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## Organizational Communication of the Commons: Any Particularity?<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** This paper aims to make a theoretical contribution to the literature on collaborative action and the management of *the commons* (Hess and Ostrom 2007; Ostrom 1990), with particular emphasis on communication. It draws on communication studies to identify some of the premises that are key to the Organizational Communication of the Commons (OCC). The organizations that have to deal with some of the new commons (Hess 2008) manage and communicate outputs about knowledge, environment, social justice, public health and other fields. This paper argues that it is in communication that they constitute, or not, the so-called commons as such. Communication and management are at the heart of making-sense processes, so the author adopts the framework of the Communicative Constitution of Organizations (CCO) (Cooren 2000; McPhee and Zaig 2000). The paper points out that narratives and storytelling are the places where some of these processes take place and regards organizations as story producers (Boje 1991, 2014; Czarniawska 1998). The contribution argues that organizations dealing with the commons have particular issues to observe when communicating with the community and stakeholders and highlights specially three: a) accepting the blurring boundaries of organizations; b) adopting a new and integrative approach that opens up organizations to the publics; c) truly democratizing decision-making processes, which must be open communication systems, not just available or transparent. The paper ends with a call for a shift in organizational culture by challenging three features of neoliberal logics: identities – embedded in storytelling practices –, their publics – the nature of which needs to be reconsidered –, and their governance – which requires consistent and fair feedback from all agents. The author argues that communication processes are at the basis of this change. The essential idea put forward is that it is how we communicate at an organizational level that (re)cognizes the commons as such.

### Keywords

Communication, Nonprofit Organizations, Organizational Communication of the Commons (OCC), Constitution of the Commons.

### 1 Introduction

The concept of *the commons* has a long tradition in social sciences and economic thought. It was in the eighties when the advances made by Elinor Ostrom (1990) and colleagues challenged the idea that, left to their own logics and driven by selfish interests, individuals, institutions and organizations at large would extinguish any common pool resources (CPR). This conception emerged from that of previous analysts in the sixties (e.g. Hardin 1968), and led to a dichotomous response to managing the commons: privatization or strong regulation by public bodies. The commons are defined as “shared resources in which each stakeholder has an equal interest” (Hess 2006), which have particular governance problems because of human behavior such as “competition for use, free riding and over-harvesting” (Hess and Ostrom 2007:5). We usually refer to CPR in terms of the environment (woodlands, biodiversity, fishery), nature (minerals, land,

woods, water, air), and non-physical resources such as knowledge, cultural diversity, languages, etc. Even so, as Ismael Vaccaro and Oriol Beltran (2019) have pointed out, CPR can also be seen as a “conceptual fiction”, in the sense that once we make use of them they become either common property or an open access resource. As we shall see, this warning is meaningful to our theoretical viewpoint.

Ostrom challenged the idea that people and organizations had no agency in the better management of the commons and that their behavior would exhaust or deplete the benefits of others or be exploited to such an extent that the situation would become lose-lose. From this point on, the academic literature on the commons has grown, and the resources regarded as commons have diversified. Communication has been identified as a type of *new commons*, which would include mass communication, public media, infrastructures and open source websites (Hess 2008). But little attention has been paid to aspects related not to communication as commons but to what this paper defines as Organizational Communication of the Commons (OCC). This concept refers to the management of communication in the organizations that administrate the commons and we argue that, even though most organizations have to deal with CPR to some extent or another, those that are heavily involved in the management of the commons should ensure that they accomplish certain aspects within the communication processes.

Scientists working in the field have already shown that communication among the members of an organization improves the management of the commons. Research on communication typically considers its cost; communication is costly. However, increasing costless communication increases the mean efficiency of a group (Ostrom and Walker 1989; Muller and Vickers 1996), and communication among members who exploit a common resource leads to moderation and homogenization (Ghate, Ghate, and Ostrom 2013). But communication does not always improve agreement; it can cause misunderstandings among in-group management and reinforce the viewpoints of other stakeholders (de Nooy 2013). Added to this, it cannot be seen as a direct solution to, for example, the governance of specific high-risk socio-ecological systems that requires not only communication networks but also actors who can provide trustworthy information. In this, governmental agents seem to have a central role (Berardo 2014). Applying this type of analyses and using elaborate models to quantitatively calculate efficiency, the research has shown that communication “increases the group performance in commons dilemmas, even if communication is costly” (Janssen, Lee, and Tyson 2014:633) and that opening communication with local groups increases cooperation for managing common resources (Mitra, Buisson, and Bastakoti 2017). Overall, when researchers regard communication as important, they usually analyze the impact that constrained, unconstrained, costly or costless communication, has on the efficiency of the group management of CPR using models, experiments or game dynamics.

These advances are essential to measure whether communication in organizations adds efficiency or not, increases or decreases the trust among stakeholders or strengthens or weakens the will to cooperate for the common good. But communication should be seen not only as a matter of cost or an element by which efficiency can be evaluated. This is concerning particularly because of the importance that Ostrom (2009:421) put on media organization and interactions (including information sharing, or networking) as the social, economic, and political setting that affects a subset of variables that will help organizational self-governance avoid the “tragedy of the commons”. Our approach does not focus on the cost/benefit of communication in a given system and does not pretend to contribute to this line of thought. We will theoretically reflect on a broader issue: the extent to which organizations dealing with the commons have to adopt a particular approach to communication in socio-economic systems. To this end, we will use OCC to identify the type of communicational issues that have an impact on the constitution of the organizations as

such and on their observance of the commons as such. Because the commons are so diverse, as is the socioeconomic environment in which they are managed and the cultural background of the communities, it is not possible to establish universal rules or paradigms to govern common or open access resources. This was pointed out by the pioneers in the field like Ostrom (1990:23–24) who stated that we cannot establish general rules or unlimited premises should not be a cause of concern. It is indeed an opportunity. One of the consequences of this is that the field is particularly fragmented, with a series of case studies that focus on specific types of commons.

We should point out first that communication is not just an option for an organization, but a must. Therefore, organizations dealing with this type of resource cannot avoid communication, either internally among members or externally among stakeholders or addressed to some sort of “publics”. Thus, communication in organizations dealing with the commons, as in every organization, is not just a matter of cost. It is communication that lies at the roots of all organizations. Here, we follow the Communication Constitution of Organization (CCO) paradigms (Cooren 2000; McPhee and Zaugg 2000). But the important thing is that it is the way this communication is organized and how it is managed that shows the extent to which the organization observes CPR as such. At this level, storytelling and narrative approaches to the organizations have a central role and relevance.

Let us discuss a couple of examples to illustrate this idea that could appear as abstract. Education is regarded as a type of knowledge commons (Hess and Ostrom 2007; Hess 2008), and universities as among the institutions that manages not only education, but information and knowledge as well, which *are* both considered as CPR. Universities should consistently develop an OCC that involves transparent management, open-access to educational and knowledge resources, creative-commons policies, public events, spaces, libraries or classrooms, and so on. Also, public communication should present education and knowledge not as privative, exclusive or competitive. However, experience differs considerably and public universities have strict policies on access to knowledge, their advertising is full of markers stressing competition, exclusiveness, and the individual benefit that students and companies can add to their careers and economic performances. Therefore, pragmatically, education and knowledge *are not* CPR for these universities. Another example: if we take a health or medical commons such as community resistance to illness we could decide that health care or vaccines should *be* considered CPR, but so should the information and knowledge about how to freely access them, the consequences of using them or not, the scientific progress in certain medical areas, etc. Health care centers, hospitals and institutions should then take a broader approach to OCC so that they can communicate and exchange with communities within a political system that is socially organized for open access to public health and regarded as a sort of CPR. Still, experience tells us that health is a common good that has historically been privatized. Access to medicines is constrained and medical knowledge is very much in the hands of privately or publicly owned institutions, not shared and managed as a common good. Therefore, public health *is not* a CPR in these management and communication systems.

We argue that both of these cases may be a sort of *illusory CPR* or even an *illusory kind of commons* because it is through our practice and how we act and communicate that constitute the commons as such. This *illusion of the commons* works on the same premise as other non-performative acts of speech such as the ones pointed out by Slavoj Žižek (2010) and Sarah Ahmed (2005) and they can be detected, for example, in anti-racism claims, access to work and housing, and the like. We need to ask ourselves how we can counteract this illusion. At the same time, the fact that the pragmatic communication strategies taken by these institutions do not constitute CPR as such is in line with Vaccaro and Beltran’s (2019) argument that CPR is a problematic and even can be a useless concept. We argue that OCC should have at least three features that challenge the

neoliberal approach to organizations. These features involve a shift in three key elements: identity, publics and governance.

## 2 Boundaries, publics and democratization

Traditional corporate and institutional management has had rather strict boundaries between internal and external communication. The term “internal communication” is commonly used to refer to those actions addressed to staff, managers or the members of the organization. This conception has been handed down from the classical public relations approach of the 1980s and the idea that integrated communication means that organizations should speak with “one voice”. More critical and reflective approaches have problematized such well-defined boundaries (e.g. Cheney and Christensen 2001; Fernández del Moral 2004; Castelló 2019). Thus, the first premise that we are proposing here is that the boundaries of organizations are more blurred in OCC. Or, in other words, *OCC is rooted in organizations that dissolve strong boundaries with society and communities at large*. CPRs are diverse, sometimes movable (e.g. fisheries) or immaterial (e.g. education), but those organizations that regard these resources as the commons should notice that they would have trouble applying the old dichotomy between internal and external. We can illustrate this with the risk industries that use river water or send CO<sub>2</sub> into the atmosphere after paying the corresponding quota so that they can legally pollute the air. To an extent, these companies “buy” common resources and, because they have paid for them, expect to be able to manage them as if they were privatized. Their communication on use is regarded as an “internal matter”, and communicating procedures for de facto emissions, spills or “incidental” events are also “internalized”. Nearby communities, however, may not agree to go without a proper environmental river mouth or quality air, and decide to demand better information. Public bodies here are to monitoring and guaranteeing the observation of the rules. But these communities counteract with framing responses that provide an alternative to the industries’ narrative, which impacts on public discussion through media coverage (e.g. Castelló 2010). In this sort of scenario, air and water are not regarded as a commons by the industries while they are regarded as such by the communities. The situation does not correspond to how the commons and communication boundaries are generally understood. In this case, not only does the scenario extend to become what Jan Gonzalo and Jordi Farré (2011:129) identified as a “communities metamodel of risk communication”, but also the boundaries of the communities are moved to such an extent that the whole scenario becomes a sort of *super-community* and finding internal consensus and fairness is crucial.

These types of situation tell us that OCC distances itself from closed community models and opens up organizations and their communication to broader publics. In a networked environment, the traditional “boundaries of organizations” are permeable, but this permeability cannot be “controlled” by PR activities in the same way as it was twenty years ago. Thus, renewing the OCC would literally set up an “open access” system, in which how the organization manages its resources is reported transparently. Such transparency is not always achieved or tolerated by companies dealing with natural resources, environmental impacts or social issues like health, education or equality. Here, the commons go beyond its definition in terms of property; a common source can be regulated as property but problematically communicated as such in *super-community* scenarios like the one described above. What this shows for the cases discussed is that common extractive industries do not treat the commons in their production and transformative processes, and neither do they communicate the commons, because they are not considered as such; and this is a major cause of conflictive episodes wherever they happen. The blurring of boundaries is related to the so-called *economy for the common good* (Felber 2014).

A communicative constitution of organizations (CCO) approach would argue that the way we communicate is part of an organization's input and, therefore, also part of the commons. This does not mean that organizations can be reduced to discursive action but, as Cooren (2004:388) proposes, that a "textual agency" is acknowledged in organizations and has human and non-human "contributions". The commons is constituted in communication because it is common-action. So we can move on to take a look at the immaterial commons of knowledge and education, and the university system. In regular discourse about the role of public universities it is repeated one and a thousand times that universities, funded with public resources, build a body of public knowledge that is transferred to society. The model seems to imply that knowledge is "manufactured" in the university, and transferred to society at large. In the last decade, great efforts have been made in the field of open-access resources, massive open on-line courses (known as MOOC), and a new definition of what social impact is. Again, if we visit public university offices we see that the communication and marketing departments are not organized as if they were dealing with a commons. Here we should avoid misunderstandings: commons and open access are resources of a different nature. Educational marketing is generally accustomed to using the discourse of competition with particular insistence on rankings, the impact factor of research or the head-hunting of top scholars, they invest quantities of money in attracting students as customers – for example, a common term in Spanish is "*captación de estudiantes*" one expression that we would propose to switch to "*atracción de estudiantes*"–, they evaluate and engage in decision-making processes that assess programs as products or services, or they launch social media and advertising campaigns similarly to those at private businesses. Most universities are, communicatively speaking, operating along similar lines to corporate brands; their pragmatics constitutes knowledge and education as commodities. If a real OCC were to be implemented in education, the first step would have to be to define the boundaries of what sort of organization the university is: Are universities "the place" where knowledge is produced or one more actor in society transforming common knowledge? Are the students regarded as an internal public and organizational members of the organization or are they more like customers who spend two or three years "purchasing" something? These considerations not only challenge the borders of the institution – who we are – they also change the very idea of what publics are.

Who are the publics in an OCC strategy? The traditional position of institutions communicating to explain the organizational outputs was to mistake the publics for customers or audience, a sort of outsider community, as a segment, a kind of liability or "objective" to be "targeted", who can be mobilized to purchase, vote or act in a specific way. We are used to dealing with this misunderstanding in universities. We already problematized the regular treatment of the publics as "segments" and used logarithmic schemes to address the specific features of each group (Castelló 2019). Those institutions dealing with CPR are expected to adopt a different communication culture and the general public should be considered when specific issues are designed and addressed. Participation and co-creation dynamics in designing and distributing the message among the interested communities are crucial and should be general practice. Therefore, the traditional concept of the public with a passive role in communication design and decision-making is exhausted. For the commons theory, this was referred to as "analytic deliberation" by Dietz, Ostrom and Stern (2003:1910), and means that the "interested publics" are relevant when action is taken regarding the governance of the commons. This implies increasing trust, engagement and effectiveness. So, *in OCC the publics are neither passive nor the receivers of communicative acts; instead they take part in the organization's output because they are part of the organization.*

For purposes of illustration, we can give the example of woodlands and wildfire extinction and prevention. Woods are considered to be a common good which is not easy to manage exclusively

through private or public bodies. In one research project on the sense-making processes surrounding fire prevention and mitigation, we noted the frames that different publics can apply to this issue, with a focus on environmental organizations (Castelló and Montagut 2018). These organizations include a wide range of individuals, from expert volunteers to participants in eco-friendly activities, who have a rich understanding of how to prevent wildfires. Their viewpoints are not commonly taken into account by institutions or firefighting bodies. If we engage in a similar exercise of sense-making retrospection (Castelló 2019: 44-52) for the risk communication industries and higher educational institutions, we will be able to determine how the larger *super-community* understands them and how we can collectively deal with them. One example of a positive attempt to include different publics in campaigns for prevention and mitigation was the 2018 campaign by the Barcelona Provincial Council (2018). One of the features of the campaign was that it included volunteers like the Agrupació de Defensa Forestal,<sup>2</sup> academics and experts like the Pau Costa Foundation,<sup>3</sup> and the firefighting bodies. The campaign by the Barcelona Provincial Council pointed out that the general public could help improve the situation by protecting themselves, consuming local products from farmers, avoiding negligent behaviors and understanding wood management. The campaign was a good example of CCO in the sense that the communication itself constitutes the wood as commons.

This type of renewed and participatory approach to communication campaigns reveals a third aspect that should be considered by *OCC: the need for a truly inclusive decision-making process within the organization*. Many researchers are working on the issue of how we can respond to the need to take into account different decision making-structures. That is to say, ones that incorporate grass-roots movements or are truly transversal communication flows. Among them, we can exemplify with the project SoCaTel,<sup>4</sup> that is implementing a co-creative platform to implement health services for long-term care. A variety of approaches are used here, but we will focus on narrative perspectives, because a more democratic and inclusive governance necessarily involves visualizing and hearing stories from minorities, from the organization grounds, and activating bottom-up procedures. This is important because, above all, organizations are storytelling agents, producers of narratives (Boje 1991; Czarniawska 1998). Here David Boje's concepts of *microstoria* and *antenarrative* play an important role in a more complex understanding of how storytelling transforms organizations and society. At micro-levels, *microstoria* are non-premeditated stories, unplanned but active, which are collectively as important as official stories or stories organized by managers. Boje (2001:1) regards *antenarratives* as "fragmented, non-linear, incoherent, collective, unplotted and improper storytelling". Here we could understand them as a type of counter narratives, sometimes opposed to official stories, that are not just relevant at the level of managers or at a macro-level, but also as an active action from practitioners at a micro-level (Boje, Haley, and Saylor 2016). Whilst corporate and institutional communication commonly focuses on macro-stories and top-down rationales, a more democratic view of governance brings together many different communicational levels, including workers and members of the organization, customers, media and social networks, etc. This type of broad but strong process of sense-making defines the third premise of the OCC and initiatives like SoCaTel or others, which pay attention to stories from the grassroots and *microstoria*, can be a way to channel new participatory and co-creative dynamics.

### 3 Conclusion: challenging neoliberal premises

This paper aims to reflect on how the OCC is challenging the usual prerequisites of certain organizational communication approaches, and especially corporative communication. Neoliberal schemes reinforce the notion of the tragedy of the commons and the "pathogenic effects of

conscience” that Garrett Harding (1968:1246) already pointed out in the sixties, and which explain that those who exploit a commons experience “intended” and “unintended” communication when asked to desist from continuing such exploitation. We may apply this notion also to organizations. The intended communication is condemnatory – you are not a responsible organization – whilst the unintended communication activates a neoliberal logic – your organization is shamed because “standing aside” while others make profit. In Hardin’s words (1968:1244), the tragedy is that each individual – organization or group of stakeholders – feels compelled “to increase his herd without limit – in a world that is limited. Ruin is the destination toward which all men rush in a society that believes in the freedom of the commons”. Even Hardin pointed the perils of this schizophrenic system, an affirmation that reckons the ideas by Deleuze and Guattari (emphasis in original, 2009:246/1972) when holding that “schizophrenia is the *exterior* limit of capitalism itself on the conclusion of its deepest tendency”.

As Ostrom did before us, we have continued to problematize this bi-polar viewpoint, and we have challenged three key aspects of neoliberal logics in the realm of organizational communication. This challenge involves problematizing the question of who we are – as organizations and collectives –, who we are addressing, and how we organize our decision-making processes. All three aspects are ontological elements associated with communication issues developed in Castelló (2019):

- Identity: OCC requires organizations to redefine their identity and broaden their limits. The question of who we are should be answered in four parts: the material, the mentalized, the projected and the pragmatic organization. Although not all organizations go to such lengths, those managing commons are more obliged to reflect on their identities, expand their borders and substitute the common internal-external approaches to proximity positioning of time and space for each of their communication activities and events.
- Publics: OCC requires publics to be included in organizational logics and communication procedures. It is not sufficient just to give them a “window” of expression through social networks and on-line platforms. As for every form of communication, in networked OCC the dichotomous scheme of sender-receiver, or a passive/active audience, is over. We are not referring to the notion of *prosumer* or the profit made of users’ activity or content –like the *user generated content* model. The fact that publics are part of the organizational output means that we abandon the notion of users, audience, voters and consumers as we understand them. In OCC, the publics become the community, the collective, and, therefore, they are a constitutive part of the organization.
- Governance: The decision-making processes in OCC have to change constantly. To include the community in these processes is a mechanism by which all the stories of an organization can be channeled. These processes rely in both macro and micro levels beyond the narrative and discourse. Thus, OCC should explore all the models and alternative modes of organization (among others, cooperatives, participatory budgets, time banks, assembly events, co-creation initiatives, communitarian rules, etc.) that also requires a reform of communication processes and rationales.

Without a doubt, the answer to the question formulated in the title is yes. OCC implies some particularities that are attached to organizations dealing with the commons. This is not to say that other organizations are not obliged to build on transparent, responsible and morally acceptable communication directives. But it seems to us that when dealing with the commons, organizations

are required to be more careful in their observation of inclusive and sustainable communication procedures. Only truly OCC constitute a commons as such, and the organizations as valuable mechanisms to efficiently and ethically respond to the challenges of our limited and fragile world. Thus, OCC is not just a matter of *cost* or even the *cost of being*, but a matter of *being itself*.

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## Methodological Appendix

This is a theoretical contribution. It is mainly grounded on a review of the literature and the discussion of concepts put forward by major scholars in the field. The paper was also enriched by previous research at Asterisc Communication Research Group<sup>5</sup> on risk communication, storytelling and framing wildfire mitigation and prevention (see references).

## Biographical note

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2. <http://snadf.org/>
3. <http://www.paucostafoundation.org/ing/index.php>
4. <https://www.socatel.eu/>
5. <http://www.comunicacio.urv.cat/en/research/>