Forum Introduction

Bridging the “Third Space”: Advancing Communication Theories in/of Nonprofit Organizations

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Keywords
organizational communication, nonprofit

The nonprofit and voluntary sector “occupies an increasingly critical and visible position in our political, social and economic life” (Frumkin, 2002, p. 1). As critical, nonprofit and voluntary organizations (NPVOs) deliver a myriad of services, foster social entrepreneurship, enable civic/political engagement, and facilitate the enactment of private/religious values. As visible, registered nonprofits numbered more than 1.5 million in 2010 in the United States alone and included public charities, private foundations, chambers of commerce, fraternal organizations, and civic leagues (National Center for Charitable

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Statistics, 2011). These numbers increase dramatically when figuring in more informally organized volunteer community groups, not to mention the vast amount of nonprofit work happening across the world. In virtually every area of society, NPVOs offer alternatives to corporate and governmental forms of organizing—from banking and housing, to education and retail. In other areas, such as religious expression and artistic performance, NPVOs are often the primary structures for collective action. Still further, social service provision is dominated by government contracts with NPVOs, and businesses enterprises often partner with NPVOs to implement corporate social responsibility programs. Simply put, there is no way to fully understand today’s organizational landscape without a thorough understanding of the nonprofit and voluntary sector.

In addition, NPVOs highlight certain communicative aspects of organizing that can make them even better sites of inquiry than corporate or government contexts. The multiplicity of stakeholders, the importance of social capital, the prevalence of volunteer labor, the complexities of governance and accountability, and the centrality of mission and values create a unique environment for many dynamics that organizational communication scholars are interested in pursuing (Lewis, 2005). Interdisciplinary research on NPVOs has been “vigorous” (Bielefeld, 2006), but organizational communication scholarship has often relied on theories informed by corporate and/or government models rather than studying NPVOs as distinct forms or highlighting communication as a central mode of explanation.1

Accordingly, this forum is important as it presents several ground-breaking essays that highlight unique theoretical and practical contributions that organizational communication scholarship can make to the interdisciplinary study of NPVOs—continuing a conversation that began at the 2010 National Communication Association’s Organizational Communication preconference.3

Koschmann begins with an explicitly theoretical essay in which he advances a communicative theory of the nonprofit. He argues that we need to develop distinctively communicative explanations of NPVOs and that our theorizing should arise from communicative understandings of organizations and human interaction. Such communicative explanations should (a) embrace lived experiences (of space, time, human relations, and the body); (b) interrogate language and discourse, examining how taken-for-granted terms like “nonprofit” and “volunteer” enable/restrict organizational activity; and (c) examine the constitution of NPVO forms vis-à-vis communication processes.

A key theme in the subsequent essays involves the contradictions and tensions that are inherent to the organizational life of NPVOs. And rightfully so, given that the NPVO sector is an “elusive mass of contradictions”
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(Frumkin, 2002, p. 1) and that a tension-centered approach is an important framework for organizational communication scholarship (see Trethewey & Ashcraft, 2004). Dempsey’s essay notes one such tension—how critical issues of power and control are often minimized because NPVOs are bound up in notions of the public good. She therefore argues NPVOs need to be understood politically, calling for increased critical attention to (a) the very category of “nonprofit” as it masks differences (see also Frumkin, 2002); (b) the nature/status of nonprofit employment to “complicate taken for granted accounts of nonprofit work as enriching, meaningful work”; and (c) the politics of nonprofit representational practices that advocate on behalf of others (see also Dempsey, 2009).

Ganesh and McAllum investigate tensions that arise when “professionalism” is contrasted with “volunteerism,” especially as divergent notions of status and labor (as material, emotional, and embodied in nature) constitute both terms. They illustrate that when held in tension, the practices that constitute volunteering (e.g., receiving limited training) can be understood as forms of unpaid, amateur, and low-status (i.e., unprofessional) labor. They advocate examining processes such as the marketization, routinization, formalization, and rationalization of volunteer practice to assess critically the bifurcating effect that discourses of professionalization (as a colonizing logic) have on NPVOs.

In his essay, Isbell examines the identity tensions experienced by boundary spanners in NPVO interorganizational collaborations. Given that the construction and maintenance of identities is inherently rooted in communicative interactions, tensions emerge as “boundary spanners” simultaneously represent their personal interests, the interests of the collaboration, and the interests of the organizations they represent. Isbell therefore contends interorganizational collaboration research should escape the “fixation” at the organizational and interorganizational levels and account for the numerous affiliations (and consequent identities) a NPVO boundary spanner manages as an individual actor in the collaborative process.

Murphy and Dixon also explore tensions in negotiating identity in interorganizational collaborations as they narrate separate but similar experiences working as capacity builders with two different nonprofits in Uganda and Kenya. Dixon explains how her racial and cultural identification as “one of them” when the founder of an international NPO “othered” the Ugandan people reinforced an inequitable racial and cultural power relationship. Murphy describes how two gay male colleagues hid that salient aspect of their identities in order to further the NPO’s work. Their narratives demonstrate that scholars cannot overlook the complex intersections between social identities and relations of power.
Eschenfelder explores the contradictory emotions experienced in NPVO work. As she notes, nonprofit workers often choose their work based on passion about a social cause, but consequently spend much of their time dealing with people who are sick, uneducated, resource limited, mentally unstable, and the like. NPVO workers must then perform emotional labor to manage tensions between the ideals of social causes and the realities of NPVO work. These emotion-linked tensions should be of particular interest to organizational communication scholars, especially because these tensions are both organizational and communicative in nature.

Finally, Sanders argues scholars can better understand NPVO marketization by theorizing the tensions of organizing for all organizations dedicated to fulfilling social missions and building civil society within market economies. Such theorizing reframes the tension between financial imperative and social goals as a central ontological feature of nonprofit organizing that is both productive and constitutive (and must therefore be managed and preserved) rather than as destructive or disabling (which should therefore be closed off or resolved).

In combination, these essays not only encourage scholars to pay attention to tension and contradiction but also suggest directions for future research in NPVOs. To begin, how (if at all) does the very category of “nonprofit” privilege some organizations and marginalize others in its masking of differences across and within economic, political, and social relations? What constitutes “communicative work” in the nonprofit and voluntary sector? How do NPVOs mobilize discourses for building civil society? In what ways are NPVO participants centrally involved in the work of communicating social problems and their solutions . . . and how do they feel about that work? And when working with clients in NPVOs, how do workers and volunteers navigate emotional labor and emotion work?

These essays also suggest organizational communication scholars have much to contribute regarding communication and identity. How do NPVOs help constitute the identities of marginalized groups to broader publics? How are the “identity investments” to work or volunteer to serve social good and build civil society similar to and different from these in other types of organizations? What communicative practices do NPVOs and their workers engage in to manage tensions between market- and mission-based professional identities? And how do volunteers feel if and when their work is marginalized as unprofessional in NPVOs?

When doing such future research in NPVOs, Lewis’ concluding essay urges scholars to spend more time trying to answer questions of importance to NPVO practitioners rather than trying to convince our academic
colleagues that our interests are important and legitimate in the first place. She recommends three starting points for this engaged scholarship approach: (a) convening NPVO practitioners who would make up a useful learning community, (b) identifying NPVOs that are highly successful in some regard and documenting their best practices, and (c) stimulating thinking and research about the future of NPVOs in scholar–practitioner learning communities. Taken together, these essays highlight the unique contributions that organizational communication scholarship can make to the interdisciplinary conversation on NPVOs, and stimulate future scholarship to advance communication theories in and of nonprofit and voluntary organizations.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Notes

1. For exceptions in recent scholarship, see Dempsey, 2009; Dempsey & Sanders, 2010; Eisenberg & Eschenfelder, 2009; Ganesh & McAllum, 2009; Garner & Garner, 2011; Koschmann & Laster, 2011; Lewis, 2005; and Lewis, Isbell, & Koschmann, 2010.
2. Deetz and Putnam (2001) argue the field of communication must articulate a unique mode of explanation to contribute effectively to interdisciplinary research.
3. The coeditors would like to thank all of the Bridging the “Third Space”: Advancing Communication Theories in/of Nonprofit Organizations 2010 preconference participants for their contributions that have influenced our thinking related to (a) critical issues to explore in NPVO research, (b) building communicative theories of NPVO organizing, and (c) conducting engaged scholarship in the NPVO sector. Special thanks to our keynote presenters: Renee Houston (University of Puget Sound), Drew Ebersole (Greater Metro Parks Foundation, Tacoma, WA), and Jennifer Shea (San Francisco State University) and to Matt Sanders for gathering our notes in a white paper.

References


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