

The communicative constitution of organizational continuity and change in, through and over time

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#### Abstract

This chapter explores the role of time in organizational continuity and change from communicative and discourse perspectives. Changing our conception of communication, we argue, also changes our insights into the temporal underpinning of continuity and change. Reviewing literature that sees discourse and communication as constitutive of organizational reality, reveals that time often plays a central, yet unacknowledged role in organizational continuity and change. This chapter thus develops an overview of time in discourse and communication studies, unpacking how temporal notions matter to organizational continuity and change. In doing so, the chapter elucidates how the pace(s) of change and continuity are collective, multidirectional accomplishments constituted through discourse and communication.

*Keywords:* change and continuity; time and temporality; communicative constitution of organization; organizational discourse

In this chapter, we explore the relations between continuity and change, and more specifically the temporal underpinning of these relations, based on the assumption that they are communicatively constituted. To do so, we focus on the way continuity and change have been addressed within the interdisciplinary field of organizational discourse studies (ODS) and communicative constitution of organization (CCO) perspective. While these studies are varied, they share the premise that organizational phenomena—such as organizational continuity or change—emerge through discourse and communication. Figuring out how continuity or change take place, then, is a question of understanding everyday communicative practices across, for example, meetings, e-mails, policy and strategy documents, symbolic artefacts, etc. (Phillips & Oswick, 2012; Schoeneborn et al., 2019). This claim rests on the assumption that:

[A] constitutive perspective, informed by the linguistic and practice turns, shows how discourse and communication are not simply activities that occur within organizations or the surface-level manifestations, or conduits, of more putatively ‘real’ factors and containers. They are symbiotic, interdependent, and mutually constitutive in constituting organization. (Kuhn & Putnam, 2014: p. 437)

In recognizing that discourse and communication are *constitutive* of organizational phenomena, ODS and CCO offer critical approaches to studying continuity and change (Grant et al., 2005). They steer us away from functionalist assumptions, i.e., from viewing organizations as existing a priori and from reducing continuity and change to intentionally planned efforts. Instead, ODS and CCO rethink continuity and change by leaving behind the conventional view that communication accompanies change and is transmissive, arguing that communication and discourse are fundamentally constitutive and performative of organizing change and continuity, whether they are intended or not (Grant & Marshak, 2011; Hardy & Thomas, 2014; Plotnikof & Pedersen, 2019). Rather than viewing continuity and change as fixed end states or necessarily opposite, these are better understood as communication and discursive tensions emerging in dynamic relation to each other in, over and through time.

This chapter introduces how this constitutive perspective offers a relational understanding of both intended and unintended organizational continuity and change as *emerging and entangling* in communicative practices and discursive constructions in, through and over time. Such a perspective enables us to concretely observe how continuity and change are interactively relating and performed in everyday activities. Studying those activities reveals how the two phenomena are entangled, as they are discursively produced, communicatively enacted and thereby materialize across actors, spaces, and times. However, while ODS and CCO perspectives are saturated by underlying assumptions of time – such as communicative practices emerging *in time*, text-conversation dialectics moving *through time*, and discursive power relations reproducing *over time* – temporality often remains implicit (Plotnikof & Mumby, 2023). This means that the role of time and the temporal underpinning of communicative practices are blind spots,

limiting a more fine-grained, temporally sensitive theorizing of continuity and change within CCO and ODS. We argue that greater sensitivity to temporality allows to move beyond static views on communication in continuity and change, and to further a more fundamental consideration of the communicatively and discursively constructed pace of continuity and change relations in organizing processes.

As shown below, communication has often been limited to function at specific moments in change efforts, either to collect information or to transmit it to specific audiences. Thinking that communication is merely a vehicle for preexisting pieces of information is problematic (Axley, 1984), as that reduces change to a rational, disembodied *decision* to change that can then be “communicated”. Such transmission views on communication miss how that decision is performed and negotiated through concrete, often precarious interactions and, furthermore, they fail to understand how intended change only emerges and propagates insofar it is enacted communicatively through equally tangible situations. In contrast, ODS and CCO perspectives enables detailed attention to how particular communicative interactions and discursive constructions of change unfold and scale up to changing organizational reality (Basque et al., 2022; Thomas et al., 2011). However, they assume—rather than explicate—what it means that these interactions unfold *in, through and over time*. To further contribute to what a fundamentally constitutive understanding of communication and discourse means to continuity and change, then, ODS and CCO must also make their view of time more explicit.

To do so, this chapter unpacks how continuity and change are approached in ODS and CCO, examining three specific conceptualizations of continuity and change relations in this literature, namely 1) strategic versus resisting communication and discourses, 2) text-conversation dialectics, and 3) micro-interactional analysis. Works within these conceptualizations, each in its own way, present continuity and change as emergent and “fleeting” processes, in which time plays a central part (see also Cooren et al., 2015). After reviewing these studies, we identify key relations between change, continuity and temporality constituted through discourse and communication, thereby contributing to elucidate the performative role that temporality plays in ODS and CCO perspectives. Altogether, this offers timely concepts to understand the fundamentally communicative, discursive constitution of organizational continuity and change.

### **Discourse and communication views on continuity and change**

Research on communication in relation to organizational change has traditionally considered it as a means to a goal, in one of two ways. First, it is said that communication prepares for change, for instance as organizations are implementing strategic changes and want to ensure that staff and other actors support it (e.g., Schulz-Knappe et al., 2019), or when organizations share information about possible external threats, such as environmental crises, and communicate about strategic changes in response (e.g., Lewis,

1999). Discourse and communication also allow sharing meaning and sensemaking, which is key to enabling both long-term changes and more agile decisions in the early stages of change (Balogun & Johnson, 2004; Brown et al., 2015). Second, communication is considered as a vehicle to propagate a strategy once it is decided, helping manage later stages of change by sharing a sense of purpose (e.g., Köhler & Zerfass, 2019). These views mostly consider change as a rare occurrence, and communication as a tool to collect information and disseminate decisions with respect to it (see Axley, 1984; Weick & Quinn, 1999).

Continuity, for its part, is often discussed in the guise of resilience towards external factors and changes, for example when a business restores continuity following a crisis (Doerfel & Harris, 2017). In that sense, continuity is the ability to conserve some features despite change, such an organizational culture (in agreement with the “unfreeze-change-refreeze” model by Lewin, 1947; e.g., LeCouvie & Pendergast, 2014). Communicating continuity, in such understandings, is again considered chiefly according to a transmission metaphor; it is described as an effort to strategically legitimize a certain course of action as coherent with existing organizational identities and goals, and to reassure actors (employees, clients, stakeholders) that the change in fact keeps the organization on track (DePamphilis, 2015).

Both understandings limit the role of communication and discourse to managerial tools used at specific stages of change or continuity efforts: either they help decide about change prior to it, or they inform and implement it afterwards, or they manage stakeholders’ expectations regarding the organization’s continuity. Discourse and communication, then, function as effective management tools for change or continuity-fulfilling normative tasks, intended to work before, during or after decisions of change or continuity. However, in challenging this more *conventional view* on change or continuity as stages in a dichotomic relation, and communication and discourse as managerial tools or medium, a stream of process studies have advanced out conceptualization of change and continuity (see chapter XX in this volume for more on this), suggesting that we view these as emerging relations integral to all organizing processes becoming in flux (Chia & Tsoukas, 2003; Langlely et al., 2013). Such a novel process approach to change and continuity, however, requires an equally novel theorizing of the role of discourse and communication in this regard (Grant et al., 2005; Thomas et al., 2011), one that moves past its reduction to managerial tools acting as a medium between change managers and their audiences.

Indeed, a closer reading of literature taking a *constitutive view* on communication and discourse shows that this also completely recasts the relationship between continuity and change (Grant et al., 2005; Grant & Marshak, 2011). Discourse and communication turn out to play a more crucial role in enabling both continuity and change than the transmission view reserved for them, as they also suppose different ways of conceptualizing time. A key aspect of these novel conceptualizations consists in a relational approach to continuity and change, where communication and discourse enact and materialize shifting relations, whose reconfiguration constitute change or continuity (Cooren, 2018). Acknowledging the

variety of these studies, many follow a broad definition of communication as interplays of texts and conversations, in which conversations are observable interactions, and texts are symbolic materialization, through which organizing is becoming in, through and over time (Koschmann et al., 2012; Taylor & van Every, 2000). Further, text/conversation interplays enact discourses, understood as sets of interrelated texts and associated practices of production, distribution and consumption that bring an idea or object into being (Grant & Marshak, 2011; Plotnikof & Pedersen, 2019). Methodologically speaking, this also defines the object of study: the researcher examines the way interactions, talk and texts interrelate and perform change and continuity. This allows such studies to follow change and continuity as they unfold in everyday practices of more or less strategic concern.

To further unpack how this view advances our understanding of organizational continuity and change, we discuss three main analytical conceptualizations taking a constitutive view of communication and discourse. We order them according to how intentional they consider continuity and change to be located in 1) strategic versus resisting communication and discourse; 2) text / conversation dynamics; and 3) interactional approaches. As we will see, however, each of them challenges the conventional view of intentional or planned change, but also our very understanding of continuity and change, and brings into the picture new understandings of time and temporality.

### **Continuity and change in strategic versus resisting communication and discourse**

Strategic efforts to manage and organize change or continuity have been studied widely, including in ODS and CCO perspectives (Hardy & Thomas, 2014; Plotnikof, 2015; Vásquez et al., 2018). Without suggesting that either change or continuity are necessarily questions of strategy, such work scrutinizes how various concerns may become powerful and gain authority, thereby becoming strategic in specific, consequential ways through communication and discourse. Such studies have, for example, looked at narratives, whether they are written in annual reports or told during meetings (Robichaud, 2003; Vaara et al., 2016). They have found that other temporal foci, especially towards the past, press on the present and the future through their mobilization in narratives and other communicative practices (Basque & Langley, 2018; Hjorth & Dawson, 2016). In that sense, strategy discourses and communication, including narratives, have performative effects and function powerfully in the way that they may relate and legitimize continuity and change in constituting organization reality (Hardy & Thomas, 2014). Without being explicitly mentioned, temporality is central in such studies, as strategic efforts may span several years, and documents such as meeting minutes, reports, grant applications, emails, etc., play a key part in creating change or continuity across singular events (Vásquez et al., 2018). Such dynamics also exist across much shorter timespans, as concerns gain strategic status even within the same conversation and are commutatively made present and crystalized into a course of action for the future (Bencherki et al., 2021). These studies show

that, rather than well-articulated intention, it is complex discursive dynamics and networks of communication, in precarious, tensional relation to each other, *that make any change or continuity become reality*.

Relatedly, others look at resistance to change, and suggest that change and resistance are inherent to each other, and some even see resistance as co-constructive of change and continuity efforts (Thomas & Hardy, 2011; Frandsen et al., 2018). Such research elucidates how power-resistance dynamics challenge the distinction between change and continuity. For example, studies shows that organizing and legitimizing change emerge through ongoing discursive negotiations and communicative resistance, for example, during meetings, or through emails, and documents (Thomas et al., 2011; Plotnikof & Pedersen, 2019). Such perspectives make resistance integral to change and hence relate change to continuity, by arguing that ongoing power-resistance dynamics shape negotiations of what change may mean and how it come to matter to the situated work practices and actors. These studies unpack fine-grained analysis of change discourses, meaning negotiations and counter-narratives situated in specific moments, seeking to change the future of organizational plans. Further, examining such moments in detail across events and meetings reveal how these communicatively interrelate or contrast change and continuity through power-resistance dynamics. Others unpack resistance to politically decided changes, accentuating the precarity of both change and continuity as depending on power-resistance dynamics that are enacted through multimodality and multivocality across actors over time (Buchanan & Dawson, 2007; Mumby & Plotnikof, 2019; Thomas & Davies, 2005).

This literature highlights how discourse and communication interweave and negotiate meanings of change and continuity through power-resistance dynamics that constitute organizational reality in and across time. In that sense, change and continuity is not constituted despite each other, but in ongoing relation to one another. This body of knowledge highlights the multi-directional and multivocality of discourse and communication constitutive to rethinking both change and continuity. In so doing, they show how change or continuity may be demarcated in a strategy, but also reveal how they are implied by one another and entangle in messy ways through the communication emerging amongst actors and spaces embodying them in, over and through time.

Viewing strategic and resisting efforts of continuity and change as relations constituted through discourse and communication, including narratives and counter-narratives, is underpinned by temporal assumptions of such constructions occurring in, through and over time. Yet, they are freed from the temporal assumption of planning. First, as we hinted, information collection, strategy formulation, dissemination and resistance turn out to be multidirectional and simultaneous, rather than steps in a well-disciplined procedure. They involve communicative practices taking place across years, a few meetings or within the same conversation, as new information may appear, suggesting other courses of action, causing

negotiations or rejections of ideas (e.g., Cooren et al., 2015). Second, the fact that communication and discourse materialize in multimodal, fragmented ways in the situation, allows multiple voices and concerns to co-emerge in time, but also through time and over time. This is because they can re-emerge across events, interactions and ideas, which by their relation may appear as strategic, resisting and conflictual, yet which may reconfigure across different past-present-future constructions; for example through anecdotes from participants' past, stakeholder concerns expressed earlier or predicted future horizons or outcomes (Bencherki et al., 2019; Plotnikof & Pedersen, 2019; Wenzel et al., 2020).

### **Continuity and change in text / conversation dynamics**

A key notion in studies adopting a constitutive perspective is the text / conversation interplay, which directly addresses continuity and change. Early scholarship on communication's constitutive role was centrally concerned with the way principles, values and ways of doing things are negotiated in conversations that may sediment and stabilize into texts, which again may be renegotiated in further conversations (Taylor et al., 1996; Taylor & Van Every, 2000). Text and conversations may be woven together into "metaconversations" that, in their turn, sediment into authoritative texts that define what the organization is about (Kuhn, 2008; Robichaud et al., 2004), as well as what changes may be discursively reproduced or resisted (Grant & Marshak, 2011; Mumby & Plotnikof, 2019). This iterative or recursive dynamic is how organizing unfolds, as the continuity that texts provide is put in productive tension with the change that conversations afford.

The notion of text, though, should be understood broadly: a text is any description of the organization, irrespective of the empirical form it takes. It may be a document, a piece of technology, a story that is told again and again, etc. What distinguishes texts and conversations, then, is not their material form, as they may in fact both be oral (as when someone quotes a rule) or textual (as when discussing on an online forum). Instead, conversations are distinguished in that they *reflexively* re-examine texts and allow them to make a difference in the ongoing situation, as when people invoke a rule to account for their action (Taylor & Van Every, 2000). The iterative nature of text-conversation dynamics entails that continuity and change are shaped as people refer to what others have said and written previously, i.e., as they 'ventriloquize' texts in a citational chain that maintains continuity across situations over time, while also altering the original texts and giving them new meaning, thus performing change (Cooren, 2010, 2012).

The relationship between text and conversation has led authors to recognize that continuity and change, or order and disorder, are not two different states, but rather simultaneous occurrences (Vásquez et al., 2016; Vásquez & Kuhn, 2019). Any effort to order and organize things, whether in everyday conversations or over longer timespans, thus inevitably also creates disorder and disorganization. However,

rather than regret this fact, it should be recognized that it is crucial for organizations to be living, adaptive creatures (Bencherki & Iliadis, 2021; Vásquez et al., 2022).

For continuity and change, acknowledging the text/conversation interplay also entails recognizing that continuity necessarily involves change, as any identity, routine, history, procedure, rule, or other text must also be enacted to make a difference in the ongoing situation. Continuity is moot if it does not affect the conversations where it could potentially change – and where, potentially, a different decision could be made (Grothe-Hammer et al., 2022). On the other hand, change also supposes continuity, to the extent that conversations are about something, i.e., they reflexively refer to texts, if only to the linguistic norms that substantiate communication, or risk being nothing but unintelligible and disorganized babble (Cooren, 2010).

The text/conversation interplay has two important consequences for the way we understand temporality and time. First, it highlights that continuity and change are simultaneously present in any given situation. Indeed, conversations and texts coexist in meetings and other decision-making arenas, as people talk about the documents they show each other, jolt the ideas they talk about on a flipchart or comment on PowerPoint slides (e.g., Bourgoin & Muniesa, 2016; Cooren, 2007). The apparent continuity of texts is therefore subject to change through talk where the inscriptions of the past are made present and can act through the bodies and voices of those who interpret them (Vásquez & Kuhn, 2019). For instance, notes from a meeting are written to create continuity until the next one, but at that time, people must read them and voice them, with the risk of betrayed what their past selves intended (Vásquez et al., 2018). Continuity and change are therefore not stages, as conventional models may have suggested, but different rhythms and paces afforded by different communicative modalities. Second, the fact that conversations reflexively concern texts, which are themselves stabilizations of prior conversations, means that any utterance or writing already folds into itself other temporalities, in a polyphonic manner (Benoit-Barné & Martine, 2022). Organizational time, then, does not flow from the past to the future, but rather takes a multitude of twists depending on the layering of text and conversation.

### **Continuity and change in interactional approaches**

Studies interested in the text / conversation interplay often – but not always – analyze it in naturally-occurring interactions. In that sense, researchers on communication's constitutive power, but also some discourse scholars, rely on interactional analysis to make sense of communicative data (Cooren, 2007). They are often inspired by ethnomethodology (EM) and conversation analysis (CA) (e.g., Llewellyn & Hindmarsh, 2010). Such an approach views the construction of social order – i.e., of the organization – as sequentially emerging in each situation where it is practically dealt with (Garfinkel, 1967). This is why these scholars are reluctant to explain what takes place within a given situation by drawing from outside



“context,” as if societal or organizational forces overlaid empirical reality (Pomerantz et al., 2018). Instead, they consider the reflexivity of interacting participants as a key analytical resource.

Ascribing reflexivity to participants supposes that, when interacting, people are concerned with maintaining a viable social order and adapting it to emerging needs: in other words, it is through interaction that people deal with continuity and change. This view of how social order is interactionally and reflexively constituted rests on the notion of accountability (Samra-Fredericks, 2010). This term refers to the fact that, when they interact, people expect each other to produce their behavior in a way that is recognizably relevant to the situation at hand, or else to provide an account – or initiate a “repair” – to restore their behavior’s meaning (Heaphy, 2013). For instance, talking about a new issue when looking at the sheet on which the meeting’s agenda is printed makes clear that the speaker is not merely drifting off topic (with respect to the previous issue), but transitioning to a next item (Cooren et al., 2015), and therefore also highlighting that there is, in fact, continuity. Thus, an action is meaningful in the context of other actions that provide its “meaning-context,” as well as reactions that display others’ recognition of its contribution in the ongoing activity (Schutz, 1967). Producing a behavior that is not recognized as relevant may, at best, appear as a misunderstanding of the shared activity – for instance, saying “goodbye” because you thought the meeting was over – or lead to anger and other strong emotions if they are viewed as a disregard for shared expectations – as when someone leaves an interaction abruptly (Llewellyn & Butler, 2011).

The expectation that people will produce behavior that is *accountable* ensures that some degree of continuity is collaboratively enforced by participants in an interaction, and that any change contributes positively to the ongoing activity. Even highly institutionalized situations designed to maintain continuity, such as a judge having to adjudicate a legal case to ensure social order is maintained, are fact interactional accomplishment: they can be seen as conversations between lawyers and judges comparing framings of the situation, and as reflexive dialogue between different situational expectations (Cooren, 2015). Similarly, a classic case of producing change is that of creativity; however, constitutive perspectives of communication have shown that a “creative” idea is interactionally assessed on the basis of its ability to maintain a link to legitimate forms of creativity, thus maintaining a degree of continuity with established ways of doing things (Martine et al., 2017). Likewise, interactional studies have shown how continuity in (Western) medical standards may be upheld despite the different expectations of emergency humanitarian work, and how unwanted change is averted (Matte & Bencherki, 2019). At times, the very expectations that are held in common must be reflexively inspected, as when an organization adopts a new identity that questions its very substance (Chaput et al., 2011).

In the same way as we noted that the strategic and resisting studies highlighted the sequence of communicative practices through which continuity and change were accomplished, or that documents and texts were renegotiated through conversation, interactional studies point to the micro-temporalities of talk

(Rawls, 2005). Such “micro” time is crucial to study as it is through such situatedness that multiple temporalities interweave in constituting various organizational times (Clark & Pinch, 2010; Plotnikof & Mumby, 2023). In keeping with the ethnomethodological roots of interactional perspectives to the constitutive role of communication, the latter must be understood as implying a reflexive reconstruction of the history of practical action (Kim, 1999). Indeed, jointly figuring out what social order is being constructed also supposes jointly characterizing what has been happening so far, whether in the immediate past of the conversation or in the broader history of the interacting parties. Importantly, this characterization occurs in the interaction’s present time, acknowledging it as a key relevant temporality (Basque et al., 2019). The past and the future exist to the extent that they are made relevant in the unfolding of the current interaction: they are here-and-now accomplishment, thus pointing to their situatedness.

In sum, the three analytical strategies are not only specific kinds of continuity and change – for instance, “communicative change” – but rather ways of looking at any organizational change, turning our attention to the key role communication plays in it. Aligned with process theorizing, constitutive views of discourse and communication consider that, while dealing with continuity and change, people link together the past, the present and the future – for instance, through interpreting the past, envisioning the future, all the while debating in the present (Kaplan & Orlikowski, 2013). They do so simultaneously, meaning that different time horizons are involved at once in any (communicative) action (Schultz & Hernes, 2020). This is the case because, in fact, the past and future are enacted through the present in a process of becoming, which implies that the present cannot be talked about as such before it has reached a closure, thus already being in the past (Hernes et al., 2021).

More specifically, across these perspectives we argue that viewing communication and discourse as constitutive, challenges three commonly held assumptions about time: that it flows in a linear, unidirectional manner; that temporalities (i.e., the past, the present and the future) are stable, distinct entities; and that time is objective. When taken together, these challenges reveal a conception of time as a multidirectional, fragmented, and relationally constructed phenomenon. In turn, this view of time has important implications for the way continuity and change are conceived which we will unfold below.

To illustrate this point, we turn to an example based on an important, urgent tension between these two notions as they co-emerge and are negotiated in a case of climate change and related politics. Indeed, while scientist urge politicians to initiate brisk changes, the latter tend to privilege continuity in their policy decisions. However, with the growing evidence that climate change is quite real with serious consequences, politicians increasingly (attempt to) blur the distinction between the two, presenting continuity as an enactment of change. The case of Canadian prime minister Justin Trudeau, a self-described champion of environmental issues, allows us to observe how he walks this blurry line.

**Time in change and continuity: The case of United Nations' sustainable development goals**

The United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals<sup>i</sup> (SDGs) are apt examples of discourse aiming at creating change to ensure continuity: they are a strong invitation to political, institutional, and business leaders to change the way we work, produce, consume, and live, to preserve the continuity of our very lives on this planet. Such urgency is regularly repeated, as was the case in a 2020 UN broadcast: “On 25 September 2015... 193 world leaders committed to the 17 Sustainable Development Goals... These are a series of ambitious objectives and targets to end extreme poverty and hunger, fight inequality and injustice, and tackle climate change, by 2030<sup>ii</sup>.” In this statement, we see how the SDGs are positioned temporally: they have a starting point – 2015 – and an end point – 2030 – whose pressing nature is stressed by the “ambitious” character of the objectives that were formulated.

In taking a constitutive view, we can see how the UN's statement performs a strategic discursive construction of an urgent, necessary demand for change, by configuring together the past, the present and the future: our past has failed to respond to grand societal challenges, and so our continuing future depends on urgent, ongoing changes. The seriousness of the issues at hand may give the impression that the situation's urgency is obvious. Yet, when closely observing the communication practices taking place in various international, national, and local institutions and organizations, we notice that counter-narratives emerge that suggest alternative paces and time horizons for these objectives. Indeed, as the UN's call for strategic change disseminates to other actors, it is also distorted and transformed into counter-narratives and other communicative practices that resist the UN's version of reality. These communication practices can be sorted out according to the three categories of **constitutive** discourse and communication identified above.

Strategic and resisting conceptions of time can be exemplified in the Canadian prime minister Justin Trudeau's efforts, during the 2021 elections, to reconcile his defense of his country's oil and gas industry, with his claim to be an environmental champion. To do so, he operated a discursive repositioning, by which he committed to ensuring that the oil and gas industry reaches “carbon neutrality” by 2050, starting in 2022. Any new oil exploitation project would need to help attain these goals. Trudeau was also pressed to justify his government's 4.5-billion-dollar purchase of the TransMountain pipeline in 2018. To him, the purchase is justified because the government will “invest all the profits in the green transition,” as reported in a newspaper article of the time (Shields, 2021). While, to some, Trudeau's position appears to adopt a hard line with the oil and gas industry, in fact these new commitments delay prior objectives and suggest that the countdown only starts in 2022 (while the UN's broadcast, above, positioned the starting point in 2015). As an expert commented in the same article, if we want to reach climate change goals by 2050 – not to mention the UN's 2030 – the oil and gas industry does not need to be carbon neutral, it needs to have all but disappeared. Trudeau's suggestion that buying a pipeline is a way of funding green projects also

suggests a transitional period during which fossil fuels simultaneously cohabit with a green transition, and therefore that change coexists with continuity.

The example of prime minister Trudeau thus illustrates how it is possible to discursively appear to pursue similar goals but to move the temporal signposts and to suggest simultaneity, all to delay action and resist the pace produced by others' strategic formulations. However, it also shows that others – such as experts – can provide alternatives, thus highlighting the multidirectional and collective nature of the discursive constitution of time and temporality.

Second, we can zoom in on the text/conversation interplay through which some actors negotiate the urgency of the SDGs, and such zooming in also allows us, third, to observe some interactional features of this negotiation. The context of a debate between Canadian party leaders, which took place during the 2021 electoral campaign, offers a good opportunity to look at the way they communicatively conducted such negotiation regarding climate change in particular<sup>iii</sup>. An obvious case of text/conversation interplay is offered by an opposition leader, Yves-François Blanchet, who criticized Trudeau's lack of action, by pointing out that "the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has established that Canada is a very very bad student when it comes to climate change." Blanchet thus lends his voice to a text, the IPCC report, showing that his own critique in fact extends ongoing ones. Shortly after Blanchet's comment, a journalist, Paul Journet, asked Trudeau: "you wish to put a ceiling to gas and oil emissions, but you are still giving out drilling permits, including to Newfoundland. When will you put an end to new projects?" This intervention can be looked at both in terms of text/conversation interplay and interactionally. It presents both Trudeau's "wish" to put a ceiling and the fact that he hands out drilling permits as established texts (presumably based on party's program and on prior government decisions) and, by juxtaposing them, stresses the apparent contradiction between both. It then directly poses a question in temporal terms, asking *when* new projects will be barred. Trudeau's answer was that "we will continue being serious by pricing pollution and taking other necessary measures," which is vague but also illustrates that, for him, no change is necessary, since he can just *continue* with his current course of action. The journalist appears displeased with the answer, and insists with another question asked in temporal terms: "but, if I may, the ceiling starts on what year, and will decrease at what rhythm? It is a slow slope, or an abrupt one?" Journet insists that Trudeau commits to a clear temporal framework and to a pace of change. However, the prime minister, again, answers in terms of continuity, giving a temporal horizon moving towards the past, explaining that "the emissions have been capped for four or five years, and they won't be raised anymore."

The exchange between Trudeau, the opposition party leader and the journalist, thus illustrates the importance of the interaction itself as a time through which other temporalities are made relevant (as Journet's efforts show) and through which participants characterize their shared history, i.e., depicting Trudeau as either failing to commit to change or not. The exchange also highlights how different rhythms

coexist, and that people reflexively revisit past texts (the IPCC report, electoral promises, government decisions, etc.) as they layer temporalities. Overall, the example of the SDGs and their negotiation in Canada shows how temporal horizons and the pacing of action are not intrinsic, but rather communicative accomplishments. As climate change objectives were reiterated communicatively on different occasions, their urgency was also renegotiated in subtle (and, at times, not so subtle) ways.

### **Implications for scholars and practitioners**

Adopting a *constitutive* view of the role of communication and discourse in continuity and change has several implications for the way we understand these two related notions and their temporal underpinning. First, it sensitizes us to the fact that continuity and change are *becoming* together. Their joint evolution corresponds to entangled and open-ended relations, which are continuously reconfigured through communicative practices across actors and spaces *in, through* and *over* time (Plotnikof & Pedersen, 2019; Thomas et al., 2011; Vásquez et al., 2018). While this temporal underpinning is evident in much ODS and CCO literature, this chapter has explicated how a constitutive view on change and continuity as ever-shifting relations also recast new temporal arrangements, highlighting that time is never a given, but also communicatively and discursively performed.

As such, our view on communication alters our working assumptions about time and temporality, which in turn affect how we understand continuity and change. While a conventional, transmission-based view of communication (see Axley, 1984) emphasizes a step-by-step, intentional conception of change initiated by top managers, a constitutive view stresses a multilateral and fuzzy conception, where continuity and change are interwoven and joint accomplishments by multiple parties involved. This also entails that the organization's different parts may enact and construct time at different paces. When time is considered a communicative accomplishment, then, if people interact differently in their unit or department, they also constitute and pace time in their own way.

Putting communication and discourse at the center calls for a more critical and reflexive consideration of how we develop and mobilize temporal notions in our research. In more conventional perspectives on time, researchers can safely suppose that, no matter what they do, we are merely reporting on external phenomena. However, when we recognize that communication and discourse constitute continuity and change relations through multimodal, multidirectional, and multivocal paces, then our own practices as researchers—which are also communication practices—indeed become consequential in determining *what* we observe, and how and why we observe it. In making such (more or less conscious) choices, we also privilege, in our accounts, some relations of change over others, and though those accounts, we also contribute to communicatively constituting them, and giving them materiality. Our research agenda,

then, must become more temporally explicit about how time underpins (our studies of) the relations of organizational change and continuity.

For practitioners, considering that continuity and change are communicatively constituted allows them to better grasp their entangled nature. They can then perceive that their apparent opposition is but the result of a temporary emphasis that may be put on either one of them. When conventional models draw attention to one organizational state, the other may be set aside, but it does not disappear for that much. Concretely speaking, practitioners, such as change managers or strategic planners, must attune themselves to the meaning negotiations or counter-narratives through which organizational members may emphasize or struggle over one or the other, hence accepting the power-resistance dynamics inherent to attempts of affecting change and continuity. Similarly, focusing on text / conversation interplays and interactions provides a firm ground for observing the way people communicatively constitute continuity and change. Practitioners may look at the way change is promoted or stifled as organizational members jointly accelerate or slow down the pace of time. Rather than assuming that people have psychological or political motivations to resist change, practitioners may therefore gain richer insights by considering the interrelated dynamics of change and continuity, including power-resistance, and the way these are communicatively and collectively created.

Most importantly, though, practitioners must keep in mind that continuity and change – and resistance to them – cannot entirely be planned or intended. A communicative perspective, indeed, stresses the messy and unintentional character of continuity and change. The practitioner's role, then, changes too: it becomes a matter of co-producing, engaging with, and facilitating the communicative and discursive practices through which people seek to effectuate change or hang on to continuity. The practitioner may try to identify how, in the way people talk, write, tell stories, or share experiences, they pace change or sustain organizing processes differently, and draw their attention to these effects. All stakeholders may thus gain a more critical and context-sensitive view of the ways in which their daily lives are always in the making of both change as well as continuity through discursive and communicative practices *in, over and through time*.

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<sup>i</sup> See <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/sustainable-development-goals/>

<sup>ii</sup> See <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/blog/2020/09/united-nations-releases-special-2020-broadcast-calling-for-collective-action/>

<sup>iii</sup> The debate took place in French, and is available here: <https://youtu.be/zMkGuQFVUS0?t=1732>