



# Performing catharsis: The use of online discussion forums in organizational change

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Received 14 October 2007; received in revised form 4 February 2008; accepted 6 February 2008

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## Abstract

Online discussion forums have been used to both support and resist organizational change. Our empirical study examined how employees in one organization used an online forum to help them deal discursively with changes that they perceived as threatening to their identity. In particular, we found that the postings of one key individual were central in framing the organizational changes in a way that had powerful cathartic consequences for employees' feelings of anger and loss of face. Paradoxically, however, we also found that such use of the online forum had the contradictory consequence of helping to facilitate the very changes that employees perceived to be problematic.

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*Keywords:* Catharsis; Discourse; Online discussion forums; Organizational change; Practice; Virtual communication spaces

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## 1. Introduction

Organizational communication about change can powerfully shape how employees interpret and incorporate those changes within their everyday work practices (Ford & Ford, 1995). Many organizations are relying increasingly on virtual spaces such as online

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discussion forums to facilitate communication about impending changes (e.g. Wellman et al., 1996). In some cases, the online discussion forums have served as powerful media in people's attempts to support and spread the change (see examples in Rheingold, 1993), while in others, the forums have been used to mobilize considerable resistance to change (cf. Bennett, 2003). We were interested in understanding how virtual communication spaces may be enrolled during a process of organizational change to address potential threats to people's identity at work.

Research on organizational change has documented how times of organizational crisis or transformation create unique challenges to members' identities (see Berg, 1979; Coch & French, 1948; Cox, 1997; Weick & Quinn, 1999). As change in organizations typically involves shifts in the way people work, these may introduce feelings of inadequacy and dislocation that potentially challenge people's identities as competent workers (Ezzamel, Willmott, & Frank, 2001; Kondo, 1990). Organizational changes may also reduce or replace meanings and practices that are central to people's positive view of themselves, such as when they are no longer allowed to engage in activities or use artifacts that had signaled their prestige or prowess to others (Pettigrew, 1985). Furthermore, employees may consider new tasks and new approaches as affording them with less autonomy, responsibility, or standing in the organization than their previous ways of working (Cox, 1997), and they may interpret this as an overall loss of status and thus as a threat to their professional identity.

Using a practice perspective, we examined how the employees at Epsilon, a large European petroleum products company,<sup>1</sup> used an online discussion forum to help them deal with organizational changes that they perceived as challenging to their identity. We explored this relationship through a qualitative analysis of messages posted to the online forum during an extensive, multi-year organizational change process at Epsilon. We found that the postings of one key individual were particularly central in framing the organizational changes in a way that helped others cope with the perceived identity threat. However, we also found that use of the online forum had contradictory consequences for the outcomes of the change process: on the one hand, postings to the forum were used both online and offline to articulate and discuss opposition to the changes; on the other hand, such expressions of opposition had cathartic consequences that reduced employees' motivations to act specifically on the changes that were at the source of their frustrations. As a result, not only did the employees fail in practice to resist the changes they railed against discursively, but also by dealing with (and thus defusing) the threats to their identity in the virtual space, they inadvertently facilitated the implementation of the changes in the work place.

In what follows, we first consider some of the research on online discussion forums, and particularly those studies examining the use of online discussions in organizational change. We then describe the setting of our research study and the methods we used to analyze the Epsilon online forum data. We next discuss our findings in terms of three practices, which we identified as helping Epsilon employees address the threat to their identity by supporting their discursive opposition to the change process. We also show, however, that engaging in these practices had the unintended and paradoxical consequence of dampening employees' interests to directly resist the changes. We conclude the paper by examining

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<sup>1</sup> All names of companies, people, and projects are pseudonyms.

the research implications of the use of online forums to perform catharsis during processes of organizational change.

## 2. Online discussion forums and change

Online discussion forums are widely available computer-supported communication technologies that facilitate virtual interaction on the Internet. Usenet, one of the largest and most popular such technologies, has been hosting online discussions since 1979. It has grown to include over 20,000 different interest newsgroups with more than half a million postings per day (Wasko & Faraj, 2000). The growth of the world wide web has greatly increased the number and usage of these communication technologies, commonly referred to as “message boards,” “electronic bulletin boards,” “online discussion groups,” or “web forums.” We will use the label “online forums” in this paper.

Online forums are virtual communication spaces structured by discussion threads. Threads begin with a message containing information, questions, requests or commentary. This message is followed by further messages replying, commenting and inquiring on the topic of the first message. Typically, threads are sorted in descending order of the date and time of the most recently posted message. Online forums are thus a many-to-many communication space where participants can post a new topic and reply to an existing one. This communication is archived, and all of the threads are always available for reading and posting. Online forums may be public or private. Usenet, for example, is a public discussion forum that anyone with access to a computer and the Internet can read or post to. However, many online forums, particularly those hosted on internal corporate networks, are private and in such cases only registered users can read and post to them. Participation in either type of online forum is typically voluntary, and messages may be posted anonymously, pseudonymously, or with identification. Most of the private forums require user information for registration, validations, access, and posting.

The social organization of online forums varies considerably depending on users' communication practices, type of forum (public or private), and location (within an organization or publicly available). Public forums are often self-organizing, where responsibility for managing discussions, contributions, and difficulties are shared, in principle, by all participants (Baym, 1995). However, research has shown that participation in such online forums is often unevenly distributed (Butler, Sproull, Kiesler, & Kraut, 2002). There is often a core group of participants who contribute most actively to the messages and to the running of the forum, a peripheral group of participants who occasionally contribute a response or comment but rarely participate in the running of the forum, and a marginal group (often referred to as “lurkers”) who read but almost never post messages, and do not participate at all in forum management.

Examining the various studies of online forums, we can identify at least three different (but overlapping) communication purposes for which these virtual spaces have been used: information sharing, coordination, and emotional support. In discussing these types of online forums, it is important to recognize that the distinction among them is more a matter of analytic convenience than empirical reality. Online forums can be, and often are used for all three purposes simultaneously (Baym, 1999; Wilson & Peterson, 2002). In our discussion here, however, we will consider them separately in turn.

First, online forums are most commonly used to *share information*. They allow participants to solicit and provide information as well as interact online to collaboratively

produce it (DeSanctis, Fayard, Roach, & Jiang, 2003). Online forums are primary means for help seeking and help giving, both within public spaces as in Usenet-type discussion groups (Wasko & Faraj, 2000) and within private company-specific forums (Constant, Sproull, & Kiesler, 1996). While many people receive valuable information through online interactions, misleading information may also be exchanged, particularly on public, anonymous and unmoderated discussion forums (Wellman et al., 1996). Thus, online forums are not necessarily cooperative spaces for neutral exchange of information and ideas. Research has shown that participants invest part of their identity in views they share online, and if such views get challenged, personal attacks and “flame wars” may result (Burnett & Buerkle, 2004; Lee, 2005). In spite (or perhaps, because) of such social dynamics, online forums have been found to be effective spaces to build various communities of interest, where groups of individuals share and develop information online about a specific topic (Gongla & Rizzuto, 2001; Wasko & Faraj, 2005).

Second, online forums are frequently used for *coordination*. Organization-specific online forums are commonly used to coordinate activities across organizational and geographical boundaries because they facilitate the distribution and integration of work among members who may never meet face to face (Jarvenpaa & Leidner, 1999). The online forums allow members to mutually adjust their efforts, and to work towards developing a shared language, a joint history, and over time, possibly common values and beliefs (Lakhani & Von Hippel, 2003). Further, as online forums provide a repository of communications exchanged, the historical and ongoing documentation of members’ interactions, agreements, and procedures serves as a useful collective memory.

These online forums, however, are not without difficulties, and a number of researchers have documented complications and conflicts associated with information, interpretations, and interests that arise as groups try to coordinate their work across time and space (Cramton, 2001; Hinds & Bailey, 2003; Mortensen & Hinds, 2001). When debates and disputes persist for prolonged periods, the community may be polarized into different and possibly incompatible accounts of its shared experience (Smith, 1999), with members becoming increasingly disengaged and alienated over time (Leizerov, 2000; Mortensen & Hinds, 2001). However, conflict may also serve as an occasion to take stock of a community’s values and beliefs, thus generating a renewed commitment to common goals (Kollock & Smith, 1996). For example, studies of task-oriented virtual communities (e.g., open source software development) find that informal leaders, especially those whose expertise or performance have earned them a central position in the community, can play a crucial role in turning disputes into productive exchanges by offering a fresh interpretation of the challenges jointly faced by the members (Koch & Schneider, 2002).

Third, online forums have been used to seek and provide *emotional support*, as when participants discuss personally challenging problems or disorders with others who share common circumstances, for example, a chronic disease, an addiction, or mental illness (Galegher, Sproull, & Kiesler, 1998). Such use of online forums often involves providing detailed information about the experiences, treatments, and consequences of the shared difficulty, and, more importantly, also offers relief through the direct support of others (Turner, Grube, & Meyers, 2001). This is especially helpful in situations where the illness or troubling condition is stigmatized, and participants, wishing to preserve their privacy, are less willing or able to seek support in person (Broom, 2005). A particular powerful feature of online forums in such circumstances is the possibility of anonymity (or pseudonymity), which allows participants to openly discuss their experiences online while avoiding

personal disclosure or embarrassment (Bowker & Tuffin, 2002). The online nature of the interaction in these forums allows individuals to choose how to present themselves to others, affording the shaping of virtual identities that can reduce the threats to face entailed by co-presence, especially where the disorder is hard to conceal face to face. Indeed, research has shown that participating in these communities may help participants overcome the identity challenges associated with various physical, social, and psychological hardships, particularly when the online support is combined with offline assistance (see Cummings, Sproull, & Kiesler, 2002).

All three of these purposes for using online forums—information sharing, coordination, and emotional support—may be valuable in both the design and implementation of change and in the mobilizing of resistance to it. As many of these online forums extend within and across organizations, we may also expect that their use in change efforts will entail a scale that would have been difficult to manage with traditional communication media.

A number of studies suggest that online networks can facilitate social change by increasing the pace and reach of that change, while also enabling additional innovations and improvisations (Kling, 2000; Morrison, Roberts, & Von Hippel, 2000). People may engage in online interactions to share their experiences and adaptations with others, and in this way reduce the overall disruption occasioned by the change that is experienced by the broader community. Online forums may also provide access to various forms of assistance that can help users incorporate the changes in their everyday work practices (Cecez-Kecmanovic, Moodie, Busuttill, & Plesman, 1999). This allows those involved in implementing the changes to deal with objections and questions early, thus gaining the opportunity to know about and address some of the obstacles to change as they arise (Orlikowski, Yates, Okamura, & Fujimoto, 1995).

The availability and use of online forums may also enable change agents or managers to communicate directly with the people most affected by the change, rather than relying on the more formal and sometimes opaque social networks that exist within large organizations and communities. Studies of online activism suggest that online communication spaces may be used to craft shared interpretations of a virtual community's goals and conditions for action (Leizerov, 2000; Wilson & Peterson, 2002). Once produced, this sense of shared fate can then be used to enlist members' commitment towards some specific changes.

Other studies, however, have shown that online forums may be used to mobilize and organize resistance to change (Kahn & Kellner, 2004), for example, facilitating the online synchronization of large-scale, offline demonstrations against globalization (Leizerov, 2000; Smith, 2001), a phenomenon that has been referred to as “smart mobs” (Rheingold, 2002). Research on the use of online forums to oppose change has suggested that participants' identities may be enrolled in practices of resistance (Langman, 2005). Identification with the online community enables the development of common beliefs, language, interests, and memory (Burnett & Buerkle, 2004; Diani, 2000; Summers-Effler, 2002), thus lowering the requirement to frequently share explicit information and engage specific coordination mechanisms to mobilize and organize the action of participants (Bennett, 2003).

While there have been some studies of the use of online forums to shape social change, there has been no systematic assessment of their role in framing people's interpretations and experiences of organizational change. As a result, there are no strong indications to

suggest certain outcomes are more likely than others. Given that the research results that are available point in different directions, we can expect that attempts to use online forums to influence meanings, identities, and actions will be used in multiple, contingent, and emergent ways within organizational change processes. We turn now to the study we undertook that involved examining how an online forum was used to frame employees' interpretations and experiences during a process of organizational change that took place over multiple years within Epsilon.

### **3. Setting and methods**

#### *3.1. Research setting*

The setting for this research is Epsilon, a large European petroleum products company that embarked on an extensive change program in the late 1990s. The change program spanned multiple years and had two main goals: (i) to merge with the Omicron organization; and (ii) to prepare the newly merged organization (which continued to be known as Epsilon) for an initial public offering (IPO) on the European stock market.

While both Epsilon and Omicron operated in the petrochemical industry, and both had their headquarters located in the same country, they differed in a number of important ways. First, Epsilon was an older company than Omicron, having been founded in the mid-fifties, while Omicron was barely a decade old. Second, Epsilon's industrial units relied on mechanical processes that required a large workforce, whereas Omicron's plants were almost fully automated. This led to the third difference between the two companies: their size. At the time of the merger, Epsilon had approximately 4000 employees while Omicron's workforce numbered about 1000. Fourth, Epsilon's employees were almost all unionized while only a few workers at Omicron belonged to a union. This meant that whereas many changes at Epsilon had historically been met with industrial action, this had not been the case at Omicron. While the blue-collar workforces of both companies were similar in terms of education, age, and gender distribution, their white-collar workers differed significantly. Most notably, Omicron included a higher proportion of college graduates and MBA degree-holders among its managers than did Epsilon.

Epsilon was headed by two different CEOs during the change program, each of which had his own approach to managing the changes. The first CEO, Anthony Smith, was hired from Sigma, a large and major competitor, and was responsible for two goals: (i) rationalizing Epsilon's processes so as to avoid duplication when it merged with Omicron; and (ii) implementing substantial cost-cutting measures to improve Epsilon's financial position so that it would command a higher price when it was floated on the stock market. Smith's tenure, which spanned from 1999 to 2001, was marked by two main change initiatives. Project TIGER was a cost-cutting effort which included streamlining the company's production and distribution network, and the elimination of over 500 white-collar jobs. Project PRIME also aimed to cut costs, but was largely focused on redesigning some 200 work processes over the course of a year.

The second CEO to head the company during the change program was Paul Jones. Jones was CEO of Omicron, and when Epsilon merged with Omicron in March 2001, Jones became CEO of the merged company. Jones's primary orientation was to manage the post-merger integration process, which he addressed by implementing Project TEAM and Project S/Energy. Project TEAM included a number of initiatives intended to engage

employees in the post-merger process: a redesign of internal communication processes, a series of motivational workshops, and an electronic suggestions box for employees to offer ideas for cost reduction. Project S/Energy included the deployment of a large-scale enterprise IT system intended to integrate information flows across the company.

Just before Smith joined Epsilon to become its CEO in 1999, the communications department launched a web-based online forum on the company's intranet. One of the people responsible for setting up this online forum explained in an interview how this came about:

[The online forum] was born [because] there were a lot of people in the company who were not familiar with [computers] so we thought [...] “what if we created a discussion forum?” [...] The idea [took shape] and the online forum was launched. It was not officially authorized by anyone [...] Its creation was not discussed in any board meeting, no one thought “let's do this.” It was [just] born!

While this internal online forum was initially used for technical and routine issues, usage shifted as the change programs got underway, and Epsilon employees began to interpret the impending changes as threatening to their identity as Epsilon workers. Over time, the use of the online forum became exclusively devoted to employees' discussions about the ongoing change process. As one of the employees noted in an interview:

[The online forum] started with technical and practical questions, about business, about procedures, everything that comes to mind. It also had a really funny side to it... Then we went into a more serious stage with criticisms of management.

None of Epsilon's senior managers posted to the online forum, and for the most part, they either ignored or tolerated its existence. Things changed towards the middle of 2001 when the CEO at the time (Paul Jones) suspended Mark Peterson, a long time white-collar employee and one of the most active posters in the online forum, specifically for reasons of insubordination as reflected in his online postings.

Our study focuses on employees' use of the online forum to examine how they engaged this virtual space to deal with the change program being implemented at Epsilon. It concentrates on the time period from November 1999, the date of the launch of the company's internal forum, to October 2001, when Peterson's suspension was reversed and he was reinstated in the company (see Fig. 1 for a timeline of major events and postings).

### 3.2. *Data collection and analysis*

Access to Epsilon as a research setting was opportunistic (e.g., Weick, 1990; Weick, 1993), and as a result, the focus was shaped inductively by the contents of the online forum and participants' accounts of their discussions both on and off the forum. Our study is thus grounded in employees' experiences of the changes occurring within Epsilon over time. The primary data consisted of archived messages of the online forum, supplemented with key interviews and some additional documentary records. It follows in the tradition of research studies that rely primarily on electronic data as the locus of the phenomenon of interest (Cramton, 2001; Ford & Ford, 1995; Hine, 2000; Orlikowski & Yates, 1994; Romm & Pliskin, 1998; Wasko & Faraj, 2005).

Epsilon's online forum accumulated over 3000 messages over its 22-month lifespan (November 1999 to September 2001). Because we were interested in how this forum

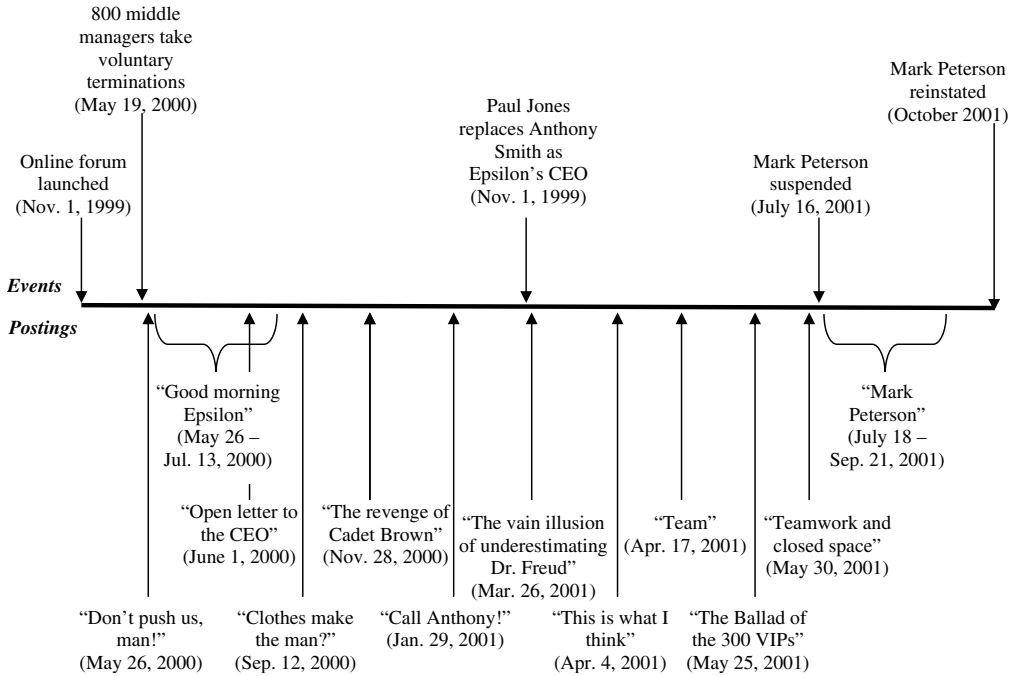


Fig. 1. Timeline of major events and forum postings at Epsilon.

was used by employees to deal with threats to their identity, we focused on those messages that specifically addressed the change program and employees' responses to it. In this selection, we were guided by our interview data obtained through conducting eleven interviews with Epsilon employees. Six of these interviews were conducted over time with a key informant who was an occasional poster on Epsilon's online forum. The other five interviews were conducted with three participants who were major posters to the forum, and two participants who never posted to the forum but who "lurked" extensively on it.

Our interview data pointed to particular messages on the online forum—all posted by Mark Peterson—as being very significant in employees' experiences of the change program and their attempts to cope with threats to identity (cf. Hine, 2000). Using this data as a guide, we selected 500 messages that were posted to the internal Epsilon online forum for our analysis. In addition to supplementing the online forum data set with interview data, we obtained some additional data from two sources. We first collected documentary materials such as copies of the company's internal magazine and publicly available company reports, which helped us to obtain a detailed representation of the change process attempted at Epsilon during the time period of our study. We also reviewed the messages posted to a public newspaper discussion space in conjunction with a news story published in 2001 about Epsilon's internal forum and Peterson's suspension. As is common for newspapers that have an online presence, a discussion forum was associated with the Epsilon story, and we reviewed the messages posted by Epsilon employees to this virtual space.



Data analysis involved close reading of the interview transcripts and the messages in the online forum. We then proceeded to perform open coding on the messages and interview transcripts to identify themes in the content and context of the messages, with a particular focus on understanding how employees were writing about and coping with the changes that were being implemented at Epsilon. We paid especially close attention to those messages identified by participants as salient in their experiences of the change efforts. We found that both reading and writing of messages on the online forum were activities that employees engaged with to cope with threatening changes. After an iterative process of coding and recoding, we identified a set of three discursive practices that Epsilon employees enacted with the online forum in order to deal with challenges to their identity as valued employees. We found that employees' engagement in these practices over time allowed them to enact discursive opposition to the changes, and in this way perform what can be understood as a form of catharsis, which offered them some release from the identity challenges they were experiencing in the work place.

#### **4. Performing catharsis**

Before discussing the three cathartic practices engaged in by employees, we examine how they made sense of the changes being implemented at Epsilon, and why they interpreted these as threatening to their identity.

Employees read and understand management's decisions and actions on a symbolic as well as pragmatic level (Pfeffer, 1981). At Epsilon, employees interpreted many of the decisions and policies associated with the change programs as threatening their status and self-worth as valued members of the original Epsilon company. In particular, employees interpreted both the rhetoric and the content of the change projects initiated by the two CEOs as dismissive of their long-standing contributions to the company, and thus as identity threatening.

Anthony Smith—the first CEO to embark on an ambitious change program at Epsilon—explained and justified the changes as required to bring Epsilon in line with Sigma, a major competitor and his previous employer. Smith's efforts in cutting costs and rationalizing processes were modeled on how things worked at Sigma, and he explained that this was the only way in which Epsilon could remain competitive. While Epsilon had never been a leader in its industry, many employees (particularly the old-timers) felt considerable pride in and loyalty to the company. They interpreted Smith's explanations and justifications for the change program as an attack on their identity as loyal Epsilon employees. One employee explained in an interview:

It's a situation where there is someone that comes to this company and says: "You are nothing, you're good for nothing, you're worth nothing." The company where he comes from is the model company and he is going to make us in its likeness. "That's how we're going to do it, like they do it at Sigma. At Sigma this is how things are done." So it's an aggression, it's an aggression. [And] to top it all, Sigma is our biggest competitor [laughs]!

Paul Jones, who succeeded Smith as Epsilon's CEO, employed a somewhat different tactic. Rather than modeling changes on an external competitor, he attempted to introduce ideas, techniques, and processes from Omicron, where he had been CEO. Epsilon employees perceived these efforts as signaling that Omicron's ways and employees were better than those at Epsilon. As one long-time Epsilon employee noted in an interview:

[There were] public statements [...] from top management saying that Epsilon is a culture of the past, it's not dynamic [...] it was even labeled "backwards" and almost civil service in the negative sense. That it is [a culture] we need to let go and forget: this was said publicly. There is, you know, pain and then some more pain, defeat and then some more defeat. [...] This is not fair because, sure Epsilon's culture had some flaws, but there were also good things about it.

A further source of threats to identity came from the content of the change initiatives. The changes as implemented were seen to negatively target Epsilon processes directly, and to disproportionately favor Omicron's employees over Epsilon's. For example, Epsilon members complained that Jones' decisions about his senior management team privileged Omicron people, as one employee explained in an interview:

A lot of people felt that there were being mistreated at several levels. First, all the key management positions went to Omicron employees. Then there were the perks [...] small things, but it's one on top of the other that leaves scars. [For example] people from Omicron would come to work here, people without any status, [...] and they had garage places immediately, people from Epsilon didn't. Like that! Everything good for Omicron, nothing for Epsilon. [...] We were always, always discriminated against. Openly discriminated against.

A posting to the online forum echoed these concerns:

Management says that Epsilon workers don't know how to work and are not market oriented, so why did they stay with the Epsilon brand and have busied themselves with taking over all the powerful and decision-making roles and created a climate of fear? Why didn't they use the brand of the company they came from [Omicron]? They are taking advantage of the Epsilon brand and now they want to take over every decision-making role at Epsilon and they want to make us [their] willing subjects.

No matter how much Epsilon employees interpreted these changes to be threatening to their identity, they believed that there was little they could do about them. Feeling disempowered to resist the change program, they found an outlet for these frustrations in participating in discussions about the meaning and impact of the changes. In particular, many found the online forum a valuable discursive resource for venting about the changes, especially by reacting to a set of messages posted by Mark Peterson, one of the most frequent contributors. In this way, they experienced some measure of release from the negative emotions and tensions associated with what they interpreted as ongoing threats to their identity. This process of venting can be seen to be cathartic (Fenlason & Beehr, 1994), and we identified three specific practices through which employees performed such catharsis: constructing counter-narratives; sharing protest stories; and expressing solidarity.

#### *4.1. Constructing counter-narratives*

A powerful way to oppose a narrative is to produce a counter-narrative—a plausible alternative version of the situation that can compete with and potentially replace the dominant narrative. The central narrative accompanying the change program at Epsilon was seen by employees to demean, on the one hand, their capabilities, experiences, and

commitment, and on the other hand, the existing practices and ways of working within the company. By bringing in techniques, procedures, and personnel from Sigma and Omicron, the two CEOs signaled that they wanted to overhaul the core competencies of Epsilon, at the levels of structures, processes, and people. For long-time Epsilon employees, this narrative undermined their sense of self-worth and the value entailed in their long-standing work practices.

One employee, Mark Peterson was an exceptionally active and expressive poster on the company's online forum. Over time, he became seen as *the* voice of protest within Epsilon, and his messages were instrumental in constructing a powerful counter-narrative to the dominant message being sent by top management. In particular, he started to enact a distinctive ritual of posting to the online forum just after the announcement of changes by senior management. Every time the company's CEO announced a major policy change, Peterson would post a response to the online forum. His response mirrored (in reverse) the rhetoric used by the CEO to discuss the changes. Thus, in Peterson's postings, managers were portrayed as incompetent, insensitive, and unskilled in the design and implementation of organizational changes. In contrast, Epsilon employees were portrayed as open to change, committed to the organization, and competent to carry out the work of Epsilon. In this rhetorical inversion, Peterson constructed a forceful counter-narrative to that promulgated by senior management. Peterson's postings involved three types of messages: messages that *criticized* top management decisions and actions; messages that *mocked* top management's rhetoric and style; and messages that *affirmed* the commitment and capabilities of Epsilon employees.

In his critiques, Peterson pointed to what he saw as evidence of top managers' incompetence, and argued that managers' misguided decisions undermined the value of Epsilon and its employees. For example, during Smith's tenure, Peterson wrote the following in an essay posted to the online forum and entitled "Open Letter to the CEO":

What happened at Epsilon was almost a Manual of How Not to do Change in Companies.

The existing Epsilon company was represented as a "negative" reference and a positive model was introduced in order to copy that of a competing company [. . .] People were ill-treated in the face of a restructuring and a merger with another company. They were then left without knowing anything about what to expect [. . .] and ending up learning that there was a "confidential" (!) plan for the restructuring through reading the newspapers.

In other messages, such as "This is what I think" and "Teamwork and Closed Space," Peterson argued against what he saw as a problematic management style: an exaggerated focus on performance figures, and a preoccupation with overt symbols of status (see Table 1). In general, these critiques posted to the online forum framed top managers as unskilled and ineffectual.

Peterson also posted messages that mocked managers' rhetoric, posturing, and style, weaving irony with jest in an attempt to undercut their authority, a move that echoed the ways in which employees were being undermined in management rhetoric. For example, just after a senior management strategic retreat was announced, Peterson wrote a humorous essay making the point that the top managers were all but expendable for the continued performance of Epsilon's operations. In a posted message entitled "The ballad of the 300 VIPs," Peterson wrote:

Table 1

Messages posted to Epsilon's online forum: Criticizing management

Type of posting	Excerpts from postings
Critiquing managers' view of employees as costs	<i>This is what I think</i> Leading people is, above all, the mission of those that manage Teams. I think that this was never fully practiced among us, although it has always been part of the official corporate rhetoric. The problems and issues around people were mostly seen as "managing a resource". And how often have people been seen through the reductionist prism of "cost"? A cost to "reduce" to the lowest possible "cost"
Critiquing managers' actions as superficial	<i>Clothes make the man?</i> Are "jeans" and "polo shirts" going to change anything? Why not find ways to socialize with each other so we can build mutual trust? How about that cafeteria that has been promised for months?
Critiquing managers' lack of respect for the employees	<i>Open letter to the CEO</i> The existing Epsilon company was represented as a "negative" reference and a positive model was introduced in order to copy that of a competing company [...] People were ill-treated in the face of a restructuring and a merger with another company. They were then left without knowing anything about what to expect
Critiquing managers' spatial reconfiguration of the work place	<i>Teamwork and closed space</i> Those who have power have the tendency to keep it. Those who get it, are proud to display its symbols in the same way that warriors display their medals. Those who increase in power enlarge its symbols. Those who lose power suffer their symbols to wither away. The Office is still the Most Visible Symbol of Power of a Senior Manager. What have we recently witnessed? – Offices have spread like wildfire; – Our open space is invaded with plantation of new Offices; – Our open space shrinks and its users are increasingly crammed together  What are the consequences? – An increase in the number of those in Power; – We are more and more a company of the Powerful, and less and less a Team of Workers; – Teamwork is increasingly devalued through the decreasing availability of spaces to exchange ideas and work together.
Critiquing managers' skills through use of a parable	<i>The revenge of Cadet Brown</i> Suddenly, and in only a handful of months, as if out of a nightmare, a flagship company is treated as if it was made out of "styrofoam," seeming to have lost its memory, culture, and identity because those who created it never really knew how to work, and it now has to be rebuilt from scratch.

Why are we granted so much freedom while our VIPs linger afar?

Without VIPs, this company is a strange and silent place.

But we're still working. And Epsilon can still survive and function. The refineries didn't go crazy and are not on the brink of explosion [...] The computers are still working [...] Customer problems are being dealt with. New deals are being made. There are no cases of fratricidal stabbings. No one spits on the floor. No hydrocarbons are missing. They have not changed their chemical composition [...] The country still has energy and the president has not been overthrown.

[...] On Monday our VIPs will be back [...] We will tell them: "What would become of us without you? Thanks for coming back. We could no longer bear your absence. We missed you so much. So very much."

In this case, Peterson uses irony by exaggerating the skill and importance of top managers and thereby highlighting the opposite—their lack of competence as change leaders. In other irreverent essays (see Table 2), such as “Call Anthony!” (a reference to Anthony Smith, the first CEO), he uses analogy to make fun of the company’s senior managers and their style.

In addition to critiquing and mocking managers, Peterson also provided an alternative account of employees’ contributions to Epsilon and their role in the change program. He did so by reaffirming their value and commitment to the company. While top managers described workers as unable and unwilling to change, Peterson argued that this condition had been produced by the identity threats entailed in senior managers’ decisions and actions. His postings pointed to earlier change programs that Epsilon employees had

Table 2  
Messages posted to Epsilon’s online forum: Mocking management

Type of posting	Excerpts from postings
Using humor to devalue management’s competence	<p><i>The Ballad of the 300 VIPs</i></p> <p>Why are we granted so much freedom while our VIPs linger afar? Without VIPs, this company is a strange and silent place. But we’re still working. And Epsilon can still survive and function. The refineries didn’t go crazy and are not on the brink of explosion [...] The computers are still working [...] Customer problems are being dealt with. New deals are being made. There are no cases of fratricidal stabbings. No one spits on the floor. No hydrocarbons are missing. They have not changed their chemical composition [...] The country still has energy and the president has not been overthrown. [...] On Monday our VIPs will be back [...] We will tell them: What would become of us without you? Thanks for coming back. We could no longer bear your absence. We missed you so much. So very much.</p>
Using humor to describe the climate of fear engendered by the change program	<p><i>Team</i></p> <p>As the “crucial day” [of the merger] comes nearer, breathing gets heavier, the number of dry and silent mouths increases, vague and distant gazes multiply, one can see fingers lost hovering over the keyboards, hesitating before sending that email that can lay all to waste, decisions and opinions slip away as if—all of a sudden—this Company became a band of ventriloquists with pain in their stomach.</p>
Using humor to make fun of a series of managers’ decisions	<p><i>The vain illusion of underestimating Dr. Freud</i></p> <p>A few days ago, I decided to do a “check list” to control my hopes, beliefs, and thoughts three hours before going to bed, so as to prevent any nightmares:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Do not question that the latest pay raises were substantial and generous.</li> <li>– Do not assume that the Communication Department has the mission of communicating.</li> <li>– Convince myself that Epsilon employees are 110% motivated.</li> <li>– Believe that the Epsilon/Omicron merger is really going to happen.</li> <li>– Believe that we should feel as excited and happy with the upcoming IPO as we do with the upcoming birth of a child.</li> </ul>
Using a game analogy to depict managers’ actions	<p><i>Call Anthony!</i></p> <p>EpsilonLand was created as a place for the post and pre-CEOs of large petroleum companies to come to amuse themselves. It’s like an anti-stress “outdoor bound” where people play simulated management exercises using a game similar to “Battleship,” where indigenous CFOs, CIOs or COOs are shot down with the ease of “sinking a submarine.”</p>

embraced enthusiastically. He argued that if managers would be more positive about these workers' past accomplishments and future role in the organization, then they would willingly support the current changes. For example, in his online posting "Open letter to the CEO," he wrote:

In contrast to what is often said, people in organizations do not resist change. On the contrary, they long for it. If that change acknowledges them and reinforces their identities, people wish and need changes. An example is the hundreds of colleagues who work here and always got involved and supported the changes that went on at the Company over the last few years. People react negatively to change if it undermines their self-esteem and threatens their identity and sense of dignity.

Peterson's posting, "Don't push us, man," further affirmed employees' commitment to Epsilon by recognizing their strong emotional attachment to and identification with the company. Commenting on Smith's PRIME project, he wrote in the online forum:

I am not tired or unmotivated, man! I think I can still give a hand in order for this Company to be Greater. Look, Greater than Sigma, man! [...] You know, Epsilon is in the genes of many of the people that work here. We have second and third generation workers. People who laid the foundation for this company, and built it by hand, to whom Epsilon is often blurred with Family. Respect that, man! [...] I made myself a Professional at Epsilon and you cannot take that Pride and Value away from me. I even fell in love and met my Son's mother at Epsilon. Imagine that, man! [...]

In this message, Peterson reminded and emphasized the long-standing relationship that many employees had with the company. Many had spent their entire careers at Epsilon, as had their parents and even some of their grandparents. Employing strong and emotionally-charged rhetoric, he argued that being an Epsilon employee had been a central constituent of (his and other) employees' sense of self for a considerable time, and that the changes currently underway threatened to undermine that identity (see [Table 3](#)).

Taken together, Peterson's postings broadened the online discussion of top managers' handling of specific policy decisions to their (lack of) overall leadership skills. In critiquing and mocking the competencies of top managers while affirming those of the employees, Peterson suggested that it was managers, not employees, who were to blame for the difficulties, frustrations, and anxieties associated with the change program. In particular, his messages offered Epsilon employees an alternative and face-saving counter-narrative to the identity-threatening diagnosis provided by Epsilon's senior management. This counter-narrative argued that senior managers' discounting of Epsilon employees was not a commentary on workers' capabilities and contributions, but a symptom of the managers' lack of skills in leading organizational change. In this way, the postings to the online forum helped employees cope with the challenges to their identity as valued Epsilon workers.

#### 4.2. *Sharing protest stories*

Peterson's postings were much discussed and referred to by participants on the online forum. Over time, his messages also spread throughout the company, even to those workers who did not read or have access to the online forum (e.g., workers in the industrial

Table 3

Messages posted to Epsilon's online forum: Valuing employees

Type of posting	Excerpts from postings
Epsilon employees are open and motivated to change	<i>Don't push us, man!</i> I'm a defender of change and renewal and I always cherished those that will follow us in upholding our tradition of being a Great Company, Great Brand and perhaps one of the Country's Symbols. I am not tired or unmotivated, man! I think I can still give a hand in order for this Company to be Greater. Look, Greater than Sigma, man!
Epsilon employees have a strong attachment to the company	<i>Don't push us, man!</i> You know, Epsilon is in the genes of many of the people that work here. We have second and third generation workers. People who laid the foundation for this company, and built it by hand, to whom Epsilon is often blurred with Family. Respect that, man! [...] I made myself a Professional at Epsilon and you cannot take that Pride and Value away from me. I even fell in love and met my Son's mother at Epsilon. Imagine that, man! [...]
Epsilon employees have always been willing and able to change	<i>Open letter to the CEO</i> To the contrary of what is often said, people in organizations do not resist change. To the contrary, they long for it. If that change aims to reinforce their identities in aspects related to the recognition they receive socially, people wish and need changes. An example of that are the hundreds of colleagues that work here and always got involved and supported in the changes that went on at the Company over the last few years. People react to change if it disintegrates their self-esteem and threatens their identity and their sense of dignity.
Epsilon employees used to be proud to belong to the company	<i>The revenge of Cadet Brown</i> I doubt that any of you knows my friend Brown. [...] I spent many years boasting to him about my job in Epsilon compared to his "sad" job as a civil servant. He never said anything. How could he! For many years, being an Epsilon employee was a source of pride and social prestige. And how much so! I think that the magical impact of the word "oil" contributed to that, but there was also the strong identity reinforced by cultural bonds (crossing many generations in some families) of a diverse but cohesive employee community. We went through many years of building, rebuilding, adaptation and restructuring. In each new stage of Epsilon's life, I boasted of every change as an example of a vital and dynamic company, aware of its culture and identity, [...] able to transform itself and answer to its challenges.

plants). Participants to the online forum printed out, photocopied, and disseminated Peterson's online postings, and people would discuss them in person and in small, informal gatherings. One Epsilon employee explained in an interview:

Everyone talked about and distributed [Peterson's] postings, because at that time a lot of people did not go to the company's online forum and printouts circulated and a lot of people made copies and distributed them through their colleagues.

In this way, people shared in and contributed to the counter-narrative constructed online by Peterson, but they did so off-line and backstage, in kitchens and corridors, the places where the informal organization comes to life. As one employee noted in an interview:

Everyone talked about the [online forum]—in the hallways, in restaurants, in the streets—it was incredible. . . I had the clear notion that the vast majority of people went to the [forum]. It was the first thing they did. They loved it!

Peterson's messages were not only read and interpreted individually, as the literature on lurking would suggest (Barnes, 2001), but were also used as collective artifacts in informal conversations outside of the online forum. These messages provided the text and context for a communal sharing of stories that allowed multiple employees, not just those who read the online forums, to deal with their loss of face through a vicarious participation in protest. In an interview, one employee commented on how his group interacted with Peterson's postings:

I think that the online forum had an enormous influence on the informal part of the organization. I read [the online forum] once a day. It depended of which department you sat in. In mine, very few people would go [to it], but [ . . . ] there were a lot of people who discussed them outside [the online forum] and those conversations never appeared [online], because people were afraid. [ . . . ] We talked a lot in the kitchens especially about Peterson's postings. Sometimes we printed his messages and we would gather together to discuss and decode his messages. He used a lot of metaphors.

Peterson's postings thus took on a life beyond the online forum. His messages substantially shaped how employees reframed the rhetoric and policies associated with the change program, allowing them to cope with the ongoing attacks to their identity resulting from a change process that they felt powerless to divert or stop. The company's online forum had cathartic implications for forum participants as well as for those who did not post to or visit the online space. This influence became particularly apparent after Peterson's suspension from the company, as evident in the following message that appeared on the newspaper's online forum:

With Mark Peterson in the company, we had his humorous and critical messages on Epsilon's Forum, which so often reduced out resentment and expressed what was on our minds but that we did not have the courage to say.

[ . . . ]

What did they accomplish with this repressive act [suspending Peterson]? We no longer say what's on our mind, that's true. In the front, we have to say yes and to agree. But it is because of fear [ . . . ]. Because we have a family and [ . . . ] children to raise. But we didn't turn into idiots. We didn't stop thinking.

A similar message was posted in response:

Without Peterson, Epsilon is not Epsilon. Without him, a part of us, our sense of dignity, our soul simply does not exist. [ . . . ] We owe Peterson for his courage and for having risked being our voice [ . . . ] whatever we do we cannot forget that while Peterson is not with Epsilon, this company is diminished in its identity and in its value. [ . . . ]

Peterson fought and suffered so that we could recover our sense of dignity as workers and citizens in the face of Jones's regime and its servants. We miss having Peterson by our side.



Epsilon employees engaged with Peterson's messages as a way of venting the anger and shame associated with repeated threats to identity. For these employees, discussing Peterson's messages provided a valuable opportunity to share painful experiences and feelings of humiliation. Armed with Peterson's strong counter-narrative, they were able to release some of these tensions, engaging in a catharsis that allowed them to continue working even in the midst of deep challenges to their sense of self.

### *4.3. Expressing solidarity*

The third practice that we identified as helping employees deal with threats to their identity from the change program was a set of online activities that allowed them to express solidarity with their colleagues. These activities emerged in response to two events that were interpreted as especially intimidating by employees: the voluntary termination of 800 middle managers in May 2000, and the suspension of Mark Peterson in July 2001.

The voluntary job termination program was leaked to the business press, so that Epsilon employees found out about it by reading their daily newspaper. News of the terminations generated considerable anger within Epsilon. While the terminations were ostensibly "voluntary," Epsilon employees interpreted the program as an aggressive move intended to rid the company of long-term Epsilon managers. One employee explained in an interview how this request for job terminations was construed:

Epsilon was being swallowed, very mistreated. Senior managers from Epsilon were being removed from all the key positions. [...] They were all being replaced by people from Omicron or from the outside. Some were competent, but others were completely ignorant [...]. It's really bad that a manager of a large corporate unit is unable to say "No" to top management, or to say "No, let's take a look at this." They can only say "Yes, yes, yes." So that's what [the top managers] wanted—people from Omicron, their friends [...]. So Epsilon felt very threatened.

Shortly after the voluntary job termination program was reported in the press, Peterson posted a message on the company's online forum entitled "Don't push us, man" (see description in [Table 3](#)). The message ended with the statement "Say good morning to Epsilon!" A couple of days after Peterson's message was posted, participants started posting the following thread of messages on the company's online forum:

**Subject: GOOD MORNING EPSILON**

**From:** Mary Rogers

**Department:** IM

**Date:** 5/26/00

**Time:** 12:07:00PM

**Message:**

GOOD MORNING EPSILON

---

**Subject: RE: GOOD MORNING EPSILON**

**From:** John Samuels

**Department:** DPA

**Date:** 5/26/00

**Time:** 2:17:23PM

**Message:**

GOOD MORNING EPSILON!

---

**Subject: RE: GOOD MORNING EPSILON!**

**From:** Cindy Wilson

**Department:** AG

**Date:** 5/26/00

**Time:** 3:30:00PM

**Message:**

GOOD MORNING EPSILON!

---

This thread of messages grew every day, with hardly any variation in posted content. This expression of solidarity also had an off-line component—shortly after the “Don’t push us, man” posting, an employee fastened the following printed message on the wall next to the elevator leading to the executive suite (located on the 15th floor):

DON’T PUSH US, MAN

Watch out because the fall from the 15th floor can be quite painful!

Signed: Joe Epsilon

This show of solidarity ended one month later with a total of 452 online messages posted for this thread. The thread closed when a large number of voluntary terminations had taken place and senior managers began to issue verbal warnings to employees who were caught reading or posting to the company’s online forum. While these warnings had a dampening effect on some of the peripheral participants, the most active participants on the forum, including Peterson, continued to post messages in much the same way as they had done.

Employees engaged in another overt act of solidarity over a year later, when the then-CEO, Paul Jones, took some of Peterson’s messages as a personal insult, and decided to suspend him because of his postings to the online forum. Jones also sued Peterson so as to build a case for termination of employment on disciplinary grounds. Jones lost the lawsuit and Peterson was reinstated in the company three months after his suspension. In the ten weeks following Peterson’s suspension in July 2001, Epsilon employees posted over 500 blank messages on the online forum, each contributing to a thread entitled “Mark Peterson”:

**Subject: MARK PETERSON**

**From:** Martin Simms

**Department:** DPG

**Date:** 7/18/01

**Time:** 4:07:00PM

**Message:**

< blank >

---

**Subject: RE: MARK PETERSON**

**From:** Cindy Wilson

**Department:** AG  
**Date:** 7/19/01  
**Time:** 11:09:00AM  
**Message:**  
< blank >

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**Subject:** RE: MARK PETERSON  
**From:** George Greene  
**Department:** IM  
**Date:** 7/19/01  
**Time:** 1:54:02PM  
**Message:**  
< blank >

---

Both this thread and the one posted a year previously constitute ways of communicating support for and empathy with colleagues—a ritualistic grieving online. While only enacted a few times by Epsilon employees, this practice of expressing solidarity had the important effect of reducing the anger and shame resulting from persistent threats to identity. In an interview, one employee who occasionally posted on the company’s online forum described the “Good Morning, Epsilon” thread as “one of the more emotional events” in the company. He explained:

It was a message that I think was very strong. It was condensed, like it was saying: “We can’t speak out but we don’t want Epsilon to die.” [...] “Good morning, Epsilon” was very strong because it was a message that was a way to say “We don’t agree with what’s happening to us.” And I think it was very strong and a lot of people joined in ... it was a cry!

In a separate interview, another employee added:

I think that that message was simultaneously a protest against what was happening in the company and a manifestation of pride, of wearing the company’s shirt. It was those two things combined and it was neat. It was neat because it grew, unlike other things that started big and then withered away. That was clearly growing. It was at a stage when people were very angry at what was going on.

Epsilon employees thus dealt with the tensions resulting from managers’ actions through the cathartic practice of expressing solidarity with each other and with Peterson (see [Table 4](#) for a summary of these threads and messages). This collective performance of solidarity helped them to enact online the feelings they were unable to act on off-line.

Through constructing counter-narratives, sharing protest stories, and expressing solidarity, the employees at Epsilon used the online forum to release some of the tension generated by perceived challenges to their identity from the change program. This cathartic outcome, however, had the contradictory consequence of reducing employees’ motivations to act directly on the changes that they interpreted as threatening. As one employee, a frequent poster on the online forum, explained in an interview:

[O]ne of the functions of the [online forum] was the role it played—it was a very powerful instrument that was favorable to the company in the sense of being the escape

Table 4  
Messages posted to Epsilon's online forum: Expressing solidarity

Event	Start and end dates	# of messages	# of unique posters	Typical message
Request for 800 volunteer job terminations	5/26/2000 to 7/13/2000	452	135	<b>Subject: RE: GOOD MORNING EPSILON</b> <b>From:</b> John Samuels <b>Department:</b> DPA <b>Date:</b> 5/26/00 <b>Time:</b> 2:17:23PM <b>Message:</b> GOOD MORNING EPSILON!
Mark Peterson suspended	7/18/2001 to 9/21/2001	541	48	<b>Subject: RE: MARK PETERSON</b> <b>From:</b> Cindy Wilson <b>Department:</b> AG <b>Date:</b> 7/24/01 <b>Time:</b> 11:09:00AM <b>Message:</b> <blank>

valve for a lot of stuff that people [...] were going to do the next morning, [but that] they didn't do. You know [because of the forum], I am no longer storming into my manager's office and yelling at him.

Indeed, industrial action reports show that Epsilon's office workers (the part of the company that had access to the online forum) did not participate in any industrial action since Peterson started posting his counter-narrative to the online forum, while reports from previous years show that these workers had called strikes in response to changes in earlier periods.

## 5. Discussion and implications

In this paper, we have examined how employees at Epsilon used an online discussion forum over time to help them deal discursively with an organizational change program that they interpreted as challenging their identity as valued members of the organization. In particular, we found that the employees engaged in three practices with the online forum that allowed them to cope with their experiences of threatened identity. These practices—constructing counter-narratives, sharing protest stories, and expressing solidarity—had powerful cathartic consequences for employees' feelings of anger and shame, but as we argue below, these practices also had the unintended and paradoxical consequence of helping to facilitate the very changes the employees were opposing.

In *constructing counter-narratives*, Mark Peterson was able to produce a powerful and plausible alternative account of the difficulties associated with implementing change at Epsilon. By critiquing and mocking senior managers' leadership skills, and in reaffirming the loyalty and competence of long-time Epsilon employees, the counter-narrative inverted the dominant managerial rhetoric. It offered employees relief from the tension they were accumulating from having to hear and observe senior managers' rhetoric and decision-making, which they perceived to be dismissive and demeaning. It also provided employees with a set of symbolic resources—in the form of protest stories—which they then used in various contexts to enact their own discursive opposition to the change.

By *sharing protest stories*, employees shared in and contributed to the counter-narrative constructed online by Peterson. They did so both online—in continuing a discussion thread started by Peterson—and more importantly, in offline conversations, where they were able to reach and engage a much larger portion of the workforce (particularly those workers who did not have access to the online forum). Through ongoing discussions across multiple media, the employees helped each other make sense of both the changes and Peterson's oppositional postings. These messages (first online, and then when printed, copied, and disseminated) provided the text and context for a collective sensemaking and communal sharing of stories that allowed employees to deal with their loss of face through participating in a discourse of protest.

In *expressing solidarity*, employees participated in a collective and ritualistic posting of messages to the online forum that powerfully expressed their opposition towards senior management and their support for those colleagues facing corporate intimidation—the 800 middle managers requested to “voluntarily” leave the firm, and Mark Peterson following his involuntary suspension. This collective performance of solidarity helped employees enact their opposition in the online space, engaging in acts of protest that they felt unable to perform overtly and directly in the work place.

Engaging in these three practices over time was cathartic for Epsilon employees. It allowed them to vent their anger and shame, and in this way discursively release the tensions associated with ongoing challenges to their identity. In drawing on Peterson's postings to vent online on the forum or offline in the backrooms of the organization, employees found a way to deal with and defuse the threats to their identity discursively and vicariously. But such catharsis did not only reduce the accumulating tensions, it also reduced their motivation to act specifically on the changes that were at the root of their opposition. In this way, employees at Epsilon assuaged their concerns about threatening change programs without having to directly confront or contest the source of those threats—top management's change policies, plans, and projects. In this case, Peterson's framing of change in Epsilon's online forum was used for catharsis, but not to mobilize resistance to change.

Use of online forums can thus have contradictory consequences for organizational change. On the one hand, use of these forums can facilitate the expression of resentment, frustration, and solidarity, thus providing an outlet for employees' emotions. On the other hand, in defusing employees' feelings of outrage and frustration, such use can dampen any interest or impulse to openly resist the change program. As such, attempts to use online forums to shape others' interpretation of the change can have the paradoxical effect of resisting and facilitating its implementation at the same time. These dynamics highlight how engaging in online forums can empower employees to voice their opposition to changes, while also reduce their commitment to overt action by unwittingly dissipating their energy and focus to directly and explicitly confront the source of their tensions.

Epsilon employees used Mark Peterson's postings to the online forum to perform catharsis collectively, both online and offline. A relationship of mutual constitution between group discussions and Peterson's postings emerged as these postings served not only as the main resource but also the primary occasion for collective catharsis. The release achieved in these gatherings was obtained through the appropriation and interpretation of the postings, and these in turn, motivated Peterson to write and post online essays, shaping the content of his discourse. In the case of the “Good Morning Epsilon” and “Mark Peterson” solidarity threads, posting a message to a thread that contained a

few hundred similar messages allowed expressive release by joining in collective action. Postings to the online forum, as well as their engagement outside of the forum, was thus a distributed collective accomplishment between authors, readers, and interpreters, a social enactment of catharsis where each participant contributed to the collective experience. In Epsilon, catharsis was achieved not on one's own, but in interaction with others.

Managers' reactions to Peterson's messages and their appropriation was instrumental to the enactment of these cathartic practices. For the most part, senior managers at Epsilon did not acknowledge the existence of the company's online forum. They never posted any message themselves, and only rarely did they act on messages posted to the forum (the exceptions being the verbal warnings that followed the "Good Morning Epsilon" solidarity thread, and the suspension of Peterson). By ignoring the company's online forum, managers essentially exempted themselves from acting on the messages posted there. Use of the company's online forum was thus enacted back stage (cf. Goffman, 1963) to employees' relationships with senior managers, allowing the construction of counter-narratives, the sharing of protest stories, and the expression of solidarity to be displaced from the front stage of situated interaction between workers and managers. Such displacement kept the cathartic practices far enough from employees' dealings with senior managers and close enough to everyday work experiences to render them useful in addressing employees' concerns about the threats to their identity.

Our examination of the use of an online forum during organizational change has implications for the (largely psychological) literature on catharsis in that it provides a social account of a process that is often treated as entailing individual psychodynamics (Schaffer, 1970). While the concept of catharsis has been found by some scholars to have little explanatory value (Schaffer, 1970), others have focused on particular aspects of catharsis that they find to have analytic power and clearer psychological outcomes (Murray & Feshbach, 1978). In general, there is little agreement in the literature about the processes through which cathartic action allows people to release tension, or what its consequences may be for broader communal outcomes (Bushman, Baumeister, & Phillips, 2001; Bushman, Baumeister, & Stack, 1999).

Our account of Epsilon employees' use of their company's online forum sidesteps some of the difficulties in the literature by relying on a grounded view of catharsis—practices are cathartic to the extent that the actors experience them as effectively releasing tension. Our data suggest strongly that Epsilon employees found their use of the company's online forum allowed them some measure of relief from what they interpreted to be repeated threats to their identity. This emic approach to catharsis highlights an aspect of this process that is seldom discussed in the psychological literature on this topic: that catharsis is socially enacted in practice. Catharsis has been mostly treated as an individual process because of the emphasis on the individual production and reproduction of identity (Guerin, 2001). However, our study shows that Epsilon employees' use of their company's online forum for catharsis was both a practice-based as well as a collective accomplishment. At Epsilon, the practices of constructing counter-narratives, sharing in the protest discourse, and expressing solidarity were social activities that employees enacted together to reduce the threats to their identity.

Our findings also have implications for research on online discussion forums. Prior research has noted that online forums can be used to frame a community's experience so as to mobilize action towards or against change (Diani, 2000; Langman, 2005). Our study indicates that online forums can also be used to construct an oppositional discourse,

which may be used by others to enact cathartic practices that alleviate ongoing threats to identity. While our findings suggest that such performance of catharsis can help employees reconstruct their diminished sense of identity, they also highlight potential unintended contradictory consequences: the use of online forums to frame interpretations and experiences of organizational change can both oppose and facilitate its implementation. We thus propose that a more nuanced, contingent, and emergent understanding of the consequences of using virtual communication spaces during periods of organizational change may be warranted.

## Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the participants of this study, as well as JoAnne Yates and Stephanie Woerner for helpful research discussions. We gratefully acknowledge the support of the National Science Foundation (under Grant Number IIS-0085725).

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