywords Branding, Organisational culture, Organisational identity, Organisational communication, Materiality, Communication department

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Why should scholars of science communication be interested in university communications? After all, such communications are often understood as distinct from science – or, more generally, research – communication, and may be located within different units within a university (Elken et al., 2018). Discussion of science communication has tended to focus on informal learning in science, interactions between scientists and laypeople, or mass media practices and representations (Bell et al., 2009; Bennett and Jennings, 2011; Bucchi and Trench, 2014), with only sparse attention to public relations or other forms of organisational communication (Bauer and Bucchi, 2008; Borchelt and Nielsen, 2014).

However, based on Horst et al.’s (2016) definition of science communication – that it is ‘organized, explicit, and intended actions that aim to communicate scientific knowledge, methodology, processes, or practices in settings where non-scientists are a recognized part of the audiences’ (p. 883) – then university communications are certainly a form of public communication of research, in that they target lay audiences and seek to convey an

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impression of the culture and nature of university life, research practice, and the robustness of university outputs. Science communication scholarship should therefore be attentive to the efforts of research organisations to build robust brands, carry out public relations, or manage crises (Fähnrich et al., 2015; Wæraas and Solbakk, 2009): these are important ways in which the nature and culture of research and researchers are communicated to wider society.

Conversely, examining university communications offers important lessons for communication and organisation management more generally. Universities are key examples of ‘plurivocal’ organisations (Spee and Jarzabkowski, 2017): they are comprised of diverse and at times competing interests and meaning systems. Similarly, they are one case (of an increasing number) where the methods and practices of the corporate world are becoming normalised within public and not for profit organisations (Drori et al., 2013; Siegel and Leih, 2018). Examining universities and their communication activities therefore provides insight into the strategic management of complex organisations in which meanings are multiple and where there may be dissent around change or organisational values (Chapleo, 2015; Spee and Jarzabkowski, 2017). In particular, as we will discover, university communications offers an example of what it means to carry out strategic communication in a context that may be sceptical or even hostile to it.

In this article I contribute to both science communication and communication management literatures by describing and analysing a case study of university communications, a publicity and recruitment campaign carried out by the Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU: in Norwegian the university is Norges teknisk-naturvitenskapelige universitet) in 2018. The research thus answers calls for more in-depth examination of university communications (Davies and Horst, 2016; Elken et al., 2018). I will pay particular attention to the way the campaign – known as ‘Challenge Everything’ – developed within, and impacted upon, NTNU as an organisation. I am primarily interested in the internal organisational effects of the campaign, building on previous work that has suggested that science communication can have important impacts on researchers, even when they are not the intended audience (Felt and Fochler, 2013). Given that university researchers (and other organisational members) are one audience for university communications, I will suggest that such communication should be seen as a form of auto-communication as well as of public relations, in that it operates as internal as well as external communication (Davies and Horst, 2016).

The article proceeds in five sections. I first outline the conceptual framework I am operating within, and in particular the two concepts – auto-communication and sense-making – I am using to sensitise my analysis. I then introduce the case study and the methods through which I have engaged with it, before providing a description of the NTNU ‘Challenge Everything’ campaign, tracing its development and realisation. In a fourth section I draw out four points of particular interest with regard to what analysis of this case study can tell us about the organisational impacts of university communications. As I close I recap key arguments and discuss their implications.

**Theoretical frames**

While science communication research has been relatively inattentive to university communications, other disciplines have shown more interest. Higher education studies, in particular, has developed ‘an emerging literature on university branding, marketing, and reputation management as a process’ (Elken et al., 2018, p. 1100), though at the same time ‘there is surprisingly little research on the actors and units that are central in the branding and marketing processes’ (Elken et al., 2018) – i.e., university communications offices and practitioners. Research has frequently been desk-based, examining university mission or value statements as these are articulated online (Wæraas and Sataøen, 2019), branding through websites or social media (Chapleo et al., 2011; Drori et al., 2013; Pringle and Fritz,
or grey literature around university strategic development (Amsler and Shore, 2017; Tienari and Aula, 2011). Research which has involved analysis of dynamics ‘on the ground’ has tended to highlight tensions between communications and academic staff and ambivalence about branding or public relations from the latter (see Frandsen et al., 2018 for one review); researchers are often ‘cynical’ or resistant to the development of university brands or to the management of their communication activities (Brass and Rowe, 2009; Chapleo, 2015; Wæraas and Solbakk, 2009). Such findings are of a piece with work that has looked more broadly at changes in the university sector over the last decades, which has identified practices by academic staff that decouple or distance themselves from demands such as increased entrepreneurial activity or the use of rankings (Sauder and Espeland, 2009), as well as with scholarship from organisation studies, which has pointed out that universities are complex, ‘plurivocal’ organisations characterised by competing interests (Siegel and Leih, 2018; Spee and Jarzabkowski, 2011; 2017).

This study adds to this literature by providing a detailed description of a single publicity campaign – ‘Challenge Everything’, produced by NTNU in 2018 – and by exploring its context, articulation, and reception. It is grounded in an approach to organisations, and organisational communication, that is qualitative, constructivist, and critical, and which is therefore centrally concerned with meaning-making. In such a view meanings concerning organisations and organisational identities are not static or fixed; rather, both meaning and organisations are ‘talked into existence’ in various ways (Kornberger, 2010, p. 103; cf. Weick, 1995). In the context of communication management this approach has been developed in a number of directions. Martin Kornberger (2010; 2015) takes a view of branding that suggests that it is increasingly a tool for internal organisational management (rather than primarily being directed at public audiences), whilst also arguing that it is not so much a static vision as a platform or field that is constantly open to co-production by diverse actors both inside and outside an organisation. ‘The brand’, he writes, ‘is the institutionalized yet contested space in which producing and consuming takes shape’ (2010, p. 48). Kornberger’s work frames branding as a ‘verb’, something that ‘performs [organisational] identity’ (2010, p. 105; emphasis in original); relatedly, Dervin takes what she calls a ‘verbing approach’ to organisational knowledge: ‘the sense making and sense unmaking that is knowledge is a verb, always an activity’ (1998, p. 36). Both branding and meaning making are thus things that are done, rather than things that are. One implication of this view is that communicative processes are central to how organisations are imagined, managed, and changed. Spee and Jarzabkowski thus find that that university strategic development (and the communication thereof) is ‘constituted through a communicative process’ (2011, p. 1219) rather than being a rigid framework that is imposed upon an organisation. Strategic planning, organisational communication, and branding are all practices through which an organisation’s identity – its nature – may be performed and contested.

I build on this underlying framework to use concepts of sense-making and auto-communication as sensitising devices for my analysis. If organisations (and meanings about them) are not static but constantly under production, sense-making will be central to this process (Dervin, 1998). Indeed, in Weick’s (1995) framing, organisations and sense-making are co-produced. An organisation is not a pre-existing entity about which stories are told, but is shaped by (and in turn shapes) such storytelling. Sense-making is ‘about such things as placement of items into frameworks, comprehending, redressing surprise, constructing meaning, interacting in pursuit of mutual understanding, and patterning’ (1995, p. 6); put crudely, to study sense-making is to examine how individuals or groups make sense of particular situations or entities. In the context of organisations this becomes significant because, first, such meaning-making is often multiple (‘what is plausible for one group, such as managers, often proves implausible for another group, such as employees’; Weick et al., 2005, p. 415); second, it is foregrounded in situations of uncertainty or change (‘we expect to
find explicit efforts at sensemaking whenever the current state of the world is perceived to be different from the expected state of the world; Weick et al., 2005, p. 414); and third, organisations often require more explicit sense-making than other aspects of everyday life, in which meanings are widely shared and taken for granted (Weick, 1995, p. 63–64). To examine sense-making is thus to explore how stories perform organisations, but also how such organisations may be multiple or incoherent, constituted by divergent meanings or stories (‘plurivocal’, to use Spee and Jarzabkowski’s term, 2017).

In this analysis I mobilise the notion of sense-making to identify the divergent meanings that are articulated around the ‘Challenge Everything’ campaign. In order to narrow the focus of the study, I do this in combination with the concept of auto-communication. This stems from studies of marketing, and specifically from a refutation of the notion that marketing represents an iterative connection between organisations and their publics (Christensen, 1997). Instead, Christensen argues, marketing is primarily auto-communication, or ‘self-referential communication through which the organization recognizes and confirms its own images, values and assumption; in short, its own culture’ (p. 199). Such communication and culture-building may be more or less explicit. Christensen cites examples of airline advertising that directly addresses employees, but other studies have suggested that organisational members pick up on messages that are directed to outsiders, and use these in crafting their own identities and that of the organisation (Kjærgaard et al., 2011; Morsing, 2006a). Ultimately, corporate communication and marketing is ‘a way of organizing’ (Morsing, 2006b, p. 98), because a ‘workplace is making a brand promise which [employees] are expected to enact’ (Morsing, 2006b; cf. Kornberger, 2010). In the context of science, there is evidence that researchers take note of the stories told in public science communication and use them as a benchmark for their own careers (Felt and Fochler, 2013); in university marketing, part of the challenge of establishing a stable brand identity is exactly that organisation members hold multiple allegiances – such as to their disciplines or to science more generally – and may not agree to ‘enact’ the university’s brand (Davies and Horst, 2016; Horst, 2013; Wæraas and Solbak, 2009).

Auto-communication, as I am interested in it here, is therefore not a straightforward process, but should instead be understood as a means by which an organisation’s culture is not only reinforced but also contested. It is a way that sense-making may take place, in that it can become the focus for discussions and rationalisations of what the organisation is and how it represents itself in public. Here I take the NTNU ‘Challenge’ campaign as an example of auto-communication – a communication activity ostensibly directed to external audiences but simultaneously received by, and having effects upon, organisational members – and explore how the campaign was made sense of by different actors within NTNU. In describing and analysing this case study I am therefore guided by the question: how do different people, in different parts of NTNU, make sense of the ‘Challenge’ campaign?

Materials and methods
A complete answer to this central question is of course not possible without interviewing every staff member and student at NTNU (and even then, we might expect multiple discursive positions from individual actors; Frandsen et al., 2018). Instead, the methods I have used explored how key actors in the campaign describe it, through, in particular, ten interviews with individuals from the Central Communication Division, faculty communications offices, university management, and with a number of students and academic staff who were publicly engaged with the campaign[1]. I sought to speak to individuals across the organisation, rather than focusing on one section of it, given that sense-making is more likely to cohere within specific organisational units. I therefore began with a provisional list of key actors or organisational functions involved in the Challenge campaign (whether as developers or critics of it), and contacted these with an invitation to be interviewed. I then used snowball sampling to recruit further interviewees until saturation was reached within
key themes discussed and suggestions of further interviewees (Cresswell, 2002). Interviews were semi-structured and aimed to allow participants to discuss the Challenge campaign, and their experiences of it, in their own terms, so that diverse meanings around it might emerge across the data set. The interview schedule asked interviewees to ‘tell the story’ of the campaign and their involvement in it, and to reflect upon it by, for instance, talking about why they see it as important or significant, what they had learned from it, and what next steps there would be. These interviews were, with participants’ permission, recorded and transcribed. All material has been anonymised.

In order to enrich the case study beyond interview accounts the research simultaneously sought to engage with the campaign’s realisation and with the (internal and external) debate that emerged around it. I gathered a range of material connected to the campaign, including posters and videos produced for it; pictures of how this material was displayed and used, both officially and unofficially; and public discussion, such as newspaper articles or social media debate, relating to it. More generally, as someone who was intermittently present at NTNU during the campaign, and who started working there some months after its launch, I have taken an approach that might be characterised as informal organisational ethnography (Ybema et al., 2009): I have been attentive to casual references to the ‘Challenge’ campaign, taken notes after conversations that featured it, and been interested in the ways that the campaign was materialised around university campuses[2]. In an approach informed by critical, qualitative, and ethnographic traditions (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996; Silverman, 2001), I have repeatedly read and looked over this material as a whole, taken notes, and used these notes to identify a set of patterns in how sense-making about the campaign takes place. This process led to the reconstruction of a narrative of the campaign, and to the identification of key themes that emerge in sense-making around it. In reporting on these patterns in this article I have sought to prioritise participant anonymity. Given that the university and the campaign are both named I have done this by limiting my use of direct quotes, attributing quotes to particular roles only where necessary to the argument, and in these cases generalising these roles (for example, ‘faculty communications officer’).

Before I sketch out the history of the Challenge campaign it is useful to know something about NTNU itself. The university is primarily located in the city of Trondheim, in the Trøndelag region of mid-Norway; after a 2016 set of mergers with smaller colleges (including in what are now the satellite campuses of Ålesund and Gjøvik), it is the biggest university in Norway, with 42,000 students. It is ‘a university with an international focus’ and ‘a main profile in science and technology, a variety of programmes of professional study, and great academic breadth’[3]. As the name suggests, it has historically focused on the natural and technical sciences, but now includes the full range of disciplines within eight faculties. Its management structure involves a university board, comprised of elected representatives from inside the organisation and external stakeholders; a top-level management group who take responsibility for day to day leadership of the university (the Rector, pro-Rectors, and Directors of Finances and Organisation); central administration functions (such as the Central Communication Division or Student Services); and, within each faculty, further management and administration structures. As is now common (Elken et al., 2018), communication activities are thus carried out by a number of units: the Central Communication Division, Student Services (particularly Student Recruitment), and faculty Communication Offices (which are of varying sizes, and which also carry out student recruitment activities). A monthly seminar brings together all staff with communications roles, of whom there are more than 60 in total.

‘Challenge everything’: the story of the campaign
The ‘Challenge’ campaign came about because of a number of developments. The leadership group was concerned that NTNU’s reputation scores – measured annually within Norway –
were stagnating, and felt that there was a need to boost its public profile. The Central Communication Division and Student Recruitment, which had previously worked separately, were keen to develop a joint campaign that would simultaneously work for recruitment and for awareness of NTNU generally. And there was a sense that it was important to address wider target audiences than had previously been the case – to reach not just young people on the verge of making decisions about where to study, but politicians and journalists (many of whom are based in Oslo, and have historically drawn on expertise and opinions from Oslo universities) as well as adults who could be interested in NTNU’s continuing education programmes.

From the start, then, those involved consciously framed the campaign as a departure for NTNU’s communications activities. Campaigns had always been run, particularly around student recruitment, but this was something that would be bigger, bolder, and simpler. Many of the communications staff had read the book *Three and a Tree*, published by branding agency 160over90 (2012), which offers a critique of clichéd and boring university communication (as summed up by the ubiquitous image of three happy students and a tree on a campus lawn), and wanted to do something ‘non-traditional’; simultaneously, the campaign also needed to line up with NTNU’s central vision of ‘knowledge for a better world’ and the values and goals encapsulated in its recent strategy[4]. After approval for this larger scale, cross-Division approach from the leadership group, a team from the Central Communications Division and Student Recruitment worked with a local advertising agency to develop a concept that would meet these various needs. The one that was selected, and which was approved by the leadership group in spring 2018, used the tagline ‘Challenge’ along with one of what were eventually around 200 words connected to NTNU’s activities, from ‘Energy’ to ‘Gravity’ or ‘The Trolley Problem’, with ‘Challenge Yourself’ and ‘Challenge Everything’ the most prominent (see Figure 1)[5].

The campaign was introduced to communications staff across NTNU at their monthly seminar, just before the summer, and additional words that might represent activities within the different faculties solicited and discussed. It was also discussed at a seminar on student recruitment and at a meeting of the university Deans, as well as being tested with focus groups involving local young people, in order to gauge responses from this audience: there had been concern that the use of English (used to ensure international reach, and because of the punchy sound of ‘challenge’ compared to the Norwegian utfordring) could be alienating, but this was in fact not a problem, and the reaction was positive. The main campaign was to be launched in September and to run for four weeks, into October – another departure for Norwegian university communications, which have generally involved a focused publicity effort in the spring, running up to the deadline for student applications in April. The next event of note was the presentation of the campaign – including a 1 min video developed by the agency[6]– to the university board, about a week before the launch. Here the reaction was more mixed. Some board members had concerns about the amount of money that had been spent on the campaign, how it would be evaluated, and the fact that they had been told about

Figure 1. ‘Challenge Yourself’ poster, and an example of the slogan in public advertising. Photo by Odin Drønen
it so late in its development. A week later, on 3rd September, the campaign went live, with an internal launch via NTNU’s intranet and distribution of posters across the organisation, advertising in all major Norwegian cities and airports, full page spreads in newspapers, and social media activity around it[7]. Importantly, the campaign had been designed to be easily adaptable to the interests and needs of different parts of the organisation. A PowerPoint template was available so that staff could make their own posters or use the graphics in their talks, several faculties developed their own sub-campaigns (for instance producing their own, more subject-specific, videos), and those involved with student recruitment, in particular, tweaked and continued to use campaign materials in the run-up to the April application deadline (with ‘Challenge Yourself’ a particular focus because it was seen as representing the NTNU student experience).

Both communications staff and the NTNU leadership group recognised that the campaign was unusual and potentially provocative, both in its reach – analysis of the campaign by a market research agency suggested that 48 per cent of the Norwegian population encountered it – and its approach, which was variously described in interviews as ‘bold’, ‘loud’, ‘non-traditional’, and ‘challenging’. But they were perhaps not prepared for the degree to which it became instantly controversial, both inside and outside NTNU, with news articles in both national and university newspapers, a live radio discussion on NRK, the national broadcaster, and social media debate. Much of this coverage featured NTNU staff who, for different reasons, objected to the campaign. While there is evidence that for many people – including the younger audiences who were the primary target for its recruitment aspects – both the campaign and criticism of it were simply part of the background noise of contemporary life, and while the reputational and awareness effects ultimately appear to have been mildly positive, there is no doubt that the campaign was subject to intense discussion. Key criticisms levelled at it focused on:

1. Advertising featuring the slogans ‘Challenge Truth’ and ‘Challenge Democracy’, which were present in a number of locations – including outside Stortinget (parliament) in Oslo – and which were seen as reinforcing populist and right wing distrust of expertise and democratic politics;

2. The use of English as the primary language of the campaign, in a context in which there is intense debate about internationalisation of Norwegian universities and the degree to which Norwegian should be protected as the primary language of academia;

3. Its cost, which was framed as problematically high, and whether it is appropriate for a publicly funded university to spend money on (attempting to) compete with other publicly funded universities;

4. The general tone of the campaign, which was seen as too corporate, superficial, and not accurately representing NTNU’s activities;

5. The appearance of extensive ‘Challenge’ advertising at the metro station that serves the main University of Oslo campus, on the day of that university’s årsfest, or anniversary celebration.

In the days and weeks after the campaign’s launch these comments were countered by members of the NTNU leadership group, who gave a number of interviews and participated in debates about it. In the interviews carried out for this research, at least, there was a general sense from communications staff and those in university leadership positions that much of the ‘noise’ around the campaign came from those who were not the primary audience for it (such as NTNU’s own senior professors), and that it had worked well with younger audiences.
At the same time many felt that at least some of the criticism was valid, and that – for instance – the clash with the University of Oslo’s årskjekt was unfortunate, the use of the ‘Challenge Democracy’ slogan could have been handled better, and that future campaigns might seek to incorporate more content in order to counter accusations of superficiality or negativity. In addition several of those with communication responsibilities in different parts of the organisation reflected that at least some of the debate might have been avoided with better internal communication – if, for example, the faculties (via their communication offices) and university board had been informed and engaged at an earlier stage of the campaign’s development. Similarly, the boldness might have gone further than intended: ‘We could have played it a bit more safe’, said one communications staff interviewee, ‘and still have got a lot of attention’.

Challenging NTNU: organisational sense-making around the campaign
The preceding section has deliberately provided something of a bare bones narrative of the history of the Challenge campaign, one that has been reconstructed from the accounts of ten interviewees and that has sought to describe but not evaluate the campaign. It is not my goal to assess whether the campaign is good or bad, or successful or otherwise. Instead, in this section I discuss four key themes in sense-making around it that emerged from the analysis.

The campaign’s openness offered scope for adaptation, personalisation, and subversion
I have already noted that part of the brief for the campaign was a degree of openness to adaptation by the organisation at large. Not only did the team behind it want it to be ‘simple and plain’ but something that ‘the whole organisation could tap into’; hence, for example, the use of different words that would resonate with particular disciplines (from ‘Challenge Materials’ to ‘Challenge Genetics’ or ‘Challenge 11111100011’[8]). In addition to this wide choice of available words – and the circulation of posters featuring these to every academic department, to be displayed and used by staff – the graphic identity of the campaign was kept deliberately simple and made available, via Powerpoint templates, to organisational members. This openness meant that it was straightforward for those connected to NTNU to use the campaign (for internal and external communication purposes) but also, importantly, to personalise it, in both institutionally sanctioned and more subversive ways. In this respect ‘Challenge’ might be viewed as being in line with Wæraas and Solbakk’s (2008) suggestion that university communications are more effective when they are multivocal rather than univocal, such that they build ‘on the variety that exists within the organization’ (p.459) rather than seeking to impose a single identity. ‘Challenge’ allowed organisational members to craft their own versions of the campaign, and thus to adapt it to their own meanings and priorities concerning organisational life.

This adaptation took place in both formal, authorised forms and as a part of the wider response to the campaign. As noted, several parts of the organisation funded and developed their own sub-campaigns (for instance focusing on recruitment for specific programmes) using the Challenge identity. But there were also many informal and playful responses that made use of campaign materials. As in Figure 2, for instance, posters could be combined to present a specific stance or set of interests, or amended in order to make a point about hygiene.

This linguistic and material flexibility was also used to critique the campaign. One group used the Powerpoint template to develop a series of their own posters, with slogans including ‘Challenge Overspending on PR’ and ‘Challenge the Marketization of the University’, and put these up around the campus on which they were primarily based, such that they blended in among the official posters. Others created posters featuring pictures of university leaders (from the Rector to department heads), and used slogans such as ‘Challenge This Man’ or ‘Challenge Authority’ (Figure 3)[9].
For better or worse, the infrastructural qualities of the campaign – that it could act as a platform, rather than only being articulated as a single, uniform message – meant that those within NTNU could use it to materialise and publicise their own interests and agendas. ‘Challenge’ is a branding exercise in Kornberger’s (2010) terms: an ‘interface’ (p. 22) where different actors and interests can engage in interactions and negotiations. This flexibility simultaneously meant that the campaign became more visible within the spaces and places of the organisation. Even playful and subversive displays of it reinforced its language and helped it become a kind of shorthand for talking about the university: the word ‘Challenge’ became a catchphrase, to be used in everything from advertising for student-run events to social media references to NTNU. If the campaign was adaptable to existing sense-making about life within NTNU, it also seems to have provided a language (both visual and linguistic).
for that sense-making, and to offer opportunities to ‘talk the organisation into existence’ (Weick et al., 2005, p. 409) in new ways.

**Sense-making is always contextual: diverse histories and interests are used to make sense of the ‘challenge’ campaign**

In the previous section I suggested that sense-making around the ‘Challenge’ campaign was adaptable to individuals’ existing meanings and priorities about NTNU because of the relative openness of campaign materials. Here I want to take this further to argue that meanings of the campaign inside the organisation were fundamentally multiple. Those I spoke to for this research made sense of it in diverse ways: it was a different kind of thing, with different histories and contexts, to different people. Sense-making about the campaign within NTNU was plurivocal (Spee and Jarzabkowski, 2017). Specifically, it was always achieved through existing interests in and meanings about NTNU.

In interviews it was clear, for example, that participants spoke about the campaign through the lens of their particular situation and concerns. For one communications officer from one of the non-natural science faculties, the campaign was important because it offered the opportunity to show that NTNU was more than a science and technology university through its inclusion of words from the humanities and social sciences. For her it had been useful because it had triggered discussions within the faculty about ‘how do you show the humanities’ contribution to the big challenges in society?’, as well as enabling their student recruitment activities to show that ‘NTNU is more than the engineering departments we are famous for’. On the other hand, for another faculty communications officer the main campaign had primarily been an opportunity for the development of a sub-campaign that showcased NTNU’s range of Bachelor programmes in Engineering. Her concern had been that – after the recent mergers had boosted the number of programmes offered – there was too much ‘marketing noise’ from different programmes being advertised; the sub-campaign they developed (through a collaboration across a number of faculties) therefore both streamlined this marketing but also aimed to ‘show off the Bachelor of Engineering Studies at NTNU’ and ‘to create this kind of pride’ for these programmes across the organisation. The main campaign was thus an opportunity to develop more effective marketing of a particular set of cross-faculty degree programmes, as well as to promote recognition of those programmes internally.

Those who took more adversarial stances towards the campaign similarly made sense of it through existing commitments and interests. The group behind the spoof posters described in the previous section had been active for some years in critiquing and debating the direction that NTNU was taking; for them, the campaign was another example of the university’s increasingly corporate nature. They framed it simply – and pejoratively – as ‘branding’, a practice that came from external expertise (such as ad agencies) who ‘do not know how or why the university is something different than a huge business’. For them the campaign was therefore indicative of shifts within universities in general, and at NTNU in particular, towards market-oriented research, heightened competition, and bureaucratisation (cf. Amsler and Shore, 2017; Andresen et al., 2015; Tienari and Aula, 2011). As with the two communication officers, sense-making about the campaign – and thus its nature and meaning – was slotted into a pre-existing framework of concerns.

In all of these cases (and others) the ‘Challenge’ campaign was explained in slightly different ways depending on the speaker’s context, role, and interests, becoming – for instance – a tool for clarity in student recruitment, a sign of NTNU’s increasingly corporate nature, or a means by which a single identity can be created and disseminated for a set of diverse institutions. Its meaning within NTNU is multiple – or, to put it differently, it is made sense of in diverse ways. Note, however, that this plurivocality does not necessarily mean contestation. Divergent sense-making about the campaign can take place within different
parts of the organisation, and need not come into contact with different views, or may simply exist in parallel. An important exception to this is discussed below.

‘Challenge Everything’ became controversial because it cuts to the question: who and what is NTNU, and how should it be represented?

If the ‘Challenge’ campaign was made sense of in different ways within different contexts within the organisation, there was one key difference of interpretation that seems to connect to the campaign’s status as a flashpoint for debate about NTNU. The ways in which speakers discussed the campaign within interviews reveals sharp contrasts in the extent to which they saw it as well representing the identity and nature of NTNU as a research organisation. Did the ‘Challenge’ campaign capture what NTNU is and who is involved in it, or was it a misrepresentation of the university and its members? It is this question that takes us to the heart of why the campaign became controversial.

Many people that I spoke to were proud of the campaign exactly because they felt that it captured the character of NTNU. ‘In essence this is what a university does, challenge established knowledge’, said one of the team directly behind the campaign. More specifically, this approach is especially part of NTNU’s identity: given that the university’s vision is ‘knowledge for a better world . . . it’s important to challenge perceived truths’. This approach of challenging and not taking things for granted is also integral to the student experience, as is an openness to being challenged: ‘we took ‘challenge yourself’ to our heart’, said one staff member involved in student recruitment, ‘because we felt that that for us was the right thing to meet our target groups with. Because that’s what we want them to do when they come here’.

For others the campaign did not mirror the organisation they felt they were part of. It did not convey day to day and quite mundane experiences of teaching and research, for example. It was ‘cool’ and ‘fancy’ but ‘does not reflect at all what is going on at the departments of NTNU’, to the extent that it felt like ‘a stab in the back’ (said one critical academic staff member). For some, the campaign was too ‘polished’ and ‘corporate’: many researchers, said one faculty communications officer, ‘would sort of keep at arm’s length from it, because they feel it’s too corporate or strategic, it’s got nothing to do with them’. Others suggested that the campaign was making claims that it did not live up to. One communications officer from a non-natural science faculty explained why the researchers she worked with disliked the campaign:

I think many felt that the campaign, this challenge democracy, challenge this- they felt that the leaders at NTNU were kind of saying things they did not do themselves. So we pretend that we are challenging society, or challenging problems, but we are not listening to our own employees.

Indeed, one academic staff member talked about the ‘irony’ of the campaign given that they felt NTNU was actually ‘the university in Norway least likely to Challenge Everything, as it’s more corporate and top-down governed than the others’. Still others again felt that the full breadth of NTNU’s disciplines was not represented. In contrast to the experiences of the faculty communications officer quoted in the section above – who appreciated the campaign because she felt it created space to showcase the humanities and social sciences – others thought that it contributed to the ‘marginalisation’ of non-natural science disciplines, or presented a way of doing research that was far away from the ‘reflective’ and ‘critical’ humanistic traditions.

None of these discussions about the kind of organisation that NTNU is (and should be) are new. Rather, the campaign rapidly became framed in terms of existing faultlines in organisational identity: concerns about ‘strategic management’ or ‘new public management’ versus the need to modernise; divisions between the natural and humanistic sciences and the extent to which NTNU is a university that values both of these; debates about (Norwegian)
language use and internationalisation. In this respect the campaign also points to wider
discussion about how contemporary academia should be funded,
structured, and managed (e.g. Amsler and Shore, 2017; Andresen et al., 2015), acting as a
microcosm not just of contestation over what kind of institution NTNU should be but of
debates about the nature of universities more generally. Sense-making about the campaign
thus became focused on its representative capacities and whether it was seen – and felt – to
match identities within the organisation. Exactly because these identities, and the way in
which NTNU is imagined, are diverse (Wæraas and Solbakk, 2008), the campaign made
visible differences between those who were happy to see themselves within it, and those who
rejected the model of the university that it represented.

The campaign demonstrates the negotiation of new forms of expertise and
professionalisation within universities

Of the faultlines that differences in sense-making reveal, perhaps the most fundamental
concerns the way in which NTNU is governed, how it spends its money, and the degree to
which its activities should be modelled upon corporate practices. In informal conversations
about the campaign – particularly with those working in humanities and social research
disciplines – it was clear that it was framed as being of a piece with the (contested) rise of
‘strategic management’, excessive spending on bureaucracy and other activities that are not
‘core’ parts of university business, and the erosion of ‘university democracy’. One aspect of
these developments is of course the use of organisational communication and branding
practices (cf. Frandsen et al., 2018). In interviews it became clear that one of the things at stake
within the campaign, and discussion of it, was the extent to which NTNU should spend
money on its communication activities, and the kind of expertise that is relevant to carrying
these out.

Many of the communications staff – particularly those based in the faculties – noted that
they had anticipated at least some of the controversy around the campaign because, as one
communications officer said, ‘my colleagues [in a specific academic department], for example,
just the fact that we have a communication division, they do not like it’. At least some
academic staff were represented as opposing professionalised communication functions
within the university, or as wanting very little money to be spent on communication
activities. ‘The scientists at NTNU’, said one interviewee involved in the development of the
campaign, ‘were like, oh you’re using so much money on an advertisement campaign. How
come we couldn’t get this money to fund our research?’. Indeed, a central criticism from
the campaigning group that had created the spoof posters concerned the amount of money
spent on the Challenge campaign at a time when they were working for ‘having more
employed’ at NTNU in stable, rather than short-term and precarious, positions. But these
tensions were not solely about money, and how it should be spent within the university. They
also concerned expertise, and the question of who knows how university communication
should be best carried out. I have mentioned communications staff’s engagement with the
book Three and a Tree (2012), which presents an argument for shaking up university
branding; this is just one example of the way in which those working in communication
roles presented themselves as thoughtful and knowledgeable experts who knew that there
was ‘a professional way of doing [university] marketing’. The ‘Challenge’ campaign was seen
as an expression of this position. It was self-consciously an effort to do something different
with NTNU marketing (and indeed with Norwegian university communications practice
more generally), and to infuse cutting-edge thinking from inputs such as Three and a Tree
into it.

Communication staff’s explanations of debates about the campaign within NTNU thus
often related to a lack of recognition of this expertise. While some academic staff said things
to me like ‘the only advert needed is the quality of our teaching and research’, or ‘you could
make a hundred good movies with that money ... about actual research, actual teaching’, those working in communications were clear that ‘it’s not like that anymore’: you could not expect students to find you, or to make sense of the programmes on offer, or anyone to understand your university’s brand and therefore know what it stood for, without sustained and specialist communications. One staff member involved in recruitment said that:

We do not communicate without thinking, without evaluating. People who work here with communication at NTNU are very conscious about what they’re doing, and we have so many things to be considerate of, and it’s not something we just do on a whim. ... [The academic staff], they don’t trust us to be expert in our area. Because they’re experts in all areas, not just biology or history but also communication, you know. There are a lot of experts in higher education!

Differences in sense-making about the campaign – was it good or bad, innovative or cliché? – thus reveal tensions concerning the increasing professionalisation and specialisation of support functions in the university (Gregory and Bauer, 2008). In particular it shows the infusion of new forms of knowledge into communication practice. It is no longer the case (if it ever was) that academic staff are the unquestioned holders of expertise; instead, universities are populated by professional, expert, practitioner communities in their own right.

Discussion and conclusion
In exploring internal sense-making about the ‘Challenge Everything’ campaign I have made four claims. First, the openness of the campaign meant that it was readily picked up on and personalised (and occasionally subverted) by NTNU staff. Second, its meaning within NTNU was always contextual, shaped by organisation members’ roles, interests, and concerns. Third, its controversial nature seems to primarily derive from questions of representation, and specifically whether organisation members recognised within it their own experiences of NTNU activities and culture. Fourth, its development points to the rise of new forms of expertise within university organisation, and the contestation of these.

The conceptual starting point for this work was that organisations and their branding are not static but are fields that are constantly being ‘talked into existence’ (Kornberger, 2010; Weick, 1995). This ‘verbing’ (Dervin, 1998) is not only always unfinished but multiple, given that complex organisations such as universities are plurivocal, comprised of different and occasionally incommensurable meanings (Spee and Jarzabkowski, 2017). This analysis has demonstrated how such divergent sense-making unfolded, and became public, in the case of a particular marketing campaign. Though such campaigns, and other forms of branding, may be framed as primarily oriented to the outside world, it seems clear that they also act as auto-communication, offering an opportunity for organisation members to articulate and negotiate their sense-making about it. In this case, we can suggest that this auto-communication has had two consequences.

The first is that it has played a role in rendering (more) visible certain key faultlines, positions, or points of debate within the organisation. Both external coverage of the campaign and less formal organisational chatter brought to the surface key differences in how NTNU is imagined: does the university live up to the claim of ‘challenging everything’? Should it present itself in ways inspired by corporate branding? How much should an ‘international university’ cleave to local culture and language? Does NTNU publicly represent, and value, all the disciplines that comprise it? There were already differing answers within the organisation to these questions before the campaign was released; what ‘Challenge Everything’ did was provide a focal point around which they could coalesce. Second, and relatedly, it seems likely that in doing this it has functioned to reinforce existing ideas about the organisation. Given that the campaign – at least for those I have encountered in this research – appears to have been interpreted and understood through pre-existing roles or priorities, its meaning has tended to derive from individuals’ prior positions. Those who were already inclined to view
NTNU as overly corporate, bureaucratised, and spendthrift see the campaign as an example of these tendencies; those who recognise the university in the campaign’s energy, boldness, accessibility, and innovation have this imagination of NTNU reinforced. It is unclear, in other words, that the campaign has changed anyone’s minds about the identity of NTNU (though the external effects are probably more complex). Instead we can speculate that it has acted as auto-communication in its purest sense: ‘self-referential communication through which [parts of the] organization recognize and confirm [their] own images, values and assumptions’ (Christensen, 1997, p. 199; my additions)[10].

This analysis of ‘Challenge Everything’ offers a number of lessons for university communications and for the practice of strategic communication more generally. The first is the significance of auto-communication, and the effects thereof. As Kornberger (2010) suggests, branding and marketing can no longer be imagined as solely directed at, and having impacts on, the outside world. They are always also performing the organisation to itself. As such, it is vital for communicators to bring the organisation along with them – to ensure, as far as possible, what Spee and Jarzabkowski (2017) refer to as a ‘joint account’ that can be mobilised in both internal and external management and communication efforts. In the case of publicity campaigns such as ‘Challenge Everything’, this may mean internal communication and engagement well before campaigns become public.

Second, such engagement is likely to be particularly important in plurivocal organisations – such as universities – where there are already well established divergences in sense-making. ‘Challenge’ was controversial because, in seeking to capture the NTNU brand, it brought to the surface differences in how organisation members understood NTNU’s identity. As Spee and Jarzabkowski (2017) demonstrate, creating shared meanings is not straightforward. Unified communication efforts will be especially difficult in organisations where organisational identity is contested and where members are happy to make this process of contestation public. Communicators should thus anticipate controversy, and be prepared to manage this.

Third, and relatedly, ‘Challenge’ tells us something about the specific challenges of strategic communication activities within contemporary universities. Higher education is undergoing shifts towards a market-oriented approach that draws on the practices of the corporate sector (Amsler and Shore, 2017; Andresen et al., 2015; Tienari and Aula, 2011). The ‘Challenge Everything’ campaign both reveals some of the tensions these developments are creating – between academic and professional staff, or concerning which aspects of a university should be highlighted in public communication – and suggests that it can be the process, as much as the content, of university communication that is controversial. One of the things that is contested, in other words, is the expertise and eligibility of those in communications offices to speak for the university at all (cf. Frandsen et al., 2018). Understanding and learning how to manage this dynamic is a central challenge for university communications practice, for those who manage and organise universities, and for future research into contemporary strategic communication.

I want to close by briefly returning to the relation between university communication and science communication. Though my focus has been on organisational sense-making around the ‘Challenge’ campaign, the case study also has significance for thinking about public science communication: after all, debate about the campaign, and the extent to which it represented NTNU or not, played out in public as well as internal media. What I think we can take from this is the centrality of public representations, not just of scientific facts, or research knowledge, but of the cultures and organisations that produce these. Science communication is frequently concerned with the products of research – knowledge, facts, technologies – and the reception and negotiation of these in public spaces. The high profile nature of this campaign, and its resonance with key debates not only within NTNU but in Norway more generally, suggests that it might be productive to more frequently attend to different, but
related, questions: what is a university? How are such research organisations presented in public? And how do debates about how they should be funded, structured, and managed unfold within public science communication?

Notes
1. Though these interviews have in part involved a snowball approach – where interviewees suggest other individuals the interviewer should speak to – I am grateful to my colleagues, and in particular to Johanne Færevaag Nome, for initial suggestions as to who were key actors in the campaign, and for assistance in gaining access to them.

2. NTNU has campuses in Trondheim but also in the cities of Ålesund and Gjøvik; I have, however, focused my attention on how ‘Challenge’ was articulated within Trondheim.

3. https://www.ntnu.edu/about.


5. The content – such as these additional words – and aesthetics of the campaign would, of course, also be fertile ground for analysis. In this article I however focus on sense-making by NTNU organisation members about it, rather than myself analysing the campaign’s discursive or visual meanings.

6. The final version of the video can be viewed at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=1&v=hnzCuhuyuf4c.

7. A selection of examples from the campaign are archived at: https://web.archive.org/web/20190529094059/https://www.h-k.no/jobber/ntnu+++profilkampanje.html.


9. It is worth noting that aspects of the public ‘Challenge’ campaign also featured encouragements to ‘Challenge’ those in authority at NTNU. Full page newspaper spreads on Saturday 8th September, for instance, depicted the Rector and other well known university figures along with the tagline ‘Challenge This Man’ (or, where appropriate, woman).

10. At the same time it has also opened these ‘images, values, and assumptions’ up for debate. As one communications officer noted, the campaign created “good discussions about what is a university, what is good university communication. You may agree or disagree with this campaign, but it creates a common starting point for discussion”.

References


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