

Competitive Paper for IMP2003

**Theme Networks – Network Themes: A Case of Unexpected Relationship Dissolution.**

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## **Theme Networks – Network Themes: A Case of Unexpected Relationship Dissolution.**

*This paper addresses the temporal and contextual aspects of business networks. Building on previous IMP work on event networks and on the concept of themes, this paper suggests a new framework combining event networks and themes that can provide new insights into and understanding of business network events. While the work done on business networks has greatly increased our understanding of the interdependencies between actors and between relationships, the focus has primarily been on the dyadic interaction of firms leading to a preoccupation with structural aspects often reifying the network as a collection of relationships. This has left out the process aspect to a large degree. We need to realize that there is a duality; that business networks are not only the result of interaction between firms, but that interactions between firms are also the result of business networks—at the same time!. To be able to investigate time, timing and process aspects in this dualistic perspective, there seems to be a need for a concept that will not collapse these aspects. Therefore the paper develops a concept of theme networks and demonstrates how this concept can be applied to a practical case of relationship dissolution. The paper contrasts the findings to a discourse analytical approach previously done on the same case by one of the authors. Implications for further developments of the concepts methodology are discussed.*

### **Introduction**

When managers are asked to explain how and why they have come to fill their current position often the explanation will refer to that they just happened to be at the right place at the right time. They will readily accept that luck or timing had something to do with it. Yet when it comes to the way they explain where they are going in the future and where their company is going, the explanations will no longer contain references to luck, but will often provide a picture of control, thorough analysis and planned actions. It seems that our expectation of a manager is a rational person in control of future events. But what if all the manager can hope for is to be at the right place at the right time?

Albert Einstein allegedly said that in his opinion “The whole of science is nothing more than a refinement of everyday thinking”. If we can somehow gain a better understanding of how events shape our future opportunities this will provide just such a refinement.

## **Theme Networks – Network Themes**

Before proceeding we would like to point to at least two different perspectives involving the concepts of themes and networks. One is the perspective of themes connected to other themes creating a network of themes: *Theme Network*. The other perspective is an actor focal perspective in which we consider a network of actors (humans or companies) and the themes of that network: *Network Themes*. In this paper we will primarily be using the first perspective to investigate how themes interact and evolve. This provides a different view from the more traditional actor focused network perspectives. In the strictest sense the actors in the theme network are the themes; however we will refrain from using that terminology so as not to confuse the use of the concept *actor*.

In the following we will define themes as the (subjective) accumulative and constant organising and re-organising of past events. Even future events could conceivably be included in the organising of themes as Hedaa and Törnroos refers to both ‘past-loadedness’ and future loadedness of events (1997 p.5), but this is beyond the scope of this paper.

In the following sections we will briefly describe a number of topics that we feel can contribute in developing the concept of theme networks; refining our thinking so to say.

### **Business networks and the interaction model**

The Industrial/international Marketing and Purchasing, IMP school of thought contributions have through the past 25 years developed a couple of models for understanding business and industrial markets. One of the models, the Interaction model (Håkansson 1982) views the relationship as consisting of a series of ‘episodes’ in exchanging a product or service, information, money and sociability. The relationship exists in and provides an ‘atmosphere’ within which interaction takes place (Ford 1997). The Interaction model identifies four elements which can be exchanged in an episode:

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- i. Product or service exchange
- ii. Information exchange
- iii. Financial exchange
- iv. Social exchange

Assuming that the episodes in the interaction model can have different effects on the relationship atmosphere, it seems reasonable to distinguish between e.g. positive or negative effects according to some measure. At a given point in time we can therefore consider how many episodes have been of a specific type (e.g. negative) out of the total number of episodes. We will refer to this as the *episode density*. The relevance of this measure is clear if we consider for instance how many negative (positive) episodes it takes to destroy (establish) a relationship. We would assume that it is not simply the number of episodes that matter but rather the frequency and the ratio between positive and negative episodes. We must note also that the density typically will decline as the number of episodes increase with the evolution of the relationship just like the density of a network decreases with the size of the network (Scott 2000 p.74).

Ford (1980; 1998) speculates about how the business relationship develops through time. Noting that analysing a relationship from single 'episodes' will only provide a partial picture and that analysing the overall 'atmosphere' will provide an incomplete picture, Ford presents a 5 stage life cycle model describing some typical 'episodes' connected with each stage. His model thus connects the 'atmosphere' with the 'episodes'. Episodes are the stuff that the relational atmosphere is made from, but the episodes must be seen in the light of the atmosphere as well. In a sense the atmosphere provides and shapes our expectations and sensitivity:

"Thresholds, the amount of time and input necessary for seeing or recognizing an object or event, are closely governed by expectancy. The more expected an event, the more easily it is seen or heard ..... perception is to some unspecified degree an instrument of the world as we have structured it by our expectancies." (Bruner 1986 p.46)

A point also supported by Weick:

"Expected events are processed quickly, which leaves time for adaptive action and frees attention for controlled processing ..... expectations do filter inputs." (1995 p.146)

Assuming that the episodes in the interaction model are merely a subset of a larger stream of events, we can expand the view of relationships as consisting of events in confluent event trajectories. Events

provide not just timing but cause possible changes in underlying themes and affect the 'atmosphere' of the relationship (Håkansson 1982; Brennan and Turnbull 1998; Ford, McDowell, and Tomkins 1998). Even events outside of the focal relation can have an impact to the degree that they are perceived (or later consequences are detected making a likely 'root cause' visible).

This is very close to our view on events and themes. We believe that events shape and create narrative themes, but themes also provide an atmosphere for events that can be favourable or inhibiting. In Ford's model the atmosphere is categorised as life-cycle stages. In our view themes can be categorised in a similar way but the categories need to be identified e.g. by using grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Locke 2001) or possibly generalising from multiple case studies (Halinen and Törnroos 2003) because the categories define what we can observe (Eisenhardt 1989; Eisenhardt 1991; Yin 1989). Themes are not an objective quality or attribute of an event but are highly subjective. And it is exactly this subjectivity and its consequences that we are interested in describing more closely.

### **Event networks**

Hedaa and Törnroos (1997; 2001; 2002) propose that the concept of event networks will provide a new view on interfirm relationships and networks. Their framework de-centers the individual and the firm as actors by focusing on the events instead. Because one event can be perceived by an actor and acted upon causing a new event, events can be connected via such relationships into event networks. In everyday language this notion is referred to as chains of events: The confluence of event streams. This is a one dimensional perception because the chain metaphor indicates a string of events compared to the more complex structure of the network metaphor. Compared to other approaches to describing interfirm relationships the event approach conserves important aspects of time. In essence events can be seen as timers of the relationships. It is by observing events that we can detect or deduce dynamic processes.

But the idea that events are coped with rather than controlled is not the only consideration we would like to suggest. When observing the dynamics of interfirm relationships we notice that events are not random phenomena. They are the result of actions of human agents or they are caused by nature. Every situation can be said to contain potential future events some of which are more likely to happen. Events in a sense cause other events creating our notion of a trajectory of events. Being able to perceive how previous events have created, shaped, and influenced our present situation may provide some indications to where future events may lead. We will refer to this as incoming event trajectory and outgoing event trajectory.

But what are events? Drawing on Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, Hedaa and Törnroos (1997) define "an event is an outcome of acts or changes caused by nature". Since our interest here is how events lead to other events, and since we do not know of inaccessible events of which we can only make inferences, let us focus on the perceived events. We will adopt the position that an event is not an event until it is perceived by someone and that the existence as well as the interpretation of an event therefore depends on the perceiver. Of course also unnoticed acts take place, but then nobody is there to tell. The way the perceiver explains the relationship between events can be put into stories and narratives to make sense.

### **Themes as a concept in Event Networks**

When an actor becomes aware of the outcome of another actor's act this is considered an event according to Hedaa and Törnroos. If we combine this with Weick's (1995) contribution to sensemaking we can view this as an organizing and structuring process inside or between actors resulting in a set of perceptions. Assuming the perceiving of events and the process of sensemaking is a continuous process we note that events that have already been observed and made sense of can change meaning later on in light of other events. Events are constantly defining, re-defining, and augmenting the stories and narratives of the past.

Just like in the fairy tales where the outcome will depend on what type of story or narrative we are dealing with, the actor will act in accordance with his sensemaking story. Future acts will be a function of not just the previous events but also of the underlying qualities of the story. The *theme* as well as the *event timing* of the narrative accumulation of perceived and expected events is likely to be an important influencer on the possible future acts.

Before going any further we will take the time to look more closely at the event model and at themes.

### **Themes, narrative and story**

The concept of theme is used in many different areas such as literature, theater and movies. It is even used to describe common design elements and features of a document or presentation by some software products. Here we will use the term to describe the main insight or dominant idea in an event. Classic themes include human vs. nature, searching for an identity, love, conflict, loss of innocence, good vs. evil.

Themes are brought forward through the story's or the narrative's action, characterization, actors, and use of imagery.

Often in the literature the narrative is associated with a final quality. They are stories that have been told, re-told, modified, selected and organized so that they comprise a whole (Boje 2001). Stories are what Boje refers to as 'ante-narrative'. Stories come before narratives and often lack the proper plot sequence and logic normally associated with a narrative. This notion of stories as 'ante-narratives' fits very well with our understanding of sensemaking as an ongoing and eternal process. There may never be a finished version; there is only the here and now ante-narrative or story that makes sense at this precise moment. Future events may require this story to be changed.

The case of complex business relationships and interactions seems to be close to Boje's description of Tamara (1991). In Tamara there are many different stages and actors and two spectators might get very different experiences.

*"In such a Tamara of collective sensemaking, people are only tracing story fragments, inventing bits and pieces to glue it all together, but never able to visit all the stages and see the whole." (Boje 2001 p.5).*

Drawing on Spradley (1980), Boje (2001) selects a taxonomy of four types of narrative themes: bureaucratic, quest, chaos and postmodern for theme analyses of a narrative. Since he is very focused on the 'ante-narrative' or the more unstructured story he is also interested in a fifth type; the ante-narrative type, that categorizes everything that 'falls between' the other four types. The ante-narrative analysis is about the things left out or beyond the explicit themes of the initial four types of narrative themes (Boje 2001 p.134). In the following we too shall use this approach in our attempt to see beyond the themes that are initially explicit and visible in our case.

### **Complexity and Business Networks**

Complexity theory holds a great promise for many aspects of social science (Kauffman 1993; Kauffman 1995; Stacey, Griffin, et al. 2000; Fuller & Moran 2001 ) but even though there have been some attempts at applying this theory to business networks (Geersbro & Hedaa 2002), so far there has been no clear breakthrough. If we assume that business networks are complex in the sense that they consist of a very large number of actors and interactions between them; studying these phenomena without somehow

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collapsing this complexity can be very difficult. In the studying of events and the themes that make sense of the events, how is complexity involved?

Complexity can be defined in terms of complex adaptive systems:

*“A complex adaptive system consists of a large number of agents, each of which behaves according to some set of rules. These rules require the agent to adjust their behavior to that of the other agents. In other words, agents interact with, and adapt to, each other.”* (Stacey 2000 p.276)

Here there is no overall blueprint to determine what the system is supposed to do. Rather agents interact locally according to their own intentions and principles i.e. it is not really system but rather an open network.

Because of the difficulties in studying real live complex adaptive systems such as interacting human beings, much of the research in this area is done using computer simulations programs. This raises however the question of whether it is possible to draw parallels or analogies, between computer simulations of complex adaptive systems and real organizations. Stacey (Stacey 2000) proposes that narrative themes rather than individual human beings should be seen as the self organizing entities. Stacey further suggests that the nature of the themes organize the experience of relating in a number of ways, by:

- selecting what is to be attended to
- shaping how what is attended to is to be described
- select who might describe it
- accounting by one to another for their actions
- articulating purpose in the form of themes that express ideology

Like in any complex system, evolution comes from a diversity in agents and interactions. Stacey’s view is that an organization’s internal capacity to move to a new organizational attractor depends upon the degree of diversity in its themes (Stacey 2001 p.389). The constant battle between legitimate, visible themes and invisible shadow themes are just below the surface of seeming tranquility. The fact that more than one unnoticed theme can be active at any given time is what can explain themes suddenly popping up. They have been ‘waiting’ just below the surface for an opportune moment to arise.



Our focus on themes rather than the individual actors then would retain the complexity aspects of the interactions.

### **Co-evolution**

As we are interested in themes and how themes might interact with one another rather than focussing entirely on the actors, we will need to consider how themes evolve and more importantly how themes co-evolve.

The concept of co-evolution originated in biology. It is used to describe different ways in which different species relate to one another in an ecology. The way that the evolutionary trajectory of one species is potentially affected by another species is often described as either symbiotic, commensal or parasitic. It seems that there are some differences in how these terms are defined but for our purpose we will adopt the definitions given below.

Symbiotic means that the species 'help' each other and that they have mutual benefit from the interactions. Commensal co-evolution is when one species uses the other typically for food or shelter without causing serious negative effects to the other species. And finally a parasitic type of co-evolution is when one species (the parasite) causes detriment to the other (the host) (Internet 2003).

Species can compete for resources as well: one species can drive out another, or both species might evolve into distinct non-competitive niches. Interdependence can change e.g. when external factors like the climate or geology change.

Recent work on complex adaptive systems have shown intriguing similarities in behaviour between ecologies of animals and the computer simulations of the complex systems (Kauffman 1995; Kauffman 1993; Holland 1998). And biologists have long harboured the image of a fitness landscape in which the peaks symbolise high fitness, and the species wander toward the peaks under the influence of mutations, natural selection, and random drift never actually reaching such peaks. We can also imagine that such a landscape is dynamic perhaps more resembling the waves of the ocean than stable mountain peaks on land.

## **Interaction between companies as co-evolving themes**

Now let us look at how themes interact with each other and with events and actors. For this purpose we have chosen to use an 'ecology' metaphor. Ecology can be described as the scientific study of the interrelationships among organisms and between organisms, and between them and all aspects, living and non-living, of their environment. Ernst Heinrich Haeckel (1834 - 1919) is usually credited with having coined the word 'ecology' in 1869, deriving it from the Greek oikos, meaning 'house' or 'dwelling place' (Xrefer 1999; Elton 1953).

If we view the themes as co-evolving in a common fitness landscape, we can imagine that even small changes in the fitness landscape may provide changes in themes population even if the themes do not change themselves. Another theme might suddenly pop up in the 'ecology'. On the other hand relatively large changes might have little impact. This non-linear connection between cause and effect is an important aspect of complex systems and is often referred to as the 'butterfly effect' (Kauffman 1995 p.17) where small changes in input or small variations in initial conditions make huge differences later on.

Combining the interaction model with the notion of co-evolving themes provide us with a framework for understanding dynamic or evolutionary aspects of business relationships. Business relationships that can be viewed as the result of episodes or events influenced by how themes (and what themes) are perceived by the actors; in sensemaking of what the past experience is and what future expectations might be.

Our framework for the analysis is inspired by McGrath and MacMillan (2000 p.51-52) and it has an actor focus. With the Actor, Resources, and Activities Model of IMP (Håkansson 1982) in mind for other purposes the framework could easily be modified to focus on activities performed or resources shared or employed in the event network, but for this case we chose the actor focus:

- Who is(are) the actor(s)?
- Who is involved, in what way?
- Who is referred to or talked about?
- Link to theme? What theme(s) will be influenced by this event? If any?

## **The case of TDF and PMI**

To illustrate how the theme framework could be used we have performed a simple event and theme analysis on a case that has already been analysed using discourse analysis (Hedaa 1997). Naturally the level of analysis and detail can be much deeper than shown here.

It is the case of a business relationship between a consultancy firm, Personal Management Institute (PMI) and the Danish national telecommunications operator publishing house, Tele Denmark Forlag (TDF).

Hedaa (1997) lists 53 exhibits, mostly newspaper articles and correspondence between the actors that were subsequently made available to him. Hedaa's analysis is done from a discourse analysis perspective, and hence describing and analysing who are saying what (and on what background) about what is in focus. In this sense the publishing of e.g. newspaper articles and airing of television programs are considered events.

For the purpose of this analysis, however, this one to one relationship might not apply throughout: the acts (caused by actors' acting), and their being perceived by another actor, will most likely not coincide with the publishing of these articles. This means that the timing of events and the timing of the publishing of newspaper articles etc. is not the same. When analysing the event- and theme-network we will therefore need to infer the timing of acts and events from the published data available to us.

The event that triggered Hedaa to do his analysis was a programme on Danish national television on June 19<sup>th</sup> 1997. But as we shall see this was not *the* triggering event in the story we unravel here. Rather it was yet another event (or rather an act) in a network of events that had occurred previously. At the time of the television program on June 19<sup>th</sup> 1997 some of these prior events became apparent or even re-defined (re-justified) to some of the actors and other acts were still largely unperceived by most.

### **Events that were initially visible to the public**

In the following the main events as they unfolded in the media are listed. Note that some events bring up new themes where other events modify or repeat themes already visible. Some themes seem to spread very fast. In the ecology metaphor this corresponds to some themes breeding, proliferating and becoming ubiquitous and others disappearing into oblivion.

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The following is a list of the events that took place, the topics of the events, and the possible theme implications. The possible themes listed are the themes we could see once the events and the topics were listed: The themes represent our reconstruction of the events and topics available to observation. In the following we will focus on just a few of these themes: “The grey market for training”, “PMI is making people sick”, “Employees are pressured”, and “Employees are very happy with the programme”.

Clearly this list of themes is highly subjective and we make no claims to the contrary. However, this is an example of how themes are used as a structuring device, bringing one particular opinion or view into focus through the evolution of the possible and plausible themes.

<b>Event</b>	<b>Topic(s)</b>	<b>Theme</b>
1997-06-19/21.25: <i>Critical program on Danish national television</i>	‘PMI is causing course participants to break down using dubious methods.’ and ‘participants are ‘forced’ to disclose deeply private and personal details about themselves on video’	“PMI is making people sick”
1997-06-20: <i>Article in local newspaper (Holbæk Amts Venstreblad)</i>	‘TDF was too long in terminating the courses’	“Employees are pressured”
1997-06-20: <i>Article in national newspaper (Jyllands Posten) by Lars Abild</i>	‘Courses are mandatory and use a ‘hot chair’. Employees are pressured by announced lay-offs’	“PMI is making people sick” “Employees are pressured”
1997-06-20: <i>News bulletin from RB-børsen</i>	no new topics, repeating topics already mentioned	
1997-06-21: <i>Article in national newspaper (Jyllands Posten) by Lars Abild</i>	‘The grey market for courses’	“The grey market for training”
1997-06-21: <i>Article in national newspaper (Berlingske Tidende) by Niels Møller</i>	Topics identified: ‘many employees are happy with the course’ and ‘feel as a part of the same organisation’ and ‘5% may not feel that they have been treated correctly’	“Employees are very happy with the programme”
1997-06-21: <i>Article in national newspaper (Jyllands Posten) by Lars Abild (Business and Finance section)</i>	‘5% are expected to break down’	“PMI is making people sick”
1997-06-21: <i>Article in national newspaper (Politiken) by Nanna Wendt Sørensen and Berit Andersen</i>	‘courses are a form of terror towards the employees’ and ‘who is going to be fired?’ and ‘there is a secondary purpose for the courses’ and ‘no hidden agenda!’	“The grey market for training” “PMI is making people sick”
1997-06-21: <i>Article in local newspaper (Holbæk Amts Venstreblad) by Peter Schollert</i>	‘employees want PMI courses to continue’ and ‘if screening is not 100% effective, courses must stop’	
1997-06-22: <i>Article in national newspaper (Berlingske Tidende) by Birgit Straarup</i>	‘the employees’ rights’ and ‘we might sue PMI’	“Employees are pressured”
1997-06-22: <i>TV review in national tabloid (Ekstra Bladet) by Hans Flemming Kragh</i>	‘psychic terror against employees’	“The grey market for training” “PMI is making people sick” “Employees are pressured”
1997-06-22: <i>Article in national</i>	‘there is no quality control on	“The grey market for

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<i>newspaper (Jyllands Posten) by Claus Christensen</i>	courses'	training"
<i>1997-06-23: Article in national newspaper (Jyllands Posten) by Arne Panduro</i>	'courses may have gone too far' and 'many employees were satisfied'	"PMI is making people sick"
<i>1997-06-24: Press release from PMI partly agreeing to some of the critique</i>	'PMI may have gone too far'	"PMI is making people sick"
<i>1997-06-25: Article in national newspaper (Jyllands Posten) by Lars Abild</i>	'PMI may have gone too far' and 'we (PMI) want to improve our course' and 'we (Tele Denmark) will offer psychological hotline'	"PMI is making people sick"
<i>1997-06-25: Article in national newspaper (Berlingske Tidende) source: RB-børsen</i>	'we may have gone too far' and 'we (PMI) want to improve our course'	"PMI is making people sick"
<i>1997-06-26: Article in national newspaper (Jyllands Posten) by Lars Abild</i>	'heads should be rolling!' and 'we have tried to stop this before' and 'we want some money as compensation!'	
<i>1997-06-26: Television critique in national newspaper (Politiken) by Anders Ubrskov</i>	'television programme was 'butchering' PMI' and 'showing video on national television is un-ethical'	
<i>1997-06-28: Article in national newspaper (Jyllands Posten) by Lars Abild</i>	'it is a problem that anyone can do this type of courses' and 'DI does not approve (of the PMI course)'	"The grey market for training"
<i>1997-07-02: Article in national newspaper (Jyllands Posten) by Lars Therkeelsen</i>	'should courses be run this way?'	"The grey market for training"
<i>1997-07-19: Article in national newspaper (Politiken) by Birgitte Bollmann</i>	'television programme went too far' and 'what is wrong with training employees instead of simply firing them?' and 'I have been satisfied with PMI courses before'	
<i>1997-07-26: Article in local newspaper (Holbæk Amts Venstreblad)</i>	'the show must go on'	
<i>1997-07-28: Article in national newspaper (Politiken) by Ulrik Haahr</i>	'contract between teacher and participant' and 'where is the line between psychotherapy and training programmes?'	

### Events that became visible or gained new meaning after June 19<sup>th</sup>

After the television programme and the subsequent newspaper articles were publicised, other events could be observed or dug out through investigation. This is mainly correspondence between the focal actors TDF and PMI but also correspondence among other stakeholders as we shall see.

<b>Event</b>	<b>Topic(s)</b>	<b>Theme</b>
<i>1996-12: Suggested plan for team-building process from PMI to TDF</i>	'TDF needs teambuilding programme'	
<i>1997-05-23: Letter from ATW to TDF and Tele Denmark HQ regarding strike</i>	'courses must be terminated' and 'consequences could be unfortunate!'	"PMI is making people sick"
<i>1997-05-23/16.44: Fax from TDF to PMI</i>	repeats the topic above mentioned to PMI	
<i>1997-05-26: Fax from ATW dept. 11 to TDF and Tele Denmark HQ</i>	'courses must be terminated' is repeated	

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1997-05-26/27: Letter from cand.paed.psyk. Jørgen A. Christensen to ATW dept. 12	'PMI courses professionally questioned'	"The grey market for training" "PMI is making people sick"
1997-05-28: Letter from ATW dept. 12 to members in TDF regarding end of strike	'strike is called off because we have been made promises that things will change' and 'PMI courses professionally questioned'	
1997-05-29: Letter from PMI to course participants regarding revised course information	'every participant can say no' and 'confidentiality will be observed'	
1997-06-03: Letter from PMI to course participants regarding revised course information	'every participant can say no' and 'confidentiality will be observed' and 'course less stressful'	
1997-06-11: Letter from PMI to cand.paed.psyk. Jørgen A. Christensen inviting a professional dialogue	'you (the expert) do not know all details, we (PMI) will be happy to inform you, and we would like a dialogue'	
1997-06-12: Phone call from marketing director Svend Holm, TDF to PMI about the immediate termination of the course	'course is terminated'	
1997-06-12: Cry for help from 24 course participants, frustration that the course might be terminated	'do not terminate the course –we like it!'	"Employees are very happy with the programme"
1997-06-13/9.00: Meeting between PMI and TDF at TDF	'course is terminated'	
1997-06-13/11.24: Internal memo from Keld Holland, TDF to Svend Holm, TDF; decision to terminate course	'course is terminated'	
1997-06-17: Letter from Keld Holland, TDF to PMI confirming the decision to terminate the course	'course is terminated'	
1997-06-18/18.54: Fax from Svend Holm, TDF to PMI regarding evaluation sheets and 'spontaneous' reactions from participants	'course has good evaluations and many like to continue'	"Employees are very happy with the programme"
1997-06-19: Television program is announced in the newspapers' TV guides	'PMI is causing course participants to break down using questionable methods.'	"PMI is making people sick"

These (and probably even more undiscovered) events led to the subsequent television programme and many newspaper articles. Hedaa (1997) suggests a number of possible themes:

- TDF induce psychic illness in their employees by a course
- TDF uses PMI to provide 'therapeutic' courses
- On paper participation was voluntary, but in practice it was mandatory
- PMI forces participants to disclose deep personal issues
- The process is a violation of ethical principles
- PMI is part of a grey market for courses and is not trustworthy in its use of references

As we can see, some of these themes are also identified by this study, whereas others are not. Interestingly Hedaa (1997) diagnoses the TDF organisation as 'neurotic' having a lot of problems with people not feeling well and breaking down even before the PMI programme. Indeed the programme was meant to remedy a number of such issues within the TDF organisation.

### **Events that may have happened, but which are not accessible to the researchers**

Based on the events that we did manage to get access to, a number of potentially important events are clearly 'missing' from the list: How and where did the TV reporters or researchers first hear of the course and its consequences? Who had an interest in this story becoming known in the public? And whose video tape (from the course) was shown on television? Why would anyone allow an allegedly traumatising video to be shown on national television? Like in a crime investigation there are a number of things that we cannot know for certain. However by doing this event and theme analysis we have a much clearer picture of the network of event that took place.

### **Some conclusions on the case**

Most of the topics that we identify can now be put into different types of co-evolutionary type of themes: some themes are parasitic, some are commensal and others are symbiotic. All of the themes have of course somehow their origin in the situational circumstances that we have just described, yet it is interesting to see how the themes develop, compete for resources (like number of columns in the papers), and die out.

### **Parasitic themes**

One theme that clearly feeds off another even to the degree that one theme dies out is the theme: "Employees are happy with the course". This theme seems to be out-competed by the original theme presented: "PMI is making people sick". For some reason the latter theme takes over completely and the original theme about satisfied employees is never really addressed.

Most of the parasitic themes are seen towards the end of our period about one month after the television programme.

### **Commensal themes**

Several themes can be seen as commensal. The themes raised by the television programme: “PMI is making people sick using questionable methods.” and “Employees are being pressured” are commensal along with several other themes not listed here. All these themes benefit from each other’s existence but do not cause negative effects to the others (or indeed any effects probably). In a way we can see the themes as providing a fitness landscape in which other themes gain visibility (are brought up in newspaper articles).

This type of themes are most apparent one to three weeks after the television programme.

### **Symbiotic themes**

Most of the themes brought up by newspaper articles in the first few days after the television programme are symbiotic because they support one another. The theme that “PMI is making people sick” is followed by other themes that has to do with other angles on the issue and they are in fact all part of a more overall theme: “PMI are incompetent and they are hurting people”.

We also note that the theme about “the grey market for training” is brought up and adds a lot of support to the first theme while gaining some momentum itself.

The symbiotic themes seem to be predominant in the days immediately after the television programme.

### **Findings**

As we have already noted by focusing on the themes and their evolution different aspects might come to our attention. Clearly having some insights into the events that preceded the crucial television programme on June 19<sup>th</sup> help us paint a much richer picture of what happened when TDF decided to terminate the training programme from PMI. As we have seen some of the themes that gained a lot of visibility as a result of the television programme were in fact already established in the interactions and events that took place between the association of telecommunications workers and TDF and Tele Denmark. One theme, which must have been very clear in the minds of many of the actors, could very well have been the fact that Tele Denmark had announced lay-offs of 2,500 employees as a result of a merger between four



regional telephony operators. This theme will probably have had a lot of impact on other themes in various ways. It provided a fitness landscape in which themes and events unfolded and made sense to the actors.

We also note that the deliberate introduction of many of the themes by journalists and other actors had a major effect in many cases. Some of the themes we have seen completely overtook other themes and seemingly new themes gain a lot of strength in the landscape presented by other themes. This is a clear indication of just how powerful themes can be and of how effectful the deliberate use of themes can be.

Because we expect our themes to co-evolve in a plausible, coherent and logical way we can also clearly see when bits and pieces are missing or does not fit; What kind of theme can have changed one of the participating employees' theme of 'the video is painful and very private' to 'it is OK to show it on national television'? We can only speculate but one such theme could be: 'it is for the good of my colleagues'. But then what kind of event could have provided that theme? A meeting with a union representative? We do not know.

### **Conclusions and some considerations for further research**

Our approach to the co-evolution of themes is based on the theoretical ideas described earlier. It is built on a number of factors which our empirical studies and practical experiences have revealed. Factors which have prompted our deep puzzlement, curiosity and a desire to comprehend the effects of themes on business relationships.

Firstly, what if management is an illusion of control? What if managers and companies are not in charge and cannot control their future? What if all they can hope for is to cope with events and episodes as they present themselves? The PMI project was carefully and thoroughly planned. Yet it proved to be very unsuccessful to the two focal actors.

Secondly, why is it that sometimes even small events will set in motion a huge train of events that can cause radical changes? And why is it that sometimes even a large number of highly visible events will make very little difference? By including such notions also expressed in complexity theory to the realm of business networks, using events and themes rather than actors as the focus, this paper has demonstrated a possible method for describing and potentially understanding complex aspects without resorting to

collapsing those same complex issues and without many of the inherent difficulties in a more human actor focused approach.

The practical use of a theory is that it helps us structure and understand the 'world' we live in. Theory helps us cope with the problems. This model or framework can provide managers with a new perspective on their business relationships and the prevailing themes, and it can help improve their awareness of themes that are not yet fully developed or accepted.

Because it is very difficult or perhaps even impossible to see the underlying deep structures of contingencies or causes, the researcher needs to take extra care in this type of analysis. We are in a sense dealing with continuous theory development, testing and refinement.

One can argue that these themes are brought up by the journalists and the media for the purpose of selling more newspapers etc. However the case clearly illustrates how powerful some of the themes are, especially when they co-evolve with other themes irrespective of what the motives, free wills and intentions of individual actors might be. The notion of co-evolution as we have applied it here further allows for us to consider the dynamic aspects of competition or cooperation between themes rather than their mere existence or lack thereof.

Naturally one can also argue that the themes we identify here are the result of our subjective analysis and therefore do not represent an objective truth. To this we agree. But it is not our intention, nor indeed within our limited abilities, to uncover objectively true themes. Our ambition is to present what we see as one plausible, coherent and logical interpretation of themes to illustrate how the concept of theme co-evolution can provide a way of analysing temporal and spatial aspects of business relationships.

For the past 25 years the IMP group has produced many studies on business relationships and networks. Most of these studies have focused on a descriptive account of specific episodes or events taking place between focal actors. And most of the studies have assumed implicitly or explicitly that the actors controlled their actions and the outcome of these actions; the resulting events. We suggest that taking an event-theme perspective on business networks will provide a basis for describing and perhaps understanding temporal-spatial aspects in which the actors are much more re-active than hitherto assumed. We therefore strongly urge more research in this area to provide a plethora of descriptive cases which we hope can provide the methodological and theoretical foundations to move this area forward so that it will provide a complement to comprehensive existing IMP work.

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