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Management Communication Quarterly 2009; 22; 671 originally published online Mar 3, 2009;
DOI: 10.1177/0893318909332070

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Perspectives, Challenges, and Future Directions for Organizational Communication Research in Brazil

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The field of organizational communication in Brazil is relatively new in comparison to other countries. Although research in the United States began in the 1960s, organizational communication is just now developing in universities around the world. In Brazil, organizational communication grew out of questions and issues related to public relations. Although narrowly defined at first, now Brazilian scholars value a broad view of organizational communication, one that embraces different perspectives. Similar to the range of U.S. scholarship (see Putnam & Boys, 2006), Brazilian scholars operate from linear, transactional, interactional, and dialogical models of communication.\(^1\) Practitioners in the market are looking to improve their qualifications through in-company training programs and postgraduate courses offered by communication departments and associations.

Based on this brief scenario, this article highlights and analyzes two trends that attest to the unique nature and possibilities for organizational communication in Brazil. In particular, it focuses on (a) the opportunities to tie organizational communication to other fields of knowledge through multidisciplinary work and (b) the transformation in contemporary Brazilian society based, in part, on current business and work relationships.

**Opportunities for Multidisciplinary Research in Brazil**

To account for the complexity in which contemporary, global organizations exist, Brazilian studies of organizational communication need to establish a
dialogue with other fields that can contribute to the practical development as well as the social scientific foundations of research. Human beings are developing knowledge at an amazing speed, and this growth demands multidisciplinary and transdisciplinary connections with such areas as administration, anthropology, politics, sociology, economy, education, and linguistics. Despite its multidisciplinarity, organizational communication retains, at its core, a focus on the nature and exchange of messages as well as attention to the broad-based discourses and cultural framings of these messages, texts, and interactions. As such, authors, including Lopes (2003), Maia and Franca (2003), and Schuler (2004), have highlighted the role of interaction and recognized the symbolic, linguistic, and sense-making processes of communication. Communication is not simply a transmission but rather the process of making meaning.

In the face of rapidly changing experiences and a diverse environment, a multidisciplinary approach alters the way we look at organizational communication. Today, Brazilian social scientists are adopting an approach that enables communication to be at the center of the organization (Hall, 2004, p. 156). This view differs from the functionalist perspective that emphasizes coordination of activities and improving the quality of written and oral messages. Yet the treatment of communication as a management tool is still prominent in organizational studies, and organizational communication researchers in the field of business administration predominantly rely on functionalist approaches (Blinkstein, Alves, & Gomes, 2004, p. 129).

In this sense, expanding research into the larger realm of the social sciences has the potential to provide a breakthrough in Brazilian organizational communication. Moving away from the functionalist approach, the most exciting studies no longer confer the “primacy of the process” to “the communicators” of messages (Iaskbeck, 2007, p. 234); that is, senders are not the owners of communication and sense making. Thus, the theoretical, conceptual, and methodological support employed by other social science disciplines could enrich the analysis and understanding of communicational processes and practices in organizational communication (Mattos, 2008, p. 30).

**Transformation of Brazilian Contemporary Society**

Developed under a capitalistic mode of production, contemporary Brazilian society has renewed its capacity to adapt to the changing social climate. Decentralization and diversification that stem from the fast pace of
knowledge organizations and rapid globalization of goods and services are accelerating organizational information flows and intensifying the cycles of production and services as well as the development of alliances and relationships. This context calls for management to be more flexible, more oriented to work relations, and more collaborative, both internally and externally, than it previously was (Deetz, 2001).

This transformation of the Brazilian organizational scene also focuses on new processes for economic advancement and political democratization. As social agents expand their scope of articulation through multiple roles, society is increasingly concerned about the legality and credibility of their actions. Ethics lies at the forefront of these discussions and has become a relevant issue in organizational settings, especially with the public. For Lipovetsky (2004), applying ethics to corporations stems from the competitive pace of the contemporary world. Companies in Brazil currently employ codes of ethics to develop accountability in their business practices, especially during times of decision making. This focus on ethics, as a trend in organizational communication, responds to public demands for visibility and legitimacy of social organizations.

The role of the mass media in connecting organizations with society represents another area in which contemporary Brazilian society is changing. Specifically, organizations have embraced a new media logic that changes the ways that Brazilian businesses approach their work. This logic embraces new media and mediated communication as an alternative societal link or a means of communicating through such venues as customized literature, radio and television, and new technologies for internal communication. Academia is beginning to investigate and understand how business interactions take place within this new media context. Researchers and academic representatives in communication associations and graduate schools are addressing these issues, as evident in the case studies and colloquia that compare Brazil and Portugal and Brazil and Spain in organizational use of new media. This new direction in mediated communication increases organizational accountability and the interactions among diverse stakeholders, which in turn enhances an organization’s sustainable process.

These new relationships have also led to an increased number of Brazilian studies on collaborative networks. Oliveira and Paula (2008) describe the existence of a new network of discursive practices composed of organizational relationships known as “multi-referential processes” (p. 102). Di Felice (2008) observed the formation of a new social organization, diverse from that of the electronically mediated mass, a society made up of technical and spontaneous interactions of its members who redefine it and
shape it through continuous and collaborative interactions. These interrelationships, whether mediated or not, offer the potential for new and far-reaching research developments. Triggered by global changes and recent developments in communication technology, these communication perspectives require organizations to expand social interactions and adopt new relationships.

Conclusion

In conclusion, organizational communication is still in its infancy in Brazil. Nevertheless, graduate programs, scholarly debates, and academic meetings review specific trends and raise challenges that organizational communication scholars are uniquely positioned to address. The two trends noted here—the opportunities for multidisciplinary research and the transformation of the Brazilian contemporary society—reveal the ways that organizational communication research and the needs of society mutually shape and are shaped by these trends.

In the professional context, contemporary organizations need to foster creativity and innovation that will expand economic, social, and environmental contributions to a new society with new values. Organizational communication, with its stance toward organizations as complex interactive processes (Marchiori, 2008), provides an ideal context for responsive and innovative business practices.

In short, organizational communication forms a disciplined site for the development of knowledge that offers “theoretical-epistemological interfaces” (Oliveira & Soares, 2008, p. 10) among organizations, communication, and society. It is a complex, multidimensional, and multidisciplinary process. A logical direction for future studies is to capitalize on this multidisciplinary trend and link organizational communication to scholarship in other fields. Organizational communication studies demonstrate the importance of connecting communication to societal transformations and highlighting the relevance of the field to changes in organizational life and contemporary Brazilian society.

Note

1. Examples of Brazilian studies of models of communication include dialogic communication, addressing interaction and dialogue (Freitas, 2008; Oliveira, 2008; Ribeiro & Marchiori, 2008); relational communication, which intensifies the construction of sense making (Maia & Franca, 2003; Oliveira & Soares, 2008); and strategic communication, seen as an
integral part of organization management (Kunsch, 2003; Schuler, 2004). These studies have connected organizational communication to the production of knowledge (Marchiori, 2001) and addressed the need for intentional and structural relationships between organization and society (Oliveira & Paula, 2007).

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