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How Institutions Communicate; or How Does Communicating Institutionalize?

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Introduction

John Lammers' article on institutional messages provides some interesting ideas for exploring the conceptual and empirical link between the macro world of institutions and the micro world of organizational communication. Let me take the liberty of turning those ideas on their head. Rather than just asking how institutions communicate, let us ask: how can processes of communicating serve to institutionalize? In addition to taking a next step of identifying institutional messages that vary in endurance, reach, and encumbency, as Lammers suggests, let us also explore how messages are *made* to endure, reach, and encumber. Besides focusing on institutional messages as thoughts that take on a life independent of senders and recipients, let us instead consider how institutional messages have no life *except for* the communicative interactions between senders and recipients. To explore these other issues and show how they can shed light on the links between macro institutions and micro communication, I will draw on organizational discourse theory which foregrounds the co-constitutive nature of this relationship. Through organizational discourse theory, I believe, we can avoid the reductionism of "message," which, as Lammers himself points out, has been eschewed by the "discourse metaphor" (Putnam, et al. 1996); and, at the same time, develop his idea that institutional messages can, indeed, be seen as elements of discourse.

The ideas that comprise organizational discourse theory have been widely accepted in organizational communication (see Putnam & Fairhurst, 2001), organization studies (see Grant, Hardy, Oswick & Putnam, 2004) and, to a lesser extent, institutional theory (e.g., Phillips, Lawrence & Hardy, 2004; Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006). Much of this work has converged in conceptualizing discourses as bodies of knowledge that "systematically form the object of which they speak" (Foucault, 1979: 49). Discourses are constituted from interrelated bodies of texts that

define "who and what is 'normal', standard and acceptable" (Meriläinen et al., 2004: 544), thereby institutionalizing practices and reproducing behavior (Phillips et al., 2004). The texts which bring discourses into being take the form of a wide range of symbolic expressions that are inscribed by being spoken, written, or depicted in some way (Taylor & Van Every, 1993: 108), and include talk *and* text (van Dijk, 1997). This inscription serves to make them "accessible to others" (Taylor, Cooren, Giroux, & Robichaud, 1996: 7). Accordingly, discourse theorists study patterns in the production, distribution and consumption of texts in order to understand organizations and institutions alike.

Institutions are held in place by structured, coherent discourses which produce widely shared, taken-for-granted meanings (Phillips et al., 2004). Conversely, changes in the ways in which texts are produced, distributed and consumed have the potential to destabilize existing institutions and create new ones (Maguire & Hardy, 2006; 2009). Consequently, the production, distribution and consumption of texts are integral to any study of institutionalization. In the remainder of this commentary, I explore some of the different ways in which patterns in the production, distribution and consumption of texts account for the ability of communications to institutionalize by constructing the encumbence, reach, endurance and intentionality of the message.[1]

Encumbence: A Matter of Production

Encumbence refers "to the duty – implicated in the message itself – of the respondent to heed and comply with the message" (Lammers, this volume: XX). From a discursive perspective, encumbence is likely to be influenced by the positioning of text producers within the particular

[1] For my purposes, I assume that a "message" is one among a number of possible meanings of a text. Messages rely on texts: to become accessible to others – to be sent or received – a message must be inscribed in the form of text. However, any text has multiple meanings – whether a particular message is sent or received depends on the particular meaning that is constructed for it.

discursive context. As Lammers points out, speech acts take on different meanings depending who is uttering them. In other words, only certain actors "warrant voice" in a particular discourse (Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Hardy, Palmer & Phillips, 2001) and certain subject positions are advantaged over others in their ability to produce texts (Deetz, 1992; Fairclough, 1992).

Institutionally, this means that the text producers who are most likely to produce encumbent messages are those who are already privileged by occupying dominant positions in the field (Phillips et al., 2004). Institutional fields are "relational spaces" (Wooten & Hoffman, 2008: 138) i.e., "structured systems of social positions within which struggles take place over resources, stakes, and access" (Maguire, Hardy & Lawrence, 2004: 658). These positions provide the actors that occupy them with institutional interests and opportunities (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992) and, in some cases, the "capital" or resources to exert power over the field at a particular time (Bourdieu, 1986; Battilana, 2006). Organizationally, whether a message has encumbence is likely to depend on actors being positioned appropriately within the organizational hierarchy. For example, senior managers' have greater "declarative powers" (Tsoukas & Chia, 2002) to produce discursive templates which shape organizational outcomes because of the authority vested in them. Thus the effects of a range of communicative practices may depend upon actors also deploying authority and invoking hierarchy (Thomas, Sargent & Hardy, 2010).

Reach and Establishment: A Matter of Distribution

The *reach* of a message refers to the size and number of audiences. In discourse terms, reach depends upon the discursive space in which it is distributed**.** Hardy & Maguire (2010) have shown how different discursive spaces exist in any institutional setting; and that these spaces differ in terms of the particular sets of rules and understandings regarding text production (who

may author texts; and of which type); distribution (when, where and how texts may be distributed); and consumption (who is the target audience; who may access and act on texts). Since discursive spaces are institutionally embedded, it is likely that central members of the institutional field in question will be privileged in securing reach for their messages (Hardy & Maguire, 2008). On the other hand, other discursive spaces can provide opportunities to open up "an alternative interpretation of reality that relaxes taken-for-granted assumptions thereby creating a place where new things can be said and new social structures envisioned" (Fletcher, Blake-Beard & Bailyn, 2009: 84). Thus there may be opportunities for a range of actors to secure significant reach as they distribute texts.

Established messages are "unequivocal, sent or exchanged frequently, and thus enduring" (Lammers, this volume: XX). Texts that produce such enduring meanings are those which are "taken up" i.e., distributed sufficiently widely to act as trans-situational organizing mechanisms (Cooren & Taylor, 1997). Such texts go through successive phases of "textualization" (Taylor et al., 1996) or "recontextualization" (Iedema & Wodak, 1999) by being distributed among multiple actors. This repeated re-inscription results in the text becoming increasingly distanced from the particular local circumstances of its production. It is no longer a situated set of conversations" but, instead, a "template so abstract that it can be taken to represent not just some but *all* of the conversations it refers to" (Taylor et al., 1996: 26). Thus as text moves away from its original production – as it is distributed more widely and more often – more enduring meaning is created.

Intentionality: A Matter of Consumption

Finally, consumption is important in relation to *intentionality*. "Messages may or may not be congruent with the conscious, stated purposes of the members of the field in which it is

exchanged" (Lammers, this volume: XX). Whether a message achieves intentionality has less to do with the circumstances of its production and more to do with its consumption and, specifically, the way in which it is "translated" (Czarniawska & Sevón, 1997; Zilber, 2006). As mentioned above, if it is to endure, a particular message has to be taken up and re-stated in other texts (Maguire & Hardy, 2009). During this process, however, the meaning of the message is likely to change because, as it is reproduced, it is also translated; and translations are never completely faithful – even attempts to reproduce the message will change it in some way (Brown, 2002). Only those meanings that survive from the multiple acts of consumption that are likely to affect the institutional field; and they are not necessarily those intended by the original author (Maguire & Hardy, 2009).

Consumption is thus integral to understanding a message's effects. As Mumby (1997: 361) notes, "disjunctures always exist between dominant readings and individual interpretations" and "tactics of consumption" may be used to resist producers of texts (cf. de Certeau, 1984: xvii). Resistance can lie in the very act of consumption if the original text is consumed in ways not intended by the original producers intended; if the message is subverted as it is consumed (e.g., Ezzemal et al., 2001). Such resistance may then lead to the production of alternative texts, such as "hidden transcripts" (Murphy, 1998), "counter-narratives" (Zilber, 2007) or "counter-texts" (Maguire & Hardy, 2009). In other words, the meaning of a text is not pre-given, regardless of how powerful the producer of the text may seem; and no matter how wide its reach is or how well established it is. Ultimately, the meaning of a text – the ability of a message to institutionalize – depends on *consumption*. Yet, ironically, as Lammers (this volume: XX) points out: "message receipt and interpretation have received less attention among communication

scholars than the wide variety of senders' motivations and types of messages, channels, and contexts."

Summary

It is certainly the case, as Lammers argues (quoting Thornton and Ocasio (2008: 120), that researchers need to understand better "how macro-level states at one point in time influence individuals' orientations to their actions, preferences, beliefs; how these orientations influences how individuals act; and how the actions of individuals constitute the macro level outcomes that we seek to explain." This commentary argues that one way to explore these processes is by studying patterns in the production, distribution and consumption of texts. As Taylor and Van Every (2000: 96) argue "discourse is built up progressively" as texts move from the local to the global. Hardy (2004) calls this the question of "scaling up" – the processes whereby locally and individually produced texts are adopted and incorporated by other organizations and actors to become part of standardized, categorized, generalized and institutionalized meanings. Texts also "bear down" (Hardy, 2004) as grand, institutionalized discourses shape localized behaviours (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000).

Organizational discourse theory helps to place the co-constitutive nature of communicating, organizing and institutionalizing centre-stage. In doing so, it pinpoints another area which seems ripe for further research – examining the ways in which these co-constitutive relations are permeated with power. Neither the communication nor the institutional literatures have been entirely comfortable with concept of power (Putnam et al, 1996; Cooper et al., 2008). Yet, without an appreciation of power relations, it is difficult for us to understand either stability or change in institutions or organizations. For example, if encumbence is related to position, how are actors who are institutionally or organizational marginalized able to send encumbent

messages? How do we theorize change from the margins and what options are open to those at periphery should they wish to bring about change? If reach is determined by discursive spaces that are institutionally or organizational embedded, how do new spaces open up where alternative interpretations can be expressed? If establishment is rests on distribution, how do new discourses survive and endure? Perhaps understanding acts of consumption offers the best way forward. Consumption turns intentionality its head – it takes the focus away from the message and the medium, from those producing and distributing messages and texts and, instead, forces us to consider the myriad of recipients who may or may not hear the message; who may or may not give it meaning; and who may or may not challenge, transform or sabotage it. Agency, determinism, and domination are replaced by serendipity, resistance, and subversion; offering interesting new possibilities for communication, organization, and institutional scholars alike.

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