**INTRODUCTION**

2014 is a landmark year for communication in South Africa: it simultaneously sees the 40th anniversary of the South African Communication Association and the 20th year of democracy in the country. Innately, academic reflections on the manner in which communication and democratisation have interwoven in these years, would follow. Although initial reflections would inadvertently settle on the communication fields of media and journalism as catalysts for social change, a germinal notion supplied by Ganesh and Zoller (2012, 66) points to a veritable contribution from the field of organisational communication:

[C]ommunication scholarship has much pragmatic value in offering visions of how change can take place and how democracy across the world can be deepened and woven into everyday communication practices. Indeed, theoretical concerns with democratic change have arguably been at the heart of much communication inquiry in the past century, and scholars have crafted a diverse range of perspectives on communication processes and mechanisms through which individuals, communities and organizations procure and enact democratic change.

Throughout, however, we find that scholars have relied on … activism as significant trope to understand specific communication processes involved in such change.

In organisations within South Africa, one of these *enactments* *of democratic change* has certainly been the introduction of ‘legitimate’ activism – where, prior to democracy, most forms of trade union engagement were seen as acts of political insurrection (Adler & Webster 1995; The Center for Humane Arts, Letters, and Social Sciences [sa], 2). From the field of corporate communication, studies that engendered in, and ensued from the excellence theory advocates the potential positive impact that activism could have on organisations by ‘pushing’ it beyond equilibrium, to a state of dynamic equilibrium – mediated through strategic and two-way symmetrical communication (Dozier et al. 1995; Grunig 2002; Grunig & Grunig 2011; Grunig et al. 2002; Grunig & Grunig 2001; Hon 2007). Arguably, these studies grow to form the basis of our understanding of ‘positive activism’ within organisational settings, as it proffers a host of ‘excellent’ communication principles that, when acted upon successfully, augur positive outcomes for an organisation.

Indeed, many might argue that the change to democracy, in itself, is an example of how mediated activism could lead to transformation beyond an established equilibrium; to a state of dynamic equilibrium that has the potential to create an *enhanced* state – even better than that previously experienced.

Contrasted against this promise of positive activism, however, are the recent strikes in the mining industry of South Africa, that have been said to be crippling to the country’s economy, and ultimately, if not circuitously, lead to the deaths of 44 people in the *Marikana massacre*; perceived to be “reminiscent of the Sharpeville massacre of 1960” (Chapple & Barnett 2012, 1). With activism in the mining industry being anything but a new phenomenon, organisational communication practitioners in South Africa would have to revaluate positions on activism and excellence, committing to the development and escalation of the principles of the excellence theory to charter the contribution of the field in the next leg of democracy in the country.

To this end, this paper seeks to explore and raise initial arguments to further the notion of excellent or positive activism in organisations within the South African context. Herein, the research will report on qualitative, semi-structured interviews with veteran workers and leaders in the mining industry, as sampled, and identified with the help of the Southern Africa Institute of Mining and Metallurgy (SAIMM). The empirical data gathered from these interviews will be used in conjunction with existing literature on the topic to further and reconfigure the communicative features that should accompany activism in organisations in the mining industry of South Africa. For this purpose, the paper will firstly contextualise activism in the mining industry, after which the methodology of empirical exploration of this phenomenon will be unpacked. The theoretical background of the excellence theory, as well as contemporary developments thereon will thereafter be discussed and used for finally presenting the findings, which are born from both the theoretical underpinnings and empirical explorations.

**CONTEXTUALISATION**

The history of South Africa as a country and that of its mining industry is virtually intertwined, as the interior of the country was largely only charted and explored; with towns settled once mining operations made it lucrative enough, and in some cases possible to do so (Davenport, 2013). A telling example is offered by Davenport (2013, 26) when writing about the pioneering era of mining exploration in Namaqualand in the early 1850s, noting:

When mining began, Springbokfontein [now the town of Springbok in the Northern Cape province] consisted of one mud hut and a few tents, but within five years it had become a large mining station consisting of a collection of substantial buildings such a houses for workers and officers, mess rooms, stores, wagon-makers’ and blacksmiths’ shops, stables, and forage stores.

Not overtly stated, but certainly inherently implied herein, is the economic significance that mining, and the operations surrounding it, brought to the country. Rosenthal (1970, 87) quotes a surviving letter from the 1870s, written by a man in search of his fortune along the “gold bearing” streams just outside the current-day Swellendam, Western Cape, who states upon arrival:

Well, here I am, settled in the most beautiful country I have ever seen, with the consciousness of treading on ground that will, with ordinary intelligence and labour, yield a living to everyone. Some reap a larger harvest than others, but none need starve.

Although these words were written at the dawn of mining in South Africa, it could hold true in almost any of its ensuing epochs. Certainly, when rhetoric surrounding most labour disputes and contestations for nationalisation in the South African mining industry is reviewed, the sentiment displayed in the 150 year-old letter, seems to have survived. In the time that the letter was written, the mining industry of South Africa was ungoverned, but firmly operated on a principle known as ‘Diggers’ Democracy’ (Davenport 2013; Magubane 2002; Marks 2001; Ndlovu 2012). *Diggers’ Democracy* is defined as a socio-political, anti-capitalist system that promoted the rights of diggers as individuals, rather than a collective group, preventing the monopolisation of mining by a wealthy elite (Davenport 2013; Magubane 2002; Marks 2001). So set were the diggers on upholding this system that, when the then-Transvaal government tried to grant a mining concession along the northern bank of the Vaal River to just three men, perhaps one of the first forms of activism in the mining industry was realised, where diggers “rose up in rebellion… [r]ather than allow such blatant monopolisation, the riotous diggers declared the village of Klipdrift [that the concession pertains to] an independent Diggers’ Republic” (Davenport 2013, 49).

Clearly, the South African mining industry has undergone many changes in terms of the governing and owning of mining and mining rights since the Diggers’ Democracy period. Many practises of activism, specifically labour or trade disputes, essentially revolves around the fact that employees and labourers (the modern-day ‘diggers’) are “exploited” by mine owners and managers, often portrayed as proverbial ‘fat-cats’ at the head of the purely capitalist industry – with the Aurora mining scandal perhaps being one of the best exemplifications (*see* Sapa, 2012). This divide between mine employees and managers or owners is intensified by the historical encumbrances of racialism and apartheid, where Black employees especially seemed to have always been shafted. In the 1920s and again in the 1940s, Black mining employees instigated activism endeavours in revolt – as outlined by The Center for Humane Arts, Letters, and Social Sciences ([sa], 1):

Provoked by poor wages and horrible conditions (African miners wages has risen by about a penny from 1911 to 1919), Africans organized many more strikes and boycotts on the mines, culminating in two major actions in the 1920s. Both had at their core similar causes – stagnant wages [and] horrible living conditions in and around the job sites.

Sadly, many parallels can be drawn between the cited reasons for the activism of the 1920s, and that of the platinum strikes of 2012/3. The supervening years, however, saw a lot of progress in how organisations view, operate in, and act on organisational activism. Organisational communication theory propound that activism is a symptom of a healthy organisational environment, where potential for growth and excellence is prevalent (cf. Dozier et al. 1995; Grunig 2002; Grunig & Grunig 2011; Grunig et al. 2002; Grunig & Grunig 2001; Hon 2007). When the organisational outcomes of the recent mining strikes are considered and measured, however, the opposite seems to have materialised. Notwithstanding the loss of life, the economy of South Africa has been “crippled” by these (sometimes wildcat) strikes (Goodlace 2014; Investec 2014), just as the Governor of the central bank, Gill Marcus, directly attributed R5.6 billion ($643m) in net equity-market outflows directly to the strikes in the months succeeding the *Marikana massacre* (The Economist 2012). The question begging to be addressed, therefore, is whether or not organisations and their communications have failed in terms of organisational activism in our burgeoning democracy, and what amendments should be made to our guiding theories, taking lessons from this industry.

**RESEARCH METHOD**

If addressing the questions outlined above truly does have the aim of charting future advancements or neoteric vantage points, the research method employed to this end would, by virtue of its nature, call for explorative research. Neuman (1997, 21) describes exploratory research as aimed at establishing the accuracy of a principle or theory, to promote knowledge of a process or to build and expand on theory. As this research builds on, and expands excellence and organisational activism theory, and reviews this by means of empirical research (thus establishing its accuracy), the goal of this research points to an exploratory nature.

In exploring the phenomenon of activism in the mining industry of South Africa, two data-gathering methods are employed: a review of the germane literature and in-depth interviews. These methods are qualitative in nature, with qualitative research basically defined by its methods to produce descriptive data, interpreted by means of a deductive reasoning technique (Keyton 2006, 7; Stewart 2002, 132). In both methods, inferences are made from the bulk of descriptive data (the literature and interview transcriptions) applicable and connected to the research objectives under investigation. In this way, a deductive reasoning pattern or method is used for each one (Johnson-Laird 2010, 8; Rips 2008, 187).

The in-depth interviews – which yield the empirical data of this research – has the aim of phenomenologically exploring the views and opinions of individuals who work and function within the mining industry of South Africa. For study into organisational communication, phenomenology is simply defined by Littlejohn and Foss (2011) as the way in which individuals understand the world through their personal and direct experiences – simply put, and for the purposes of this article, the way that they experience activism in the mining industry of South Africa. As organisational communication phenomenologists, the lived experience of these individuals becomes the basic data of reality, as the only reality that one can know, is the subjective experience of reality and the world, as it can be known to one (Flick, Von Kardorff & Steinke 2004; Gregg 1966; Merleau-Ponty 1945).

To this end, the interviews will take the form of semi-structured and semi-standardised interviews. Due to the semi-structured nature of the interviews, standardised as well as follow-up questions were included. The standardised questions were structured, based on the main themes identified in the literature review, while broader and more open questions were also asked relating to understanding activism and its place in the mining industry (for example asking participants to explain the nature thereof and the challenges it faces). By virtue of their nature, the semi-structured interviews also gave the opportunity for follow-up questions to be asked, based on participants’ answers, which allowed the researcher to explore new avenues in the research not necessarily anticipated at the outset – again, linking back to its explorative nature (Keyton 2006, 276). Herein, the interviews took the form of semi-*standardisation* as well, so as to allow for these follow-up questions (Maxwell & Satake 2006, 232).

In terms of sampling participants to the semi-structured and semi-standardised interviews, the Southern African Institute for Mining and Metallurgy (SAIMM) agreed to assist in this vein. Herein, the Institute published an invitation in their monthly journal for their members to participate in the research. The research population can therefore be defined as subscribers to the SAIMM journal, which serves the interests of mangers, engineers and technical and research personnel involved in the mineral industry, and boasts a circulation of about 3200 (SAIMM 2014). In this vein, volunteer sampling was made use of, as participants volunteer themselves (and was not directly approached by the researcher or SAIMM). This sampling method is a non-random sampling method, (Du Plooy 2002, 115; Keyton 2006, 127), although this is not deemed to be problematic, since generalisation is not an objective of this **explorative** research. The sampling yielded a response rate of seven interviews, which falls within the acceptable range for phenomenological exploration (Mason 2010, citing Creswell 1998 and Morse 1994).

The data gathered by means of the seven semi-structured and semi-standardised interviews was transcribed and a qualitative content analysis was done on the transcriptions, making use of germane themes identified in literature (Keyton 2006, 233). Speaking to this literature, and giving the basis of the findings, the next section will outline the phenomenon and theory regarding excellent activism in the organisational setting.

**THEORETICAL BACKGROUND**

In 1984 the International Association of Business Communicators (IABC) Foundation requested proposals that addressed the question *How, why and to what extent does communication affect the achievement of organisational objectives*? (Grunig 2008, 1; Grunig et al.2002, 4). A group of public relations researchers including James Grunig, Larissa Grunig and David Dozier proposed answering this question as from the perspective of an excellence study (as has, up until that point, extensively been done in general management practice – for example in Peters and Waterman’s 1982 study *In search of excellence*) (Grunig et al.2002, 5; Peters & Waterman 1982).

Following an extensive literature review (spanning over 10 years), the empirical testing (quantitative and qualitative at over 370 organisations in different countries) for what would become the *excellence theory* was done on the basis of compiling a generic benchmark, from which critical success characteristics of communication could be identified across different types of organisations. Generic benchmarking was used, due to the fact that no single organisation could ever be regarded as excellent through-and-through. The generic benchmarking characteristics of communication excellence therefore gave a somewhat idealised goal for all organisations to aspire to (Grunig & Grunig 2011, 3; Grunig 2008, 1; Grunig et al.2002, 6; Grunig 1992, 219). The result of this research, according to Grunig et al. (2002, 5) is a “comprehensive, general theory of public relations” and organisational communication in general. Although critique has been logged against this claim, literature does seem (for the most part) to agree that the generic benchmark offers literature a model for evaluating organisational communication departments and functions; for explaining why organisations depend on these departments; and how to organise and manage this function for optimal value gain and organisational goal attainment (Grunig et al.2002, 11; Grunig 1992, 86).

The generic benchmark yields 17 *excellence characteristics*, which organisations should aspire to, should they want to increase their ‘value gain’ and goal attainment. In Figure 1 below, these are summarised.



**Figure 1:** Excellence characteristics

Specifically germane to this study, of course, is the organisational level characteristic that encourages organisations to incite *turbulent environments with activist groups* (characteristic 14). Grunig et al.(2002) explicates this in a dedicated chapter on activism and organisational environments, and at the very onset clearly stake their claim by having the first sentence of the chapter read “Activism pushes organizations toward excellence.” (2002, 442). The introduction goes on to explain that the reasons behind this is multifaceted, but that it generally must start with the dominant coalition of the organisation understanding the importance of the communicative function within the organisation. Activist groups stimulate complex and turbulent environments, and this calls for sophisticated two-way communication. It is in this way that activism encourages excellence, as it obliges the organisation to communicate in an *excellent* (strategic, two-way, symmetrical) manner.

Further fulfilling or comporting to excellence through ‘positive activism’, rests on seven propositions, tersely explained here as from Dozier, Grunig and Grunig (1995), Grunig et al.(2002, 450); Grunig (2006) and Grunig and Grunig (2001) and (2011):

**Proposition 1: Listening to activists and the environment**

In any organisational environment, but especially in turbulent environments with activist groups, listening is a fundamentally important aspect of excellence. Communication cannot be classified as *two-way*, if there is not some form of listening being employed. In this, organisations need to apply research strategies (e.g. systematic observation, environmental scanning) to ‘listen’ to its environment. When activist groups start to communicate with the organisation – be this communication verbal, or through actions – the organisation must employ strategic listening techniques.

**Proposition 2: Talking with activists**

With listening on the one side, the reverse side of the two-way communication coin, is of course talking. Grunig et al.(2002, 458) states that organisations should talk “frequently and openly with activists and demonstrate a willingness to change the organization rather than trying to dominate”.

**Proposition 3: Continuous communication with activists**

Talking with activist, no matter how successful, will not yield long-term effects. For this to materialise, the organisation needs to build a communicative relationship with these constituency groups, as, in the words of Grunig et al.(2002, 460), “[c]ontinuous efforts at communicating with activists are necessary to contend with their shifting stances”.

**Proposition 4: Acknowledging the legitimacy of activists**

Innately, a relationship can only be built with activists (as with all constituencies) when the legitimacy of that group is realised and acknowledged by the organisation, and vice versa. This is not to say that the organisation should acknowledge the legitimacy of the activists’ claims or statements, but rather points to an acknowledgement of the group in itself, and the influence it wields on the organisation.

**Proposition 5: Expertise of the communicators**

Touching on other characteristics of excellence, the fifth proposition holds forth that organisational communicators need the necessary background and education (in communication management) to conduct a two-way symmetrical communication programme with activist groups. As communication in turbulent environments is a convoluted aspect, the individual(s) at the helm of the organisational communication need to be knowledgeable in order to successfully navigate the turbulence.

**Proposition 6: Evaluate effectiveness in the long run**

Excellent management of ‘positive activism’ does not busy itself with simplistic, short-term gains or losses, but rather focusses on “involving the entire organization in the response to activists, directly involve activists in decisions that affect them, research the activist group, and evaluate the organization’s response to the activists” (Grunig et al. 2002, 467). In this way, long-term effectiveness can be sought and evaluated.

**Proposition 7: Communication in the dominant coalition**

The excellence theory maintains the importance of having the communication function thoroughly represented in the organisation’s dominant coalition. Herein, the last proposition purports that it is only when there is such a representation that communication needs and issues are factored into decisions and actions, before they are affected. If communication is not in the dominant coalition of the organisation, the organisation is less likely to act in an excellent manner.

On face value, at least, the assertions and propositions of excellence and ‘positive activism’ seem to aim at mutual and efficacious communication endeavours that – even if just *argumentum ad populum* – point to potential positive outcomes. Against this, however, communicators are still confronted with the reality of the *negative* consequences of the recent strikes in the South African mining industry. Addressing this discrepancy, the section below explores possible aspects that are amiss in our theoretical understanding of excellence and ‘positive activism’, utilising data from the empirical interviews, literature on activism and narratives of the South African mining strikes.

**FINDINGS**

Although the excellence theory has been widely accepted in communication literature, this ‘acceptance’ has not come without its fair share of criticism. Noting the authors of the excellence theory’s response on the criticism, Stokes and Rubin (2010, 31) write:

The authors [of the excellence theory] contend they never argued that symmetrical practices were completely altruistic; they dismiss contingent and mixed-motive critiques as merely elaborating on their original conceptualizations of the theory; they contend that the two-way symmetrical model is not idealistic. They also dismiss the concern over abuse of power in the model, arguing activists can have considerable power by professionally employing public relations skills.

Considerate of the above, it is still necessary to build forth on theoretical aspects in literature, as no theory or model is ever complete in and of itself – immune to variation and alterations necessitated by particular contexts. It is in this vein that this section provides six considerations to ruminate in applying the aspect of excellence and ‘positive activism’ in South African organisations – specifically mining organisations – in the new leg of democracy in the country.

**Modernistic frames in post-modernistic times**

The excellence theory is thought to have postmodernistic tendencies in its assertions; such as two-way symmetrical communication, which implies mutual, if not shared, meaning creation between organisations and their constituencies. Mindful of these tendencies, the theory in itself is very much modernistic in its approach, or at the very least still harbours modernistic propensities. One of the greatest clues that point to a modernistic nature is the authors themselves describing this theory as a “comprehensive, general theory of public relations” (Grunig et al. 2002, 5). The modernistic principle that ascribes *‘a single best way’* in which an aspect can be approached, inherently underlies the idea of a *single, comprehensive* and *general* theory to describe a single phenomenon, not to mention an entire field of study.

This modernistic ‘universalism’ that normatively directs ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ ways in which communication (as in this case) within an activism situation can or should be engaged, is one of the failings of this theory in the context of the mining industry of South Africa. As will be further clarified in the considerations discussed below, communicators can do everything ‘right’, and the outcome of activism could still be very much negative. The reason for this is that no activism situation – especially in diverse circumstances such as the mining industry of South Africa – is ever unburdened from contextual or situational aspects that direct the appliance and outcome of communication. Therefore, as in the words of Holtzhausen and Voto (2002, 64), “[p]ostmodern practitioners would … rather base their ethical decision making on ‘particularism’, on the complexities of the particular circumstances at hand”. In the same way should organisational communicators be contextually and situationally directed, when it comes to communicating in turbulent, activist situations within the mining industry of South Africa. Cementing this consideration, one of the interview participants commented “it is a hard thing to navigate, you know, because you cannot even think what you did last time. What works one time, may not work the next time, and what works for one [activist group] might not work for the next one”.

Successfully navigating the activism situation in an organisational setting would therefore integrally rely on thoroughly understanding the activism context, and making and implementing decisions based on its situational merit, rather than a normative understanding of whether it is ascribed as being the ‘right’ thing to do.

**Organisational centrism**

Closely related to fostering an understanding of the activism context, so as to allow for decisions with situational merit, is the consideration of *organisational centrism* as displayed by the excellence theory. The excellence theory is largely (if not unreservedly) framed or viewed from an organisational perspective. Linking back to its modernistic nature, this organisational centrism allows for an approach to activism that takes place within “an orderly, well-integrated world, with compliant members and regulated conflicts, accepted without examination [of] organisational goals and member positions” (Deetz 2001, 19; cf. Holtzhausen & Voto 2002). If organisational communicators cannot “walk a mile in [employees’] shoes”, as one participant stated, they will fail to capture the complexity and multiplexity of the activism environment (Stokes & Rubin 2010, 31).

Failing to recognise the discordant nature of the activism environment leads to the inability to act on, or in the least respond to, the complexities of the activism situation with dire consequences. For example, in the activism environment of the Marikana saga, complexity and multiplexity was introduced by the presence of the two unions – the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) and the Association of Mineworkers and Construction Union (AMCU) – vying for union membership. So intense was the encounters between these unions, that it all but overshadowed the wage dispute at the centre of the activism (at least from the organisation’s perspective). Organisations who would have viewed this situation as being ‘orderly’ with ‘compliant members and regulated conflict’, and basically just from their own (organisational) viewpoint, would definitely not have been able to factor these convoluted aspects into their understanding of the situation.

**The activism of power and the power of activism**

Further to the above, the organisational centrism employed within the modernistic stance of the excellence theory inhibits the organisation to delve completely and sufficiently into the aspect of *power* in the activism situation. From the normative stance of the excellence theory, the idea is maintained that the organisation continues to have full communication control and power. This is a pretence in need of rejection. Certainly, the excellence theory almost contradicts itself when it comes to power in activism situations, as on the once hand it speaks to “developing more participative cultures and organics structures” (Grunig 1997, 10), yet it continually still relies on the notion of power being concentrated at the level of the dominant coalition.

Taking a more postmodernistic (and less mechanistic) stance on power within activism settings, Holtzhausen and Voto (2009, 64) reason that there are different forms of power within an organisational activism context, and authoritative power (such as that implied by the ‘rule’ of a dominant coalition) will almost always be rejected. A postmodernistic view harbours a focus on three levels of power within the organisational activism context (Holtzhausen & Voto 2002; Hung 2003):

* **Macro power**; which refers to the power exerted on the individual by the organisation (albeit by the organisation’s dominant coalition).
* **Micro power**; whichpoints to the contextual environment, and the power it can exude on individuals.
* **Individual power** or internal or inherent power; which refers to the power of the individual in organisational activism contexts. In this context, this form of power is very closely linked to the ability to resist macro and micro power.

During the platinum strikes in the mining industry of South Africa (as the Marikana- and ensuing strikes of 2012/3 in the platinum belt collectively became known), great individual, or inherent power was displayed, where employees resisted macro power from the organisation (for example calling workers to return to work), and micro power (for example the economic context created by not being paid for months on end). Arguably, many organisations underestimated the will or ability of workers to do so, and a much swifter resolution was envisaged, as many believed that workers could and would not go so long without yielding. However it is viewed, the truth of the matter is that organisations need to rouse to the reality that power does not only reside with the organisation, but that the organisation-activist relationship holds many forces and sources of power – all equally legitimate in this context.

**The political nature of activism; goal attainment and relationship building**

One cannot write about power in activism situations within the South African mining industry without speaking to the *political* nature thereof. Using the example cited before, the political nature of the activism in the Marikana saga was evident in the mêlée between the two vying unions (AMCU and NUM). The consternation this creates for the excellence theory is that the notion of *organisational goal attainment* is brought into question (just so, along with the organisational centric view). The excellence theory holds forth that if the parties to the activism work together and communicate effectively (excellently), the attainment of predefined goals are possible. Again, this mechanistic, modernistic view disallows for the configuration of complexities outside of this normative scope: when activist groups are political, it is not only the organisation’s goals that are sought. Likewise, resolution to the activism situation is seen (as from the excellence theory), when predefined goals are attained or met (when the win-win situation is reached). Recurrently in the platinum strikes, it was reported that the germane organisations continually put forth offers, in the hopes of ending the strikes. Although these might have spoken to the goal attainment of the organisations, the dominant unions might hold out for further or different goal attainment, as in the words of one participant:

If you go and ask Joseph Mathunjwa [head of AMCU] about all these strikes, you will hear him say ‘we have won’. Who is this ‘we’? You have maybe won, but the people starved for months. Others, others are dead… and for what? For 20 per cent more each month? How is that winning?

Clearly, the discrepancy in the goals of the activism not only impacts on the manner in which the activism situation is communicatively negotiated, but also on the determination of when success has been attained. Furthermore, the excellence theory purposes that a relationship of trust must be sought and managed with activist groups, in order for this goal attainment to be realised. When political forces of power come into play, however, this aspect becomes complex. Underlining this aspect, Malala (2012), in commenting on the ‘fall’ of NUM and the rise of AMCU at Lonmin (Marikana) notes: “[t]he NUM's achilles heel was that its relationship with mine owners and the Chamber of Mines had become too close”. Clearly evident herein is that the political nature of activism changes the entire context in which activism should be navigated. Again, as commented on before, this is why contextual and situational directedness is important – the situation, rather than the normative aspects of a theory, should dictate the communication endeavours applied therein.

**Activist groups as organisations**

When taking a contextual and situational view on activist groups, it should also be noted that activist groups (especially within the South African context) is mostly not only a constituency of an organisation, but also a complete organisation in and of itself (cf.Jiang & Ni 2009). This means that these activist groups inherently play a dual role in terms of its organisational involvement, and that the mechanistic stance of the excellence theory would need to be revisited. Herein, these activist situations have the goals, structures and power of **two** organisations to consider, along with the mandates of the members of these organisations. Unions within the mining industry are a good example of this, where they function (and are given ‘recognition’ and ‘power’) in an organisational setting, only once they attain their own organisational goals – for example having the dominant representation of employees.

Examining the previous quote from one of the interview participants, this sentiment comes to the fore again:

If you go and ask Joseph Mathunjwa about all these strikes, you will hear him say ‘we have won’. Who is this ‘we’? You have maybe won…

Clearly, the participant does not espouse the same goals as (he perceives) the head of AMCU to hold. Hence, the excellence theory would have to alter its understanding of *goal attainment* – it is not as ‘clear cut’ as is perhaps set forth. Again, as from a postmodernistic stance, the multiple realities of any single situation would need to be factored into the communication endeavours employed therein, as no situation is mechanistically simplistic, as it might seem at the onset, or on face value.

**Historical encumbrances**

Linking to the idea of complex and multiple realities, and as is clearly evident in the contextualisation of the mining industry, as given above, this industry is plagued by certain historical encumbrances. A very telling example of this is offered by an interview participant, who comments about the necessity of activism (even violent activism) in the South African mining industry:

What else must they [the workers] do? No, they are trying to keep my people poor. If they do not keep them poor, who will do the work for them?

Another participant also commented on these historical encumbrances, noting that unions would reject even the best of offers put forth by organisations, due to a deep-seated and long raging mistrust between organisations and activist groups. The participant mused that the activist groups would sometimes reject offers that “seemed too good to be true, as they kept trying to figure out what the catch is – what the organisation is playing at”, even when the organisation was sincere and candid in its negotiations.

Herein, and resultant of these encumbrances, consensus-based dialogue (as suggested by the excellence theory in terms of two-way symmetricality for a win-win situation) is not always possible. Taking a more postmodernistic stance, Ganesh and Zoller (2012, 68) offers up alternative views on dialogue in organisational activism situations, calling for approaches that “represents difference, otherness, and multivocality … wherein dialogue becomes a fundamental way of being in the world”. This reference underlines many of the principles that underscore the considerations as discussed in this section, as the modernistic and mechanistic views of the excellence theory are not mature or robust enough to cope with the complexities presented in these activism situations, even though it ironically calls for turbulence. Although many of the assumptions or characteristics of the excellence theory could hold true in organisational activism situations, their implementation and employment should not be directed by a normative prescription of ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ (or even excellent) communication conduct, as each activism situation dictates a different handling. The situational and contextual merit – from a more postmodernistic vantage point – should rather be the main factors in determining communication strategies, endeavours and successes in activism situations.

**CONCLUSION**

In reviewing the phenomenon of activism within the South African context – as it progressed from a fugitive act, to a staple of democracy – it became clear in this paper that activism is very much particularist: one man’s political insurrection is another’s principled activism. In the mining industry of the country specifically, the importance of contextual and situational awareness and -merit came to the fore, as the excellence theory and its characteristics were scrutinised. It made increasingly more sense for the excellence theory to be amended and further developed, as it clearly does not completely speak to the complexities offered up in organisational activism situations, such as those experienced in the recent (and/or ongoing) platinum strikes in the South African mining industry. The paper does, however, point to the fact that the excellence theory offers appropriate and relevant assertions, but strongly urges that these assertions be endeavoured only if it is contextually and situationally merited to do so – and not due to the normative prescriptions of the theory itself.

In this vein, organisational communication practitioners would need to be more interpretative in their communicative efforts, as the modernist and mechanistic normativity of the excellence theory hinders appropriate corollaries to organisational activism situations. It is within this interpretative, contextually and situationally driven understandings that organisational communicators will charter and sustain the “pragmatic value” in democracy that Ganesh and Zoller (2012, 66) speak to.

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