

# NGO Organizing for Environmental Sustainability in Brazil: Meaningful Work, Commonality, and Contradiction

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## Abstract

Through our case study of a Brazilian not-for-profit focused on sustainability initiatives, we expand knowledge about communicative labor in different Brazilian organizational environments, especially in the third (nonprofit/nongovernmental) sector. Based on a case study for which thematic analyses of in-depth interviews with the entire nongovernmental organization (NGO), including its board and staff, were conducted, we found three communicative labor processes that displayed how members entered into, thought about, performed, embodied, and sustained interaction in ways that are considered to be a hallmark of the particular Brazilian third-sector organization that we studied. The three processes of communicative labor—depicting NGO work as meaningful labor, producing commonality and difference, and transcending contradictions—enabled NGO members to withstand difficulties and engage productively in the tensions of doing communicative labor in Brazilian environmental work. Despite the volatile political-economic and diverse cultural environment in Brazil, the NGO's communication enabled them to adapt to and proactively shape environmental efforts, thus modeling sustainability and resilience.

## Keywords

communicative labor, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), Brazil, organizational communication, tensional approach, paradox, resilience, engaged scholarship

Brazilian nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) with missions centered on the sustainable preservation of land, water, forests, and other environmental factors have garnered much attention because of rapid deforestation in the Amazon, global concerns about the ozone layer, water and energy issues, and effects on indigenous ways of life and knowledge as well as the Brazilian economy (Correia, 2016). With publicity and events surrounding the 2016 Olympics, reports celebrated the human and bio-diversity in Brazil but also displayed the poverty, political instabilities, and crime in Brazil, as well as consequences of the Brazilian Zika virus (Cugola et al., 2016). With such broad and deep opportunities and needs in Brazil, NGOs feel pressures from diverse sectors and challenges inherent in the meanings and conduct of sustainability work itself.

Specifically, Brazilian NGO and global professionals engaging in sustainability efforts, find that they must manage tensions in their political positions, social practices, and daily activities (Fátima do Carmo Guerra, dos Santos de Sousa Teodosio, & Mswaka, 2016; Mackin, 2016; see Mitra & Buzzanell, 2017). These tensions are symbolic as they enact work that they perceive to be meaningful but frustrating, and material as they seek impact through short-term deliverables but struggle with long-term solutions within

complex interdependent human and material systems (Fátima do Carmo Guerra et al., 2016; Mitra & Buzzanell, 2017). Tensions also emerge in their internal and external ethical responsibilities, including their communicative labor.

According to Mumby (2016; see also Carlone, 2008), communicative labor refers to processes of mutuality, authenticity, and affect through which people share experiences. Applied to branding, communicative labor is key to the creation of value in work, production and consumption, and erosion of personal life through emphasis on labor (Mumby, 2016; see also communicative labor affirming hard work as virtuous, in Dempsey & Sanders, 2010). Applied to NGOs, Dempsey (2009) explores how grassroots organizations, particularly environmental justice and sustainability NGOs, engage in communication labor, defined here as the creation of distinctive organizational identities

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that promote work to which NGOs are ideologically and practically committed. Through her case study, Dempsey examines how diverse organizational discourses are understood by varied stakeholders, including organizational members. Communicative labor praises and blames, redefines problems, establishes the goodness of certain actions and decisions, and determines who is included within the purviews of organizing. Communicative labor and associated discourses are moral and political insofar as the calling to such work is perceived and enacted as greater than oneself and the processes through which work is accomplished are strategic, political, and material as well as discursive (i.e., “how nonprofits mobilize discourses, and how these discourses themselves carry their own sets of politics and forms of power,” Dempsey, 2012, p. 149; see also Mitra & Buzzanell, 2017).

Our goal is to depict and analyze the communicative labor of Brazilian environmental sustainability work as a tensional approach (Mitra & Buzzanell, 2017; Putnam, Fairhurst, & Banghart, 2016; Trethewey & Ashcraft, 2004). We present the case of a Brazilian nonprofit NGO called “Meio Ambiente Equilibrado” (MAE), meaning “Balanced Environment” (see <http://www.ongmae.org.br/>), for which the first author secured permission to identify. As noted earlier, Brazil has a critical role in the global ecological system. Its political-economic-cultural complexities and paradoxes provide a forum to study communicative labor aligned with Putnam’s (2012; see also Putnam & Mumby, 2014; Stohr, 2015) call for communication scholarship that promotes an internationalization agenda and attends to organization-society problematics. As Putnam and Mumby (2014) noted, organizational communication scholars “examine the relationships between organizations and their broader societal structures by exploring such issues as social justice, corporate social responsibility, social movements, and corporate identity in a globalized world” (p. 11). Central questions have to do with identities, responsibilities, and democratic organizing processes. We attend to the ways that members of a Brazilian environmental agency perceive the meanings and meaningfulness of their work and the tensions that they experience in doing communicative labor that enables sustainability.

To pursue our goals, we begin by providing an overview of communicative labor and tensional approaches to lay the groundwork for our case study about a NGO in Brazil dedicated to environmental sustainability efforts. We detail our interview and document data and thematic analysis procedures and then discuss three processes of communicative labor—depicting NGO work as meaningful labor, producing commonality and difference, and transcending contradictions—that enable NGO members to perform their work despite disruptions and obstacles and to model strategic interaction processes. We close with our theoretical and pragmatic contributions and their implications for communicative labor, sustainability discourses and materialities, and community resilience.

## Literature Review

In this section, we frame communicative labor from a tensional theoretical approach and then we discuss Brazilian environmental NGOs, focusing on one NGO in particular.

First, communicative labor encourages action “in the name of doing good” (Dempsey, 2007). In NGOs, communicative labor can involve generation of locale-specific, paradoxical, and neocapitalistic appeals (e.g., Stahelin, Accioly, & Sánchez, 2015; Stohr, 2015). At its heart, communicative labor is materialist and communicative insofar as labor generates value through its embodiment of creativity and cooperation (Greene, 2004). Analyses of communicative labor offer insight into the ways in which doing work can both perpetuate and lessen inequalities through adherence to “parameters set by others” and disregard of the “wicked problems” centered in ethical-capitalistic paradoxes (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002, p. 624; Carlone, 2008; Fyke & Buzzanell, 2013; Putnam & Mumby, 2014).

Taking a tension-centered approach enables a focus on process, specifically the ongoing sense making and ethical decision making that enable people to embody values and ideological beliefs more or less into everyday action (e.g., D’Enbeau & Buzzanell, 2011). This approach foregrounds the ironies and complexities at discursive and material intersections while noting that contexts, identity negotiations, and knowledge shift. It means that organization members are constantly in the process of organizing thus enabling changes when proposed interventions do not seem to be productive. As such, a tensional approach destabilizes realities. It encourages communicative labor, enacts resistance and complicity, fosters and closes options, and recognizes that organizing can only be constituted through navigation of discursive-material tensions (Putnam & Boys, 2006; Trethewey & Ashcraft, 2004). For Mitra and Buzzanell’s (2017) examination of sustainability work, a tension-centered approach to sustainability professionals’ efforts and careers illuminates the nuances, complexities, and contestations in meaningful work.

Specifically, Mitra and Buzzanell (2017) found that the sustainability professionals ( $n = 45$ , from seven different countries) whom they interviewed found their work to be meaningful through the ways in which they could enlighten businesses, engage in direct interactions with stakeholders, and negotiate political cultures. They reported feeling not only compelled and gratified to engage in this labor but also challenged emotionally, intellectually, and physically. Challenges and opportunities arose from lack of resources, efforts to frame their efforts in ways that produce desired results or, at least, open stakeholder interactions to further conversation. They constantly navigated the need to produce deliverables with the complexities of long-term solutions (see also D’Enbeau & Buzzanell, 2011). Finally, they drew meaningfulness from the internal and external sources of work valuation, as well as their commitments and abilities to

work somewhat autonomously (admitting that their autonomies could also be isolating and detracting). As Dempsey (2009, 2012) noted, distinct environmental NGO identities bridge overarching ideological and practical tensions through communicative labor. This communicative labor frames the efficacy of action. It also redefines and revalues aspects and negotiates inclusion in ongoing discursive-material work—processes that contribute to and detract from perceived meanings and meaningfulness of work and the very ways in which sustainability is accomplished.

To contribute to greater understandings of communicative labor in international organizational communication arenas, we examine internal NGO discourses and their consequences through an empirical study of Brazilian third-sector organizing, specifically of an environmental sustainability group, located in Londrina, within the state of Paraná. In Brazil, NGOs (or ONGs, the Brazilian acronym for NGOs) have significantly increased in number with estimates reaching 338,000 by ABONG, the Brazilian Non-Governmental Organization (Mello, 2012) and with 2,242 of not-for-profit foundations and associations supporting environmental activities, particularly environmental education (*Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística e Instituto de Pesquisa Econômica Aplicada*, 2012, cited in Tristão & Tristão, 2016). Still, there is no definitive study on the actual number of NGOs in the country (Campagnac, 2006; *Conselho Empresarial Brasileiro para o desenvolvimento sustentável*, 2010). Moreover, environmental management, interest in indigenous knowledge and material utilization, and educational initiatives to teach the general population about environmental issues in Brazil have increased considerably in recent years (Stahelin et al., 2015). These initiatives question policy, program, and practice contradictions, adversarial stakeholder and class relations, and long-term impacts on the environment itself as well as understandings of human-environmental connections (Stahelin et al., 2015). In Brazil, efforts have triggered governmental programs, bringing together public and private organizational partnerships and situating responsibilities through policies and constitutional mandates, particularly individual responsibilities for environmental impacts and governmental responsibilities for education, with NGOs pivotal in these processes (Tristão & Tristão, 2016). Within this contentious context with adversarial public-private sector and regional stakeholder interests, NGO members need to construct communication processes that not only enable them to accomplish their goals efficiently and effectively but also work with the contradictions they face in process, output, and advocacy (for such paradoxes, see Putnam et al., 2016).

## Method

We analyze data gathered by a Brazilian research group supported by The National Council for Scientific and Technological Development (CNPq), of which the first

author was a member. Based primarily on thematic analyses of deep interviews with members of the *entire* NGO, or managing Board of MAE (which included staff as well as the president and professionals) and of NGO documents and observations of interactions before, during, and after the all-organization weekly meetings, we discuss how participants engage in efforts to discursively construct a distinctive organizational identity that promotes particular ideological and pragmatic commitments in environmental sustainability and in participatory organizing. In doing so, we acknowledge that participants may have overemphasized the productive nature of their reported interactions, perhaps because of their (stated) commitments/calling to NGO environmental sustainability work or perhaps because of their desire to tell a seamless story that shifts attention from the contradictory origins and toward institutionalization of third-sector interests in Brazil (Peruzzo, 2009). Even so, how such processes are embedded in organizing is significant since Brazilian organizations have only recently begun shifting from external organizational foci toward recognizing the value of interpretive approaches (Putnam & Casali, 2009; *Management Communication Quarterly* Brazil Forum, 2009). Moreover, organizations and environmental policy decision makers typically do not utilize scientific reports, which make personal connection, translation of expert opinion, and abilities to speak to and across professional and cultural languages or expertise of various stakeholders particularly daunting in Brazil (Carneiro & da-Silva-Rosa, 2011). Communicative labor to (re)create images of commitment, multidisciplinary collaboration, and united communicative efforts within the NGO and to external publics is essential as this particular NGO is viewed as a model for participatory action in Brazilian society. Even so, the volatile sociopolitical and economic context that is Brazil threatens environmental protections (Tollefson, 2016). As such, the case parallels Brazilian national movements away from political dictatorship and censorship and toward concerns with democratization, voice, citizen's rights, empowerment, education, and transparency with real material consequences for everyday Brazilian life (Marchiori & Oliveira, 2009; Peruzzo, 2009; Pinto, 2006; Putnam & Casali, 2009; Reis, 2009). This case also provides insight into how diverse stakeholders and experts engage with the ongoing contestation in Brazilian environmental issues (Tollefson, 2016).

## Case Study

In our case study, we utilized the processes of communicative labor to extend tensional approaches about NGO action and institutionalization in Brazil and offer pragmatic or utilitarian value (Yin, 2003). In drawing out our case, we discuss our participants, procedures, and context.

We conducted in depth, face-to-face interviews with the *entire* managing board of the organization as well as other members including one paid staff member, totaling 14

people. There were nine men (64%), and five women (36%) ranging in age from the late 20s through 50s. All participants were Brazilians and had a history of dedication to environmental causes. They came to their volunteer work through different backgrounds, characterizing themselves as journalists, lawyers, biologists, geologists, social scientists, administrators, and secretaries. We *do not identify* their quotes by gender or by organizational role and expertise. We do not do so for two reasons: (a) because of the ease with which individuals could be identified and (b) because members engaged in consistent communicative labor to depict their environmental work and interactions as strategically designed to uphold collaboration and portray a united front on behalf of environmental sustainability. This consistency (in perceived practices aligned with communicative labor and environmental sustainability work tensions) enabled the authors to report theoretical saturation.

Our interviews ranged from 1 to 2 hours each and centered on focal questions about interactions, communication, and day-to-day practices, such as “how do you do your work here at MAE?” We used a flexible semistructured approach guided by very few primary questions and dependent on probes that emerged from interviewees’ comments, as well as our observations and document analyses (Patton, 2002). Interviews were conducted in Portuguese and English, depending on the MAE member’s preferences. During translations by the first author, both authors examined linguistic choices and context together to determine appropriate English phrasing and meaning. All interviews were recorded and transcribed. Transcripts were verified for accuracy against the original recordings.

In addition to interviews, we also reviewed documents and websites. We engaged in observations, particularly of team decision-making meetings that took place every Tuesday during the data collection period. During these times, we observed interactions during meetings and different workplace encounters that occurred before and after meetings. During these meetings, members often discussed activities and recounted everyday decision making that occurred with all members regardless of position and stated expertise. For instance, we heard accounts of and observed times when interns (students) would make suggestions or provide input that then would be validated by the group as useful. We observed instances when members disagreed about strategies, the value of certain information, and the utility and planning of upcoming environmental events. These observations and document analyses were used to corroborate findings and check for contradictions between what was said and what members did in their communicative labor.

Through inductive thematic analyses, general to more specific categories centering on our areas of interest were developed (Patton, 2002). We worked independently then collectively to discuss and refine the themes or semantic patterns, relying on criteria of recurrence, repetition, and forcefulness (Owen, 1984). These criteria encourage attention to

exact and similar linguistic choices, phrasing, and argument structures that are used by participants as well as emphases and other nonverbal aspects of their expressions. Through examination of their semantic patterns and language, we could gauge what in their perceived communicative labor was important to them as individuals and were reportedly structured within their organizational culture.

In our data analyses processes, we utilized our strengths as a bilingual Brazilian scholar who guided the research team but was not a member of the NGO and as an organizational communication researcher independent of the data gathering processes but expert in areas of case interest. Before writing this article, the first author presented findings to the organization not only for their use in strategic planning and reflection about their everyday practices but also as a member check for the validity of our results.

Because context is important in case studies not simply as background but more so as a driving force for communicative labor, we briefly describe the NGO MAE in Brazil that focuses its efforts on sustainability, preservation, and continuity of social, economic, cultural, and environmental assets from various levels of current society. The *World Business Council for Sustainable Development* (WBCSD) categorizes sustainability as progress that meets current needs without compromising future capabilities. However, sustainability does not focus only on resource allocation and opportunities over time but also on egalitarian distribution between current and future generations (Milne, Kearins, & Walton, 2011). Correspondingly, MAE is intensely active in the environmental scene of the Brazilian city of Londrina, in the southern state of Parana, since it was founded in 2001 by volunteers and interns at the Londrina Environmental Public Ministry.

According to its president (biologist Eduardo Panachão), MAE came about as a response to a disaster that had significant environmental impacts in a northern region of the city. At that time, volunteers were investigating large oil spills in rivers in a suburb of Londrina called Ribeirão Lindóia, where warehouses stored fuel.<sup>1</sup> The initial worries facing the founders centered on the lack of any legal framework for environmental issues in the city at the time. Instead, environmental issues fell under the jurisdiction of the Public Ministry. A lack of whistleblowers and little concern on the part of the local populace spurred some individuals to establish MAE. At that time, the clash between neoliberal ideologies, environmental concerns, and sustainable community development came to the forefront. Using the contradictory spaces opened by these different discourses and stakeholder interests, the MAE sought to provide unified but strategically ambiguous framings of events and of their work (see Eisenberg, 1984; Fairhurst, 2007, 2011; Fairhurst & Sarr, 1996) to achieve their aims of safeguarding the environment and educating the general population, offering leadership and expertise in Brazilian environmental issues. Today, MAE is credited with environmental quality in Londrina through partnerships with Public Ministry of Paraná and different

rural and environmental entities of Londrina (Radio CBN Londrina, 2013).

Over time, as Peruzzo (2009) noted, Brazilian NGOs shifted tactics to encourage active involvement of citizenry and promote a more egalitarian Brazilian society. In its two-fold environmental and societal mission, MAE and citizens worked on empowerment through discourse, interaction, and partnerships (see Peruzzo, 2009). MAE interacts with diverse stakeholders involved in environmental issues: government, community partners, and private companies. Its history as an organization and its history for confrontation, especially in the legal realm, have made MAE a regional and state-level clearinghouse and advocate for environmental concerns. As such, MAE's discourse "occupies a political space in developing the collective cultural and societal hegemony" (Peruzzo, p. 665). The communicative labor of invested stakeholders involves the ongoing (re)production of idealized organizing processes that are homogeneous in outward display but punctuated by confrontations of interests. Reported strategic interactions both support the NGO image and provide a space for internal struggles about Brazilian environmental and business sector interests.

### Tensional Themes of Communicative Labor

We argue that MAE engages in communicative labor to create images of collaboration and dialogue whereby all members—from the president to secretaries—forego privileging disciplinary expertise and status to work on behalf of the environment and of modeling participatory organizing. Most report and demonstrate (through our observations and documents describing meetings and other formalized encounters) strategic interactions aligned with this communicative labor. Their interactions also strategically punctuate points of contradiction. Thus, as volunteers (and one paid member, a secretarial staff member), they not only do the work of environmental sustainability efforts but they also do the work of sustaining and managing tensions productively.

We organize our findings to describe how members enter into and discuss interactional processes, and how they engage in discursive and material processes that they believe can sustain the NGO's work. These findings display members engaged in communicative labor (a) depicting NGO work as meaningful labor, (b) producing commonality and difference, and (c) transcending contradictions.

#### Communicative Labor Depicting NGO Work as Meaningful Labor

All participants framed their focus on environmental sustainability as meaningful labor, with many saying that such work was a labor of love. In using the phrase *labor of love*, they explained that they were saying that they would (and did)

work without a "paycheck" and that the common drive in "making money" did not characterize their experience. Indeed, they were volunteers so their phrasing was not only metaphorical but also literal. They also framed their work as invoking "caring." They did such work because, they said, they believed in its importance. They described their work as a challenge of great importance with which all could identify and celebrate ("they think it is important"; "an achievement for the NGO is an achievement for all of us"). As one member put it,

It is important to know that no one is here for a paycheck; everyone believes in the cause, they think the same, and they want it to work out right. It is not like a company where the boss and the owner want it to work out because they want profits and the rest only do their jobs to guarantee their salary, without caring if they are really doing their best. Here we believe that an achievement for the NGO is an achievement for all of us.

Like Dempsey and Sanders's (2010; see also Dempsey, 2007) social entrepreneurs and Mitra and Buzzanell's (2017) sustainability professionals, MAE members framed their involvement with work as benefitting a greater good than that afforded by corporate employment. Moreover, the strong identification with "everyone" who "think[s] the same" and revels in "achievement[s] for all of us" offers powerful incentives for membership and for engaging in interactions that strategically represent this form of idealized community. As another member stated, "We are here because we really believe and not just to get a paycheck at the end of the month," which they believe others do.

All of the MAE members expressed similar statements affirming strong identification with environmental sustainability causes. They expressed the value of and an availability to serve and exchange ideas and opinions with others for environmental good, a collective pursuit. In this framing of their work as communally constructed, they perceived interaction as strategic in its function to accomplish goals: "Our function as a NGO is primarily to seek interaction between all of the elements involved in the areas we work in, which are environmental issues." They maintained that "There is no competition here . . . people interact because they want to; because they think it is important. Not because we are forced to." Interaction grew out of the desire to do good work; interaction required that they "are all open to each other" and follow "our ideals." This admittedly idealistic depiction required ongoing communicative effort to uphold. It was upheld not only for external stakeholders but also as reference for the meaningfulness of their work and negotiations of everyday interaction.

Because of the collective adherence to environmental challenges and opportunities, MAE's organizing processes were not derived from a formal structure, but rather from the processes that were constantly (re)constructed through each person's contributions and the values to which they have

agreed (see value or ideologically focused organizing processes, Buzzanell et al., 1997).<sup>2</sup> The communicative labor involved in this identification work was omnipresent and shifted members' perceptions of relationships from work as labor for external gratifications to work as expressed through and in friendship and family imagery. As one member put it,

We end up confusing the professional relationships, as activists, with friendship. The relationships that we develop here inside the NGO end up being so close that they can't just be limited to the professional arena. It is worth stressing that the NGO is a family. This comes from the trust that we give to each person. In the moment in which you work with it [trust], you can't then disconnect it.

Such strong identification can promote decision premises that encourage similar sense-making processes and common solutions among members (Tompkins & Cheney, 1985) that shape and are being shaped by locales, identities, and practices (Kuhn, 2006). Yet, paradoxically, it also can promote exclusion of those who might profess lower identification or offer non-normative decision premises, a problematic issue given great diversity in Brazil. In many ways, it seemed possible that their communicative labor regulated and constituted member identities in fairly limited ways (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002), a sacrifice with which members, by logical extension of their comments, seemed to readily accept.

### *Communicative Labor Producing Commonality and Difference*

Members' reported high levels of identification and communicative labor to perpetuate images that all members selflessly dedicate themselves to environmental causes and participatory practices resulted in a paradox of freedom. The assumed and discursively affirmed commonality among members about work being a labor of love enabled them to also take initiative, which meant considering an individual to be both active and proactive, in concert with and aligned against the collective, conversant with insider language and ready to introduce new ideas. In taking initiative or producing productive difference, the notion of *how* interaction was accomplished routinely dominated participants' responses. In speaking about others with MAE as well as himself, this participant suggested the following process whereby members constituted their community through interaction:

I think that the initial interaction is the impulse, that first thing, the catalyst that got them to get up and come get to know the NGO. I think that this is the first interaction. When talking about interaction here inside, it is the contact that they make with the professionals from the diverse areas. They start to understand the language that is spoken here inside and starting from this is the so-called interaction process.

The interaction process with its strategic integration of similarity and difference centered around work projects, as another participant noted:

I assumed certain roles without really having had any previous experience with the people with whom I was working here. So, I had already taken up some responsibilities, and I had already started to participate more actively in the organization to an extent that, even before I had officially gone to the last board meeting, I had already participated in management meetings about the same things.

NGO participants perceived their work to be interaction—making contact with other members, meeting with and learning from people, taking initiative to grow and sustain relationships with experts, and developing capacities to engage in dissent productively (Banks, 2008; Garner, 2013; Kassing, 2011), even if it meant “swearing” at each other:

Here we have many relationships, inside and outside of work . . . The relationships are great; they aren't just something about work, about the routine. This is a good thing because we talk about NGO issues in various places, in various situations; everything is connected to what we do here. This helps a lot, to have people know each other, to have more contact, to be able to talk about something later, to call someone, even to swear at them and them at me when we need to, this is really good.

Freedom, as part of these reported strategic interactions (see Deetz, 2010), was considered to be a necessary component for MAE members to drive interaction. Freedom meant that different individuals—experienced in their areas of knowledge—perceived boundarylessness in their abilities to take initiative to act and interact in sharing insights and to learn throughout MAE, as well as connection with others and environmental causes to which they shared dedication. We observed that their connections manifested themselves interactionally and structurally through active involvement in meetings, questioning of topics under discussion, and displaying the continuous interest in and movement toward mutually creative decisions (see Deetz, 2010). These interactions were created throughout the conduct of their work, making the pattern more identifiable than specific incidents.

### *Communicative Labor Transcending Contradictions*

Openness, transparency, and harmony resonated in discourse and the interaction practices of MAE members. However, these processes were not without struggle at times, just as harmony does not mean that everyone is happy and gets along well continuously. Instead, these qualities operated as values that underlay everyday interaction and as interaction goals toward which MAE members worked. Although MAE members reported these values and spoke about them in interviews, we observed the “swearing” and grappling with issues

that some might perceive as conflict but that MAE members considered necessary for dialogue and collaboration to happen. One professional MAE member perceived that

Management meetings are open; they don't have an agenda, so there are various topics. We try to focus the specific research groups, but everyone is free. I think that the freedom and initiative that everyone has, they must have [it] in order to maintain this rhythm; because nothing here is required, these are the differences that let interaction happen with everyone.

The communicative labor to produce consistency in strategic interaction, work toward the common good, and collective action meant that discourse, spatio-temporal considerations, structure, and embodied practice had to match. The struggle to maintain interaction as the means of work is evidenced in attention to the seemingly smallest details through the overarching structure of MAE, according to one member:

We avoid changing dates/times, mainly to allow the people who go to the NGO to organize themselves as much as possible, but also to allow other people to also come. . . . There are things that we manage to build internally, from internal interaction, and from external [interaction], with society, with government. These are processes that we see as facilitating this type of relationship.

Another member commented that MAE strives to create a culture and structure that is “friendly and not so formal, . . . because from the moment you bureaucratize the work environment a lot, at least here, you end up hindering this interaction between the people, the members.”

As one member said, “interaction is what makes things develop.” The work required physical presence, putting oneself out there to interact with different people in spaces that might not always be personally comfortable but that align with the NGO mission:

One of the things that people always stress heavily: Don't just come [to be] in your group. Don't participate just in your group's activities, because in your group everyone speaks the same language. Now, as a biologist communicates with a law intern, as a law intern talks with a volunteer that has never studied anywhere, the message here is: exchange knowledge, get together. I say physical presence is very important. People need to be here with some constancy . . . doing that interaction.

Despite this fairly consistent depiction of discursive-material linkages to the mission and the communicative labor needed to (re)enact and embody messages, members did discuss contradictory opinions about the means, efficiency, and satisfactory fulfillment of goals through communication. As displayed in previous interview excerpts, most participants depicted MAE as intensely participative. They pointed to communication as the process capable of reaching all groups and members; formally observed (by us) through channels such as email and meetings and informally through

phone calls, casual encounters, dialogues, and conversations—often conducted in close proximity. They embodied the environmental work that they promoted in their physical, intellectual, emotional, and advocacy labor. MAE members' varied activities. These included: planting seedlings, engaging in public expositions and debates about the environment, creating briefs about and reporting environmental crimes (whistleblowing), protecting and supporting urban cityscapes and green environmental spaces (such as parks and plazas, and other green areas), and driving the kinds of research and conservation projects that could move Brazil to the forefront of proactive, as well as reactive, environmental work.

On a day-to-day basis, among the other services MAE offers to the public are books, videos, and references about the environment. They conduct information sessions about Londrina and the region, and about area tourist attractions. The MAE offers excursions, walks, hiking, and adventurous activities in the areas under their watch, which function daily between 9 AM and 12 PM. MAE members are also constant participants in local, regional, national, and international conferences. They produce and disseminate journalistic articles, scientific research, and practices that are based on globally accepted concepts. In short, there are many activities in which MAE members engage such that they are stretched in terms of ability to interact in the ways that they want and to do the work that they find so meaningful.

As a result, some participants stated that there were many problems within MAE and these were due to lack of communication. These participants perceived the MAE communication structure to be inefficient and incapable of reaching all organization members—they assessed such processes as compromising productive interaction and stifling the constitution of different kinds of knowledge and expertise. Thus, all MAE participants' statements did not reveal a seamless utopian view of the NGO's operations that they labored to communicate but, rather, depicted MAE as a contested site of diverse meaning-making and information-sharing with different stakeholders internally and externally.

Because of these diverse opinions, we questioned whether the formal and informal processes, as well as the organization's overall official message, could be understood and agreed upon at all organizational levels and by all stakeholders. Clarity, coherence, and transparency internally and externally have long been considered fundamental for organizational success, especially for NGOs, although such characterizations have been challenged (e.g., Scott, 2013). Indeed, a tension-centered approach would indicate that such characterizations are not the most productive because they do not leave openings for contestations that can lead to change. To ensure that knowledge and recognition of strategic processes were shared, MAE members described the need for effective and efficient formal communication channels and “formal spaces.” Formal communication processes could be characterized as inclusionary and proactive but also as reactive, occurring as means of insuring satisfaction of

day-to-day informational needs to enable overall organizing processes and organizational accomplishments:

There is always someone who doesn't know something, and this could end up hindering them because they could get help, or give an idea. I really want the communication here—that information I know could reach everyone—to happen in an efficient manner, but even so I think that everyone here is integrated.

The NGO MAE members showed consensus concerning the necessity (“requirement”) of individual initiative to provide and seek out expertise, with proactive interactions often constituting informal communication practices. As one member asserted,

It is more natural, here the individuals are conscious of this, of the importance for us to interact, in order to acquire more information, change our way of thinking, and growing as both professionals and human beings. It is not a question of work; it is a requirement.

Individuals who took advantage of multiple formal and informal communication channels managed to stay informed about diverse questions, or at the very least, those that were of interest to their area of expertise:

Information is transmitted to all of these groups. And at least if I don't want it and decide to block this access—the negative part of my actions—this information still reaches me. Of course there are a lot of emails that circulate here and I can read them and discard [irrelevant ones], or an issue can catch my attention and I can integrate it, and react to it. But it is very efficient and enables people's actions. I can omit it if I desire, but it reaches me, even if I am not interested.

In short, when informal communication was insufficient for work accomplishment internally and externally, for collective knowledge generation, and for structure, then formal channels enabled reactive strategic interaction:

The idea is to always minimize reactive interaction, leaving this only for bureaucratic issues concerning NGO management and coordination. But when you refer to NGO action management, it is always proactive, in that people always have initiative.

The communicative labor involves image creation of seamless value, interaction, and embodied performance integration: “when we get together, independent of whether it is a group from a specific area or not, we develop the next steps together, in alignment with the needs.” Although not satisfactory to all members at all times and for all considerations, MAE's interactional dynamic constituted structure, process, and relationship to produce deeply embedded practices whereby members reportedly had access to collective, formal, and informal meetings and encounters. This communicative labor to transcend contradiction and communicate

constantly was intense and all consuming, as one member recounts:

Conversations are important; they are essential for our work, our actions. We are always connected, . . . communication keeps circulating among everyone, from one to another. It is truly a process. All day long things happen differently . . . you always have to seek out new ways to solve problems, to communicate to others what you want, what you need. People have to understand this, if they don't, they never solve anything, it is impossible.

The relentless burden of doing good work, making connections, and maintaining relationships is evident in a member's comment that “If I fail to accomplish my task I will hinder a friend of mine, . . . [namely] the NGO president or vice-president, or treasurer, or group director,” and in another member's remark that everything they do in MAE is interconnected: “The people here want to know each other; they want to be friends, because they want the things to go right. They want . . . to make things change.” Without strong identification processes, communicative labor to (re)create love of labor and reported strategic interaction for accomplishing environmental and participatory goals would not be sustainable:

If we didn't have everyone integrated like this, the organization wouldn't make it. I think it is a differential, and I think this is why the NGO is still here after [more than] 10 years, because everyone is cooperating and everyone is helping out.

## Discussion

Our study provides an empirical foray into analyzing the tension-centered communicative labor in a Brazilian NGO focused on environmental sustainability. This research extends contemporary Brazilian scholars' work in broadening organizational communication approaches and redressing previously limiting foci on public relations (Marchiori & Oliveira, 2009). Specifically, communicative labor depicted NGO work as a labor of love, producing commonality and difference, and transcending contradictions in communication processes and outcomes. These processes were not seamlessly enacted without contestation, ongoing individual and collective efforts, and heated emotions. However, these processes facilitated goals to which all were oriented and wanted to model internally and externally for Brazilian society. As a result MAE members perceived strong desires to report and embody the values guiding their communicative labor. Although we did not ask MAE members specifically about the meanings of their work, we found that their identification with environmental and civic goals for their local and national communities provided insight into these areas. They expressed how their communicative labor was consistent with the overarching meaningfulness they perceived in environmental sustainability work itself and in the pressures they experienced when they did not feel as though they were producing such meaningfulness. Attention to these individual meanings and the collective meaningfulness of work

as aligned with communicative labor contributes not only to a tension-centered approach to organizational and environmental communication but also to understandings of NGO organizing in general.

We acknowledge that there are limitations to our study. First, although we utilized documents and observations for our study, we used interviews as our primary data gathering method. Use of interviews may have limited the conclusions we could draw from our study insofar as participants may have responded in idealistic or utopian ways to our inquiries (Alvesson, 2003). During the interviews, we were always aware of this aspect, but even so, further research could investigate the differences between what members say and what they do at the NGO MAE, particularly how members operate within, contest, and resist particular organizational discourse (Bisel, 2009).

Another limitation refers to not gathering data in the communities where the NGO is active and not gathering data from various other external stakeholders. We admit that such additional data gathering would have enriched our findings. However, our interest centered on how the members of the NGO as a whole expressed and constructed their interactions to accomplish their goals and manage tensions in their internal organizing processes. We encourage further research in the communities' co-constitution of communicative labor with MAE and with greater attention to diverse stakeholders and sites of operation. We note that it would be informative to do similar research with members of other environmental sustainability organizations around the globe and in connection with the adaptive-transformative capacities inherent in community resilience (e.g., Long et al., 2015).

Furthermore, because of the intensity of environmental and interactional work that MAE members do, we suggest that consideration of greater understanding of their everyday resilience labor might prove productive. Following Agarwal and Buzzanell's (2015) study on not-for-profit members' efforts to sustain their identification, involvement, and abilities to assist others and themselves in reintegrating after disasters, we note that MAE members' remarks during interviews and their activities when faced with environmental wrongdoing and crises seem to align with the familial, ideological, and destruction-renewal network ties that Agarwal and Buzzanell found. Understanding MAE members' communicative construction of resilience might offer further insights into their organizing processes, perceived meaningfulness of their work, and other aspects.

To close, through our case study of a Brazilian not-for-profit focused on sustainability initiatives, we expand knowledge about tensions inherent in communicative labor and organizing paradoxes in different Brazilian organizational environments, but especially in the third (nonprofit/nongovernmental) sector. Communicative labor processes displayed how members entered into, thought about, structured, and sustained interaction strategically to resolve tensions and to model the interactive processes that are considered to be a

hallmark of the particular Brazilian third-sector organization that we studied. Our findings not only contribute theoretically to tensional approaches to organizational communication but also pragmatically to how sustainability efforts requiring collaborations for work accomplishment and member identifications are perceived to operate. Because we presented our findings and their implications to the NGO leadership who wanted to find out how they might engage with each other and their work more productively, we consider our work to be engaged scholarship that contributes to the ways members make sense of and navigate NGO's ethical and political work (Dempsey, 2012; Dempsey & Barge, 2014) in sustainability realms, as well as the ways contradiction and paradox are part of communicative labor (Dempsey, 2009; Putnam et al., 2016).

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### Notes

1. The city of Londrina, located in the North of the state of Parana, was founded in 1934. With well over 500,000 inhabitants and covering 171,500 hectares, Londrina has a large rural area that has around 600 rivers and streams. The valley floors where the streams are located are areas of permanent preservation and constitute "Linear Parks" (following the course of the stream). These are rare in cities the size of Londrina. These parks help stabilize the climate, protect water resources, reduce the pressures of urbanization, and are sought out for recreation. The Tibagi, the largest river in the basin, supplies 60% of the city's drinking water and has suffered consequences of environmental degradation.
2. Except for having a president, *Meio Ambiente Equilibrado* (MAE) is organized around three study and production groups: *Grupo de Direito Ambiental* (GDA, the Group for Environmental Law), *Grupo Técnico Ambiental* (GTA, the Group of Environmental Experts), and *Grupo Comunicação Ambiental* (GCA, the Group for Environmental Communication). The GDA consists of interns, law students, volunteers, and lawyers. In partnership with Londrina's Prosecutor for Environmental Affairs, this specific group undertakes all stages of civil action, from investigation to filing suit in court based upon environmental and urban law. This group's primary areas of action include regions of permanent preservation, public service contracts, plazas, and the development of privately owned subdivisions in environmentally protected areas (which are often authorized by government agencies, but still result in environmental degradation and public health risks). The professionals from the GTA focus on proving scientific research to be used as reference for any legal proceedings filed by the GDA. Their research generally targets environmental recovery, reforestation, and water, wildlife,

flora, and urban zoning. The GCA oversees public and press relations, and also develops public awareness campaigns.

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