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# A Communicational Approach to Organizations: A Framework for Analyzing Contemporary Rationalizations

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In the first part of this text, we introduce socio-constructivist theories of the organizations which, like “regulation sociology”, define organizations as institutionalized entities, built in a continuous process of social regulations. It results from the dialectic relationship between control rules (formal, official rules) and autonomous rules (complementary or alternative rules locally worked out by the actors). In this framework, questions related to communication are omnipresent even if they are not being analyzed as such. What is really a regulation process in an organization, from a communicational viewpoint? Which forms of communication is it based on? In the second part, we identify three interdependent *communicational registers* (interaction, mediation, and ideological discourses), which can be defined as ideal-typical forms of communication in the organization and involved in the process of organizational construction. We also try to build an analytical frame that we describe as a *Communicational Approach to Organizations*, which is used in particular to study organizational dynamics and contemporary forms of productive rationalization that focus on communication and coordination activities.

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Without necessarily claiming a direct affiliation to the organizational communication field, some French scholars in social sciences are analyzing the nature of organizations in terms of collective action, coordination, collaboration, or cooperation, which inevitably leads to questions related to communication. Professional interactions, the production and sharing of information and knowledge, the place, role and use of information and communication technologies (ICT), organizational discourses that describe and rewrite the organizational world all hold a central position in their research agenda but are nevertheless not studied as such.

In the first part of this article, we outline these research fields that explain how organizations are constructed from *social regulations* based on communicational processes. In the second part, we will introduce the frame we have developed in our own work to develop a communicational perspective on this approach.

## **Social Construction of Organizations and Social Regulations: The Question of Communication**

Private or public companies, administrations, public services, or associations obviously constitute some very different organizations. However, beyond their particularities, they can be brought back to the same type of social object, *an organization* (or *the organization*), which we could define as an institutionalized entity, built in a continuous process of social regulations, and conceptualized for the past three decades by the *theory of social regulation* (Reynaud, 1988, 1997).<sup>1</sup> This theory, based on the concept of *organizational rules*, which lead individual and collective actions, conceives of the organization as an evolving entity. Organizational rules are made up of two aspects. The first one is an *institutional* and *normative* aspect, which refers to the established form of the organization, the relative place and role of each actor as well as the relationship that links them with their respective assignments. The second one is a *cognitive* and *procedural* aspect, which concerns the ability of the rules to incorporate the knowledge necessary in the work activities to realize the organizational objectives. Rules allow “the saving of knowledge” (Favereau, 1989) because they exempt the actors from individually mastering all the skills that are indispensable to do their work or at least help them acquire these competences.

It is possible to distinguish two types of organizational rules by incorporating the two aspects we have just defined. *Control rules*—or *control regulation*—correspond with the official structure of the organization as it is

drawn in an organization chart, for instance, the definition of workstations and the formal knowledge embedded in standard procedures, which set how work and activities have to be performed. These rules are nevertheless always incomplete because of the omnipresent events that characterize the social and economic life, in particular in high-uncertainty types of activities, such as research, design, project management, and obviously services activities. To be applied, control rules have to be continually adapted or even reformulated within *autonomous rules*—or *autonomous regulation*—by producing complementary or alternative rules that are locally worked out by the actors. Roles and individual assignments can then be redefined, and new knowledge may be created in situations of activities to make up for the variability and the unforeseeable nature of reality.

The *organizational regulation process* results from the dialectic relationship between control and autonomous regulation. It provides the basis for the social construction of organization. Actors enact the organization in their collective work, what is called *organizational work* by Gilbert de Terssac (de Terssac, 2003) to conceptualize the continuous organizational evolution where control rules are completed and challenged by autonomous rules and can finally become new control rules before being in their turn called into questions. No regulation process is possible or thinkable without bargaining agreements, compromises, or even temporarily nonincompatible viewpoints. These adjustments obviously take place in the local work situations, where they permit the exchanges between actors, whatever their logics of action may be, according to the occupations, functions, and responsibilities they take on. This entails a shared understanding of the work situation, the adoption of a common language, and an agreement on the terms of the interaction.

However, organizations cannot be reduced to local courses of action only stemming from interactional spheres locally and temporarily situated: They also are institutionalized entities that have a grip on socioeconomic, politic, and societal stakes, tallying with a more general level of observation. Thus, local adjustments have also to go with general discussions relative to objectives and fundamental principles of action. Justification theory (Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006) offers, in this respect, a conceptual frame that allows us to understand how actors with different objectives and principles of action, based on specific patterns, have to debate and argue to achieve a common agreement. Here, the problem is not only related to local adjustments between stakeholders but also related to their ability to build a common and composite world. Each of these two aspects, the interindividual and the collective one, are connected with each other.

Whatever the level of analysis is, local or general, questions related to communication are omnipresent even if they are not being analyzed as such by regulation sociology and other theories we referred to. What is really a regulation process in an organization from a communicational viewpoint? Which forms of communication is it based on? How is it possible to analyze these forms and show their links? One of the most important aspects of our personal research work consists of the investigation of what could be called *un impensé communicationnel* or a “communicational black box” (Bouillon, 2008), that is, communication as a phenomenon that is completely neglected by this type of literature.

We have identified three interdependent *communicational registers*, defined as ideal-typical forms of communication in the organization and involved in the process of organizational construction. Each register corresponds with a *communicational dimension* of the organization that appears when the organization is comprehended only through the prism of one register. Obviously, the organizational reality is constituted by the interlacing of the communicational registers and dimensions, but the identification of their specificity seems necessary to understand these processes. We also try to build an analytical frame that we describe as *a Communicational Approach to Organizations* (Bouillon, Bourdin, & Loneux, 2005), which is used in particular to study organizational dynamics and contemporary forms of rationalization that focus on communication and coordination activities.

## **Communicational Approach to Organizations and Contemporary Organizational Rationalizations**

The first register we have identified is *interaction*, where *communicating* means *interacting*. It includes not only the relational frame highlighted by ethnographers of communication but also the contents that are exchanged and appear in argumentative discussions, leading to the production, sharing, and mobilization of knowledge. This first register takes place in local situations of work where autonomous regulations are developed. It corresponds with a *situated communicational dimension* of the organization. The latter tends to be reduced to a space of social interaction, irrespective of global, social, and economic finalities and power struggles inherent in work relationships. Such a perspective comes closer to the analysis developed in the field of *workplace studies*, in terms of situated actions, distributed cognition, and ethnomethodology (Hutchins, 1995; Suchman, 1987). Texts and conversations, whose dialectic participate in the emergence of organization, according

to the Montreal School (Taylor & Van Every, 2000), constitute two sides of what we call the situated communicational dimension.

The second communicational register that structures our framework is *mediation*, where *communicating* means *connecting with*. It refers to normative and technical systems that link actors in the organization and allow the correspondence between the local level of the activities (work, production, services, etc.) and the global level of general objectives (economic constraints, competition, etc.). This register deals with a *processual communication dimension*: from this point of view, the organization is mostly conceptualized as a socioeconomic entity that produces outputs (products, services, social provisions, benefits . . .) out of inputs (raw materials, knowledge, technologies, capitals). Information and communication are included in the productive process as they both constitute a resource in the evolution of the operations as well as a way to create a coherence between different situations. Communication situations defined in the former paragraph are in fact encapsulated in this second dimension, through formal rules, ICT, and hierarchies. They cannot, therefore, be analyzed as ordinary interactions without paying attention to the social context. This perspective can be linked to the activity theory framework (Engeström, 2000), which builds relationships between objects, technologies, subjects, organizational processes, and rules.

The third register refers to the performative discourses produced by the organization to fit with, explain, and justify its activities and objectives as well as convince and mobilize the different stakeholders. Here, *communicating* means *elaborating a discourse* to rebuild symbolically the reality of the organization to show it as it should be perceived by these stakeholders from a managerial viewpoint. Situated in the depths of the communication strategies of organizations, in particular in the language elements that structure storytelling scenarios, societal responsibility, and beyond the main lines of corporate communication, this register corresponds with an *ideological communicational dimension* of the organization, suggesting interpretative frames of reality to the internal and external stakeholders. These discourses, possibly based on economic, politic, and societal topics (naturalized representations of information and knowledge society, market, globalization, competition, etc.) are obviously used to describe the organization, its strategies, and process and to give a frame to local communication situations.

Developing a communicational approach to organizational dynamics means identifying and crossing these three registers and communicational dimensions to link some levels of observation that are usually foreign to one another. Such a frame of analysis offers the possibility to acquire a better understanding of the regulation process involved in the social construction of

an organization: *Organizational work is also communicational work*, where situations, processes, and ideologies of communication take place simultaneously. Even if our analysis focuses on one dimension in particular because of time or methodological constraints, we always try to integrate the three aspects.

All these dimensions are particularly important in the contemporary movement of organizational rationalization we are studying by focusing on informational and communicational activities that enact the production and mobilization of knowledge in situation. These *cognitive rationalizations* (Bouillon, 2009) cover several aspects. The first one is the *optimization of information processing and transmission* in (and between) the organizations by the development of integrated information systems, like enterprise resources planning (ERP), to increase the administrative productivity. However, ERP implementation entails the redefinition of organizational processes (business process management approach) according to a logic determined by the information system, which entails *the detailed codification of procedures and knowledge they imply* (Mayère, 2004).

The organization must be written and described as finely as possible, including the situations of communication (meetings, information circulation, validations process, etc.). However, as mentioned in the first section of this article, such control rules are always incomplete and unable to anticipate every event that could actually take place. Autonomous regulations tend also to be rationalized, through so-called “2.0” collaborative technologies (de Terssac & Bazet, 2007), which aim at *facilitating collaborative work*, professional networking, knowledge sharing, and mobilization. This sociotechnical infrastructure is to some extent strengthened by organizational discourses, which do not manipulate actors but contribute to creating conditions that lead to the internalization of systemic constraints (Olivesi, 2002). Such a symbolical context explains and justifies the effective pressure supported by the actors in link with the power outsourcing that characterize the current production pattern. Client or customers tend to take the real control—at least they are described as such—in particular in organizations working according to management by project or in just-in-time models. Autonomy and the individual implication at work are both voluntary and constrained by the system.

Such evolutions concern many types of organizations and public services (health system, universities, etc.) that seem to converge to business oriented models. Our observations on these organizational fields and in software editors companies tend to show a double movement. On one hand, organizations are more and more formalized; on the other, informal spaces are safeguarded and somehow structured to produce a form of autonomous regulation. Thus, organizational systems seem to incorporate informal dynamics

because they determine their own global efficiency and evolution capacity. Communicational registers and dimensions constitute *objects* and *means* of organizational rationalizations. Interactions, mediations, and discourses are optimized, codified, and justified and simultaneously, they frame social regulations processes, including autonomous regulations through a form of “control dispositive” (Foucault, 1975, 1977) that include rules, technologies, objects, discourses, and space layouts. A communicational approach to organizations helps to take into consideration each dimension of these rationalizations.

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### Note

1. Some scholars of the French school of economic conventions have developed similar concepts to explain how economic activities are socially coordinated beyond markets and contracts (e.g., Favereau, 1989).

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