

Communicative Constitution of Organization (CCO)

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Conceiving of organization as communicatively constituted amounts to acknowledging that organization and organizing happen in and through communication processes. In other words, communication constitutes the building blocks by which these social forms get enacted. Even if SAP and CCO are two separate research communities, they have a lot of affinities and overlaps. One could even contend that SAP has, from its onset, always been interested in the constitutive role communication plays in the enactment of strategy, which explains the kinship that can be identified between these two research agendas.

To our knowledge, the expression “Communicative constitution of organization” was first coined by McPhee and Zaugg in an article titled “The communicative constitution of organizations: A framework for explanation,” published in 2000 in the *Electronic Journal of Communication*. It is, however, only in 2009, with the publication of a volume titled, “Building theories of organization: The constitutive role of communication,” edited by Putnam and Nicotera, that the acronym CCO started to really become popular. Three branches of this research field have since been identified: (1) McPhee and Zaugg’s (2000) four-flow model, (2) **Luhmann’s** (2018) organizational systems theory, as well as (3) the Montreal School of organizational communication, initiated by James R. Taylor (1988). Although these three branches differ from each other in several respects, they all share the basic idea that communicative activities are the basic means by which organizations manage to exist and function (or dysfunction, for that matter). In other words, they all claim that there is neither organization nor organizing without communication. Although this claim could sound self-evident, it did not correspond to any specific research agenda before the CCO field put it on the academic map. This initiated a series of studies that have, in many respects, revolutionized the field of management and organization studies, highlighting the key role communication plays in the founding and becoming of organizations, especially with regard to their strategic dimension. In what follows, we will introduce these three branches while showing their direct connections with questions of strategy and **strategizing**. If strategy is a practice, it means, for CCO scholars, that it is, first and foremost, a *communicative* practice (Cooren et al., 2015).

McPhee and Zaug's four-flow model

In their initial article, McPhee and Zaug (2000) claim that, in order to exist and function, any complex organization requires the existence of four types of communication, which they propose to call message *flows*, each addressed to a different audience. These four flows constitute organization because “they make organizations what they are, and insofar as basic features of the organization are implicated in the system of interaction” (para 12), a position that echoes **Giddens’s** (1984) notion of constitution. The first flow, called (1) *membership negotiation*, corresponds to communicative activities by which an organization maintains relations with its members, especially through recruitment and socialization. This maintenance is essential to its existence, given the key role human **agency** play in the functioning of social organizations. The second flow, called (2) *organizational self-structuring*, corresponds to the communicative acts by which an organization designs and controls its own activities. For instance, an organization structures itself, and differs from other collectives such as groups or mobs, through the production of organizational charts, procedures, contracts, or mission statements. The third flow, called (3) *activity coordination*, corresponds to the communicative activities by which members adjust their workflow and address technical problems as they occur. While organizational self-structuring consists of setting the structure of an organization, coordinating activities allows members to mutually adjust in order to address problems they might encounter on the spot in order to fulfill various organizational objectives. Finally, the fourth flow, called (4) *institutional positioning*, corresponds to the communicative activities by which an organization interacts with other stakeholders, such as competitors, suppliers, clients, governmental institutions, etc. This last flow thus allows the organization to position itself and define its **identity** vis-à-vis other organizations or institutions.

Although strategizing activities might be related to these four flows, they seem, at first sight, more directly connected with institutional positioning. Enacting an organizational strategy indeed usually concerns how leaders want to position their organization vis-à-vis its environment, a positioning that not only concerns the relations they have with their stakeholders, but also their own identity. However, any strategy can, by definition, have indirect consequences on how an organization manage its relations with its members, how they structure themselves, and how they coordinate their activities (O’Connor & Shumate, 2020). More generally, we could also mention that SAP has already drawn on Giddens’s structuration theory, which explains its natural affinity with the Four-Flow model.

Niklas Luhmann’s organizational systems theory

Although Luhmann (2018) did not position his social systems theory with regard to the CCO field (his theorization precedes the birth of CCO as such), his work has been strongly associated with this movement by some of his followers. Communication is indeed central to social systems and, by inclusion, to organizational systems, to the point that

the latter are, according to Luhmann, *exclusively* constituted of verbal and nonverbal communications. While most approaches would conceive of an organization as made of human beings who act and speak in its name (this would be, for instance, McPhee and Zaug's (2000) conception), Luhmann insists that communications constitute an autonomous realm of reality, which cannot be determined by people's actions, intentions, or thoughts. The German sociologist thus invites us to note that whenever people interact with each other, their mutual understanding is exclusively displayed in what is communicated, whether verbally or nonverbally. In other words, we don't need to speculate on what people have in mind to understand how societies and organization get constituted. It is only by studying how an utterance is understood as conveying a particular information, an understanding exclusively displayed in the following utterances, that we can observe how a system of communication manifests and reproduces itself.

While Luhmann (2018) conceives of society as the all-encompassing system of communication, he considers that organizations are special kinds of systems constituted by decisions and *only* decisions. In contrast with other forms of communication, decisions are characterized, according to him, by the fact that they not only communicate what option has been selected, but also, in contrast, what other options were not selected. Everything that constitutes an organization – an organizational chart, a procedure, a mission statement, a specific course of action, etc. – can indeed be considered the result of decisions selecting some options over others, which were then discarded. These decisions especially allow organizations to distinguish themselves from their environments, as they are always based on past decisions, called decision premises, that interconnect with each other, establishing the identity of these collectives.

Regarding the links between **Luhmann and SAP**, a Luhmannian perspective shows that any strategic decision creates conditions for further decisions about how to implement it. This approach thus invites us to acknowledge the effect of *continuity* that can be identified between past strategic decisions and current ones (Rasche & Seidl, 2020), that is, how past decision always express themselves in the way future decisions are justified and promoted, a phenomenon that Luhmann calls *impregnation* and that allows organizations to strategically affirm their identity. More generally, Luhmann also invites us to acknowledge the ecology of strategy discourses that constitute the field of strategy, an ecology that leads to productive misunderstandings because of their incommensurability and autonomy (Seidl, 2007).

The Montreal School

Initiated in 1988 by a book titled *Une organisation n'est qu'un tissu de communications* (an organization is but a fabric of communications), authored by James R. Taylor, this third trend of CCO can essentially be defined by its **pragmatist** roots. In many respects, the Montreal School of organizational communication indeed echoes John Dewey's

(1916, p. 10) claim that “[s]ociety not only continues to exist by transmission, by communication, but it may fairly be said to exist in transmission, in communication.” Instead of thinking of communication as something that happens in organization, Dewey and Taylor thus invite us to think of organization as something that happens in communication. Thinking in those terms thus leads the representatives of this CCO branch to analyze the *performative* dimension of communication, that is, its capacity to make a difference in various situations. In this respect, speech act theory constitutes a major influence, but also the study of **narratives**, as the latter shows how various communication episodes can articulate with each other to create effects of structuration. **Ethnomethodology** and **conversation analysis** also constitute major influences to the extent that both defend an *endogenic* position, that is, a position according to which the very root of social order has to be found in interaction and interaction only. However, the Montreal School researchers tend to depart from the anthropocentric view implicitly defended by ethnomethodologists and conversation analysts, as they decenter agency from humans and highlight the performative role played by **non-humans** in organizing. This position, which echoes **Actor Network Theory**, allows this approach to acknowledge not only how things like procedures, rules, statuses, **technologies**, or architectural elements can make key differences in concrete situations, but also how effects of authority and power can be produced through their agency (see entry on **sociomateriality**).

Regarding questions of strategy and strategizing, several studies have demonstrated the analytical power of the Montreal-inspired CCO approach. In particular, Vásquez et al. (2018) and Bencherki et al. (2021) have shown how strategizing could be identified as a process by which matters of concerns progressively become *matters of authority*, matters that are then supposed to define the official strategic positioning of an organization. Moreover, Cooren et al. (2015) have also shown how strategy making does not have to be necessarily defined as formal moments during which questions of organizational strategizing are explicitly addressed. On the contrary, they show how what they call *fleeting moments of strategy* can be identified in more mundane situations where the question of strategizing is not specifically in the agenda.

Echoing the SAP literature, these three CCO trends thus invite scholars to not think exclusively of communication as something that allows organization to inform their stakeholders of their strategy, i.e., what tends to be called “**strategic communication**.” Strategy is also, and maybe especially, something that happens in communication, which means that SAP and CCO scholars are undeniably well positioned to study how this works. Developing a CCO-inspired inquiry to study strategy as practice implies opting for detailed and up-close qualitative methods. Methods such as **ethnography** or **video ethnography**, **ethnomethodology**, **conversation analysis** and **shadowing** may therefore be particularly well suited to pursue such inquiries. In terms of future research, we believe that CCO approaches are very well positioned to study (1) the key role artificial intelligence will play in strategizing, (2) the performativity of classical and

new models of strategy, as well as (3) the intersection between SAP and LAP (leadership as practice).

See also

Actor Network Theory
 Agency
 Conversation Analysis
 Ethnography
 Ethnomethodology
 Giddens
 Identity
 Luhmann and SAP
 Narrative
 Meetings
 Moments of strategy
 Pragmatism
 Shadowing
 Sociomateriality
 Strategic Communication
 Strategic Plans
 Strategizing
 Technology
 Video Ethnography

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