The Constitution of Organization as Informational Individuation

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Communication scholars, especially in organizational communication, call for a constitutive approach to communication that considers communicating and organizing as a single process. Yet, current theorizing seems unable to embrace that equivalence. As an alternative, we present an informationally grounded view of communication, drawing from French philosopher Gilbert Simondon. Doing so, we extend scholarship on the communicative constitution of organization by highlighting the importance of framing communication in the context of informational individuation. Following a critical summary of constitutive communication theories, we provide a brief exegesis of Simondon’s concepts of individuation and transduction, which bind information and communication, and contribute four propositions to guide informationally grounded work on the constitutive power of communication. We then emphasize how a Simondonian view contributes to discussions on the communicating-organizing equation. We end by providing a brief empirical example and analysis, using key takeaways from a Simondonian framework, and offer areas for further discussion.

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The idea that communication, discourse, and/or interaction, are constitutive of identities, bodies, genders, social ties, capital, and other phenomena is gaining traction in organizational communication research (Ashcraft & Mumby, 2004; Butler, 1993; Kuhn, Ashcraft, & Cooren, 2017). Communication is described as constitutive of collective and organizational realities (Cooren, 2007; Grant, Michelson, Oswick, & Wailes, 2005; Putnam & Nicotera, 2009). More generally, the constitutive view of communication has been proposed as a “metamodel” for communication theory (Craig, 1999, 2015).
Communication scholars have adopted constitutive approaches to communication to conceptualize the agency in/of collectives (Cooren, 2000; McPhee & Zaug, 2000; Putnam & Nicotera, 2009; Taylor & Van Every, 2000). Yet, they still struggle to account for the apparently plural, contradictory, or paradoxical nature of these collectives, thus pointing to the need for a new (meta)theoretical model (Putnam, Fairhurst, & Banghart, 2016). We suggest that understanding communication’s constitutive role in collectives requires a renewed philosophy of communication. Such a philosophy would situate informational individuation—a notion we define below—as a foundation for understanding organization at various levels of abstraction and granularity, in the way that an animal may be defined or observed by its DNA at the same time as by its behavior in a group, with both representing different abstractions of a singular reality, made up of the same existing information at various levels.

Current perspectives suggest that communicating and organizing are not distinct phenomena (see e.g., Smith, 1993; Taylor & Van Every, 2000), but, for the most part, they continue to rely on well-traveled theories that consider communication as taking place between or within preexisting entities. This is salient, for instance, in perspectives that attempt to reconcile communication with materiality, thus implying that material and human entities precede the communicative practices that connect them (Putnam, 2015). As a result, they produce partial accounts that are bound to appear contradictory, as they have yet to be unified within a cohesive theory of communication. Indeed, few theoretical proposals account at once for communicating and for organizing, as we remain trapped with the idea that we first need people to speak, channels to convey information through space, and ideas to be exchanged. How can communication and information theory explain how speaking, informing, and exchanging generate people, channels, space, and ideas?

One exception is James R. Taylor’s (1995, 2001) invitation to think of communication as an autonomous process and of conversations as autopoietic units. Communication and conversation, in this sense, ensure their own reproduction and distinction from others. As they reproduce themselves, they are constitutive of—rather than constituted by—individual and organizational entities. To formulate his proposal, Taylor drew on Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela’s (1980, 1987) systems theory, as well Niklas Luhmann’s (1992), but also on conversation analysis (Sacks, 1992; Schegloff, 1989) and speech acts theory (Austin, 1962). These additional contributions allowed Taylor to account for the reflexive and performative nature of communication, the existence of variously organized domains of language, and the way communication constitutes boundaries to both distinguish and interface with the environment.

Yet, while Taylor’s work has generally been acclaimed, this particular proposal has received little attention (an exception being Cheong, Hwang, & Brummans, 2014). We therefore reiterate and build on Taylor’s work, to spell out its implications for issues of constitution and individuation, signification and methodology. We do so by tracing back the source of these ideas to a different origin. Indeed, decades prior to Maturana and Varela (1980, 1987) and Luhmann (1981, 1992),
the French philosopher Gilbert Simondon (1958/2005) had already proposed that communication theory must think about information and communication in the same terms as organizing and structuring. Aligning ourselves with and drawing inspiration from work on the sociomateriality of information (Cecez-Kecmanovic, Galliers, Henfridsson, Newell, & Vidgen, 2014; Dourish, 2017; Dourish & Mazmanian, 2013; Leonardi, 2013; Leonardi & Barley, 2010), we suggest that Simondon’s informationally grounded philosophy of communication (Bardini, 2014; Barthélémy, 2005, 2014; Styhre, 2010) can renew how to think of the constitution of social order and collectives, including organizations, in order to understand more broadly what Barad (2007, p. 24) referred to as the nature of “meaning making, and the relationship between discursive practices and the material world.” Specifically, Simondon offers answers to many questions that Taylor raised, such as the relationship between action and communication, boundaries between systems, and homogeneity within one system. While Simondon’s ideas have become popular in the technology literature (Dakers, 2016; De Boever, Murray, & Roffe, 2009), his relevance to the study of collectives and organizing is just being discovered (Bencherki, 2017; Styhre, 2010, 2017), as evidenced by a recent Culture and Organization special issue (see Letiche & Moriceau, 2017).

We refer to Simondon’s theory as informational, because the notion of information is key in his work. From Claude Shannon and Warren Weaver (1998) to Gregory Bateson (1972), information has traditionally been defined as a difference between two states; a homogeneous system contains no information. Information, mathematically, is what is (im)probable within a given system; in a broader sense, it is a symbol, state, and so forth that differs from an alternative. Uniquely, for Simondon (1958/2005), information consisted of potentially active energy differentials; information exists where “domains”—understood as similarly ordered regions of social, physical, technical, or cognitive activity, in the way that an open clearing is a domain distinct from the forest—within a system, or two or more systems, carry different levels of potentially active energy. Keeping in mind that energy’s Greek etymology finds its roots in ergon (action), then it is the difference in action potential between domains that defines information, not unlike the way a sick body is defined by its different (potential) behavior in comparison to the surrounding bodies, whose behavior defines normalcy and health (Canguilhem, 1989). This difference between two action potentials—what Simondon referred to as “disparation”—will tend to seek resolution, which takes place through communication: namely, the movement of action from one domain to another (or different regions within a domain, which then form domains within the broader domain, like subsystems within a system, ad infinitum). The energy from one domain to the other transmits from kin to kin, a phenomenon Simondon referred to as “transduction.” By “kin to kin” (de proche en proche in French), Simondon meant that any action propagates in a proximal way, from one being to the next, during one encounter at a time. There is no abstract transmission of information, but a finger pressing on a keyboard, transmitting an electrical signal to a microprocessor, and then on to a Wi-Fi antenna, to a router,
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To an optical fiber, to another and another, all the way to the screen of a reader, each time reordering a domain. To make a difference, then, communication must be taken up by the receiving domain, which can only welcome this new contribution if it (the receiving domain) is already structured in such a way as to allow for the new action to make any difference. The difference that is made is the signification (i.e., meaning) of communication. For instance, the internal ordering of a classroom is such that students talking to each other—forming a domain of their own, with a different energy potential—would “mean” a disturbance; during recess, the same group of students, possibly in the same room, would be ordered differently, and the same two students’ conversation would mean something different, such as friendly play.

Information is, therefore, what triggers metastable systems (where energy is not homogeneously distributed) to resolve their internal incompatibility into an organized reality; in doing so, they also produce further transductions (Iliadis, 2017). Information is an action: it is the difference that affects a metastable system and leads it to a new ordering through communication (the active taking up of this ordering). For instance, the coupling between two students’ conversation and a classroom is a metastable system made up of two differently ordered domains, while a conversation and recess in the playground constitute a more stable, similarly ordered system. Communication is the process of information’s circulation through the very systems whose reordering it provokes (Simondon, 2010). In other words, communication systems do not precede the communication of information, since a system—whether physical, technical, or social—is made up of information, at different levels of abstraction and granularity. In this sense, Simondon’s take on information and communication offers a theory that thinks of communication from the vantage point of its organizing power. That is why, for Simondon, information and communication lead to individuation: the constitution of new entities or collectives.

To clarify Simondon’s view on communicating and organizing, the next section reviews existing literature on the connection between the two notions. Following that, the section titled “Informational Individuation” presents our approach to Simondon’s theory and introduces the relevant vocabulary. We then move to the heart of the argument and suggest four proposals that briefly summarize the implications of Simondon’s thinking for organizational communication research. An empirical example then shows how these four proposals can guide an analysis of organizational communication data. The paper’s contributions, limitations, and suggestions for future research are given in the conclusion.

**Current understandings of the constitutive power of communication**

The idea that communication is constitutive of social order and collectives can be traced to social constructivism and, even prior to that, to symbolic interactionism and the idea that people jointly constitute meaning (e.g. Mead, 1934). The “constitutive model” considers that communication has the power to constitute realities—including communication as a discipline (Craig, 1999)—through the
meaning human interactants make as they exchange signs (Carey, 1989; Krippendorff, 1997). This perspective, as Taylor (2001) noted, arguably restricts communication's constitutive power to its ability to generate meaning within the minds of human beings, who are distinct from the material and/or social world they attempt to understand. This raises the question of whether “social realities” exist only within human imagination.

These limitations are attributable, we argue, to the theories of communication that underlie even the most earnest efforts to describe communication as constitutive. In the field of organizational communication, where heated conversations surround communication's ability to constitute organizations (Putnam & Fairhurst, 2015), a tradition has emerged under the name of Communicative Constitution of Organization (or CCO) that puts the constitutive model at its center (for a review, see Boivin, Brummans, & Barker, 2017). Recently, CCO researchers have become concerned about their own assumptions, as demonstrated by a series of roundtable meetings confronting perspectives within the tradition, including a 2012 debate between François Cooren, David Seidl, and Robert D. McPhee at the University of Hamburg, Germany; a panel bringing together Dan Kärreman, Linda Putnam, and Cliff Oswick during the European Group for Organizational Studies conference in 2015; or Putnam's intervention at the 2015 Philosophy of Communication conference at Duquesne University, where she presented a comprehensive overview of the contradictions and paradoxes organizations face, and how organizational communication has attempted to deal with them (Putnam et al., 2016).

The 2012 Hamburg roundtable was reproduced in Schoeneborn, Blaschke, Cooren, McPhee, Seidl, and Taylor (2014) in a point-counterpoint format that allows a glimpse into the underlying theories of each of the three CCO perspectives represented: the Montreal School, voiced by François Cooren; the Luhmannian school, voiced by David Seidl; and Robert McPhee's Four Flows perspectives. The debate revealed that each perspective rests on a view of communication that is not, as such, specifically linked to the idea that communicating and organizing are a single process. Dennis Schoeneborn, acting as a facilitator, asked the panelists a question concerning how each of them defined communication. Seidl, describing Luhmann's theory, explained that the German philosopher conceived of communication as the synthesis between information, utterance, and understanding. McPhee suggested that communication involves the interplay of signification, domination, legitimation, and constitution, each being mediated by the others, while preserving the “interpretive emphasis on tacit skills and interaction as achievement” (Schoeneborn et al., 2014, p. 291). Cooren admitted that there is no consensus on what communication means, even within the Montreal School, before suggesting that “communication is, first and foremost, considered as action,” and that action is not limited to a single human agent (Schoeneborn et al., 2014, p. 286). In saying this, Cooren acknowledged the Montreal School's reliance on speech acts theory (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1979) and a pragmatic understanding of communication (see Burks, 1958; Taylor, 2001, also evoked American pragmatism).
The three different answers provided by Cooren, Seidl, and McPhee illustrate how research on the constitutive power of communication still lacks a unified theory of communication. There is, indeed, only limited reflexivity on this question in communication scholarship. Focusing on talk, conversation, interaction, or similar phenomena is certainly a valid criterion to situate the conversation within the field of communication, but it may not be quite enough to provide us with a coherent theory of what makes communication “organizational” or constitutive of collectives, including society.

For instance, Seidl’s answer may imply a systems-based or cybernetic understanding of communication that is coherent with Luhmann’s systems theory, but which perhaps brings the question “how does communication constitute organizations?” back to an emitter (utterance), message (information), receiver (understanding) model that may not be specific to or informed by an interest in organizations in the making. For instance, despite the title of his article—“What is communication?”—Luhmann (1992) never actually defined communication, although he convincingly demonstrated its role in the self-reproduction of systems. As for structuration theory, on which the Four Flows model was erected, its relation to communication remains ambiguous: while communication, along with power and rules, is one of the dimensions along which agency and structure are articulated, Giddens (1984) addressed communication as such only in passing (Richter, 2000). Indeed, “Giddens was notoriously brief in his discussion of communication” (McPhee & Iverson, 2009, p. 52). The Montreal School, for its part, has shown how communication has organizing properties (Cooren, 2000)—that is, how communication impacts organizing processes from a perspective that combines speech acts and interaction analysis—but remains somewhat unclear on whether this process rests on human understanding (see Wilhoit, 2016).

CCO researchers, like other communication scholars, continue, despite claims to the contrary, to think of communication as a phenomenon distinct from the entities whose constitution they try to elucidate. It consists of—to quote Cooren’s answer—“what people say, write, or do,” which then, in a second stage, may or may not influence the constitution of the organization. Any truly constitutive theory of communication we end up adopting should not consider communication as a supplement or a double to an allegedly prior reality (see Rosset, 2012): for example, as a layer of description on top of a stable substrate of material and social reality (see the critique of Bourdieu in Butler, 1999).

Some social theories were imported into (organizational) communication studies exactly because they did not need to postulate a prior social order. For instance, ethnomethodology and conversation analysis (Garfinkel, 1967; Sacks, 1992; Schegloff, 1989) took as their starting point situated interactions, and have shown how, from there, people have (re)constituted the rules that bind them in turn. Ethnomethodology is employed in some branches of CCO: in particular, within the Montreal School (Brummans, 2006; Cooren & Fairhurst, 2008). Ethnomethodology conceives itself largely as atheoretical and, despite its relative popularity in communication
departments, it has not troubled itself with any definition of communication. That said, it is perhaps ethnomethodology—and its focus on the actions people perform as they enact social order—that Cooren thought that, in his answer to Schooneborn, he equated communication with action. This equation and emphasis on action were also important to Simondon.

Another perspective the discipline adopted to account for communication's constitutive power is American pragmatism (see Misak, 2013), especially Peirce's (Burks, 1958) pragmatic semiotics, which Taylor and Van Every (2014) explored more recently. Peirce located signification in a three-way relationship between a first item (the thing alluded to), a second (the symbol, icon, or trace that stands for it), and a third (the interpretant, which is the rule, routine, or process by which the relation is performed). For Taylor and Van Every (2014), this triad is inherently organizational, inasmuch as signification is both made possible by and is productive of a structure where the interpretant operates the semiosis. In other words, Peirce equated signification with the creation and maintenance of a configuration of relations between the components of the triad.

Without dismissing the importance these ideas have had in communication studies, we introduce an alternative theoretical tradition in the writings of Simondon, and suggest a philosophy of communication based on his conceptualization of informational individuation. Simondon's informational ontology (Iliadis, 2013) considered communicating and organizing as a single practice, governed by constitutive informational structures. It offers an integration of many conceptual elements that are currently scattered across theories, including that communication creates (social) order, provides endurance to that order through materiality, and that signification proceeds from the relations it constitutes.

**Informational individuation**

We suggest that Simondon's (1958/2005) notions of individuation and transduction may contribute to communication theory by extending debates on the constitutive power of communication, with a nuanced articulation of the materiality of information. Simondon explained that the notion of form should be replaced by the notion of information, arguing that information provides a clearer pathway for understanding how entities and relations are organized and individuated at multiple scales.

Simondon conceptualized individuation as the processual emergence of physical, technical, psychological, or collective entities, and argued that we should prioritize processes of informational individuation over individual objects and subjects themselves. He often stated that it is information—as an action differential that may take many guises: data, semantic information, environmental information, and so forth—that is the engine of individuation, rather than supposedly external factors that would precipitate a rudimentary form of physical causality. Simondon suggested that even when seemingly external forces produce entities (one of his more popular examples referred to molds that shape clay into bricks), what is at play is the proximal propaga-
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The process of transduction organizes entities as it propagates from one level to another. In the words of Simondon (1958/2005, p. 32, authors’ translation):

What is meant by transduction is the physical, biological, mental, social operation by which an activity propagates from kin to kin within a domain, grounding this propagation on the structuration of the domain, from place to place: each constituted region of structure serves as a principle of constitution to the next region, in such a way that a change extends progressively at the same time as the structuring operation.

Transduction is therefore the process by which action circulates through propagation, reorganizing elements along the way. If we equate transduction to communication (as was Simondon’s intention), then it becomes apparent how the communication of information is not distinct from organization. Citton (2004) suggested that, in Simondonian thinking, disparation—the differences or inconsistencies between differently ordered domains—leads to the creation of new ways of communicating between them and, therefore, to new orderings; that is how communication is productive and allows the constitution of collectives. For Simondon, then, communication is action that propagates by informationally organizing; action is both the process of communication and its content.

Simondon’s informational perspective also attended to a common concern in the literature on the communicative constitution of organizations: namely, how situated action may “scale up” to constitute seemingly larger entities (Cooren & Fairhurst, 2008). That process is not a matter of sequential physical steps, moving from individual people to a collective (Simondon, 1958/2005). Levels of informational abstraction exist, in the same way that the DNA of a single cell exists and is as real as the human individual to whom it belongs; Simondon would say that to causally prioritize one over the other is a fallacy. Simondon contrasted transduction with induction; the latter creates abstract categories by reducing the terms to some of their commonalities (for instance, the category of “tall men” reduces individuals to their size and gender), thus sacrificing their singularity. This is what happens when a collective is reduced to some general features of its members. Transduction, in contrast, is the discovery of how the total reality of each entity may be informationally communicated and ordered “without loss, without reduction, into the newly discovered structures,” so that “the result of this operation is a concrete fabric including all the initial elements” (Simondon, 1958/2005, p. 34).

For Simondon, the outcome of the constitutive process is not an abstraction of the similarities between preexisting individuals. Rather, transduction is the practical effort of finding out tangible ways in which concrete information can pass on actions along an informational chain. In doing so, information reconfigures or constitutes collectives, societies, and organizations that are not more abstract than, say, human beings; rather, they are of a different informational level, as they correspond to the ordering (including the ordering of human beings) that took place as action found a way to circulate. Simondon’s informational view is, therefore, resolutely relational,
in the sense that the structure of information precedes any notion of an already constituted being that would initiate communication. In that sense, Simondon has converged with current efforts to bring to the forefront the relational underpinnings of CCO scholarship (Cooren, 2015; Kuhn et al., 2017; Martine & Cooren, 2016) and to avoid thinking of communication as occurring between preexisting entities. Simondon (1958/2005, p. 35) contrasted the notion of information with that of form, which supposes that “the relation is posterior to the existence of the terms” and can only “capture an impoverished reality, without potential, and consequently unable to individuate.”

Simondon’s ideas have important implications, we argue, for how we think about meaning, as there are no individuals already available to “interpret” information. Instead, meaning—or, as Simondon referred to it, signification—emerges when the disparation between two domains is resolved. In other words, what an action means corresponds to the ordering that action brings about in a given domain. To return to the example of students chatting in the classroom, their voices interrupt the teacher’s lesson and, thus, question the current ordering; during recess, it means business as usual or even a reinforcement and validation of the current activity, of playtime. For Simondon (1958/2005, p. 35), “the significant [meaningful] form . . . is the structure of compatibility and of viability”: signification is obtained in the process of communication that attempts to resolve the disparation between orderings, to make them compatible, and to ensure their continued existence. Indeed, for a teacher in a classroom, the adjustments needed to make their pedagogy compatible and viable, with respect to the ordering that prevails between the talkative students, would mean something quite different than the adjustments needed to accommodate them during recess. Such an understanding can be equated with a pragmatic view of meaning that is inherently organizational; meaningful communication is communication that succeeds at resolving inconsistencies between ways of organizing.

Furthermore, for Simondon, individuation existed according to ordered levels of abstraction that disclose new informational levels, where entities emerge at greater or lesser degrees of granularity. Said otherwise, the individuation of a cell, of a person, and of an organization continue into each other and coexist at once (think, for instance, of an individual’s mental health issues, which make a difference at the biological, psychological, and organizational levels all at once). In this sense, information has the capacity to propagate action across levels; the action of chemical deficits within a synapse can make a simultaneous difference in the way a person organizes their behavior and in the way an organization organizes its work (for instance, at the human resources department). Insurance forms will need to be produced to consider medication formulated according to the way brain cells work. In other words, a single action can have cascading meanings as it reorganizes systems at several levels of abstraction, without ever losing specificity.

A Simondonian view of communication and signification may rework the presumption, in communication studies, that talking and writing should be primary concerns. For instance, while Taylor (1995, 2001) suggested that an autopoietic
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systems perspective allows recognizing that conversations self-reproduce and lead to further conversations, thinking in terms of transduction recognizes that conversations are, first and foremost, ordered systems of actions, which must further reorder under the impulse of new action; in this sense, the autopoietic systems perspective brings Taylor's proposal closer to the way ethnomethodology or conversation analysis thinks of conversations, as operating in terms of actions that are produced to deal with an interlocutor's prior actions. Yet, Simondon also allowed for doing so without the need to presume that communication is the product of individuals or that its interpretation lies in the mind of people, thus also connecting with Luhmann's (1992) invitation to de-center communication from human beings, but also allowing us to account for the way humans may interact with non-human participants within a system (see Cooren, 2015).

Simondon’s most important contribution, we think, is to account at once for communication and existence, or information and individuation. In this sense, he collapsed the usual distinctions between subject/object, micro/macro, realism/anti-realism, and abstract/concrete. These dualities are at the heart of communication studies’ struggle with paradoxes and contradictions (see Putnam et al., 2016) and may be resolved once reality is thought of in terms of informational individuation as operating at several levels simultaneously.

In this sense, Simondon viewed information as multimodal and as something that could be exchanged not only between beings who are already individuated but also within evolving systems that produce new individuations. In this theory, information is internally complex and should not be confused as consisting only of things like (media) signals.

Implications for research methodology and organizations

What sort of organizational communication research would communication scholars be doing if they adopted Simondon's theory of communication? The philosopher himself provided some starting points in answering this question. First, as Combes (1999, p. 18) noted, a Simondonian approach implies a focus on the individuation of the entities under study: “we can only account for the possibility of knowing individuated beings by providing a description of their individuation.” This entails, for instance, that any description of organizations, membership, identity, power, or any of the things that organizational communication scholars study, should be a description of the way those entities have come to exist. This does not mean that descriptions are performative (although they may also be), but that descriptions must recapitulate the performances that allowed the being to come into existence in the first place.

Simondon pushed the envelope further when he discussed the relationship between the researcher and the object being observed. At times, we cannot describe an entity and, by describing its individuation, we realize that we also cannot describe ourselves—researchers—or the knowledge we produce without also making those descriptions in terms of individuation processes; in other words, “the operation
of individuation cannot tolerate an already-constituted observer” (Combes, 1999, p. 16). Simondon explained how this seemingly tall order could be fulfilled: “this process consists in following the being through its genesis, and to accomplish the genesis of thought at the same time as the object’s genesis unfolds” (Simondon, 1958/2005, p. 34). He further noted that “it is by the individuation of knowledge rather than by knowledge alone that the individuation of beings is comprehended” (Simondon, 1958/2005, p. 36).

Simondon thus echoed calls for reflexivity in qualitative research (see Cunliffe, 2003). Concretely, this means that knowledge of the constitution of organizations does not proceed from an external relationship to communication processes. Rather, researchers are implicated in those processes, which shape them in turn. Information—say, about organizational processes—is not simply transmitted to the researcher; rather, it shapes a domain, propagates from the host organization to the university, and produces a new way of ordering research, students, writings, and thoughts. What a finding means is what it does to the researcher, to the extent that they are embedded in a domain (or several domains, each providing its meaning): their field, their community, their department, and so forth. It is only in this new ordering that a new piece of knowledge can be significant or meaningful (compare this with Latour, 1987).

We must be careful when distinguishing the researcher from their object of study, but also, more generally, when differentiating any being (or category of being) from others. The crux of Simondon’s methodology, as Iliadis (2013) suggested, is to look at the way beings’ individuation proceeds through the communication of action. Whether in describing others or the self, what matters is how beings of different levels of abstraction—from molecules to society—are constituted through information, as they organize to accommodate new actions that affect them and as their organization, in turn, create new information that affects others. What distinguishes beings from each other, including the researcher from their field, is a difference in ordering, rather than external or a priori categories.

While organizational communication research struggles to define organizations—for instance, Luhmann-inspired research is interested in organizations in the “narrower, institutional sense” (Schoeneborn et al., 2014, p. 293; see also Sillince, 2009)—what mattered for Simondon was not so much an external definition of a domain, as much as an internal ordering whose logic distinguishes different domains for practical purposes. Even the very ontology of entities is an after-the-fact outcome of ordering, rather than the starting point of investigation, as transduction can propagate from the physical to the biological, to the psychological, and to the collective, with a detour through the technical.

To summarize Simondon’s ideas of individuation, transduction, and information, and their import for (organizational) communication, we may formulate four propositions:

1. Information is a differential in action potential that emerges from a disparity in ordering between domains. Communication is the kin-to-kin propagation of
action that seeks to resolve disparity and, in doing so, organizes a domain as it circulates through it.

2. Entities, including organizations and other collectives, are not at different stages of individuation, but rather different informational levels that preserve all the characteristics of their organized components. An employee is not prior to the organization, nor is the organization an abstraction of its employees; they each exist fully and simultaneously.

3. The meaning or signification of any action—including acts of language—corresponds to its participation in the resolution of a disparity of ordering. In other words, what information means—its signification—corresponds to the way it reorders a domain. The announcement of a new contract, for instance, does not mean the same thing depending on whether it mobilizes troops, or if it leads people to go on sick leave.

4. Knowledge of an entity or of any of its facets should focus on its individuation process and should reflect on the way that knowledge itself has individuated. Said otherwise, knowing, for example, an organization, is knowing how I (the researcher) have changed along with it as I have come to know it.

In concrete terms, these proposals mean that the researcher would need to free themselves from the shackles of a dualistic epistemology opposing the knowing subject and the known object. Deductive knowledge, establishing categories of beings and possible causalities in advance, would also have to be abandoned. The goal of research would consist in following action itself as it moves along information paths, from one being to the next. Those paths are not given in advance either; they consist precisely in the way a domain is organized to become capable of accommodating that information. To understand what action means, the researcher would need to note how the observed domain has had to reorganize itself, considering that new information. They would have to show, for instance, how a teacher had to stop their lesson to shush two talkative students; this new ordering of the classroom means that the talk was a disruption.

Any research method that a communication researcher chooses, in this sense, would have to fulfill a specific agenda. First, it would have to allow for observing action as it unfolds and following its movements. It would need to have the empirical precision and granularity not to mix up, for instance, an action with people’s interpretation of it in interviews. Those interpretations, if they are used as data, would have to be treated as actions in their own right. Second, it would have to avoid recreating the subject-object dichotomy: for instance, in presuming a knowing researcher and a knowable organization. In this sense, it would have to treat knowledge creation as a process taking place on the same ontological and epistemological plane as the observed processes and consider the researcher on the same terms as the researched. Third, it would have to remain agnostic as to the nature of the beings and entities that participate in information and individuation, as well as to the nature of those that may come out of information and individuation processes. It would have to
be able to speak in the same terms of humans, technologies, documents, ideas, or rules, and recognize that determining which is the outcome of the inquiry, not its starting point. Finally, and in relation to the prior point, it would have to refrain from presuming the prior existence of some beings—for instance, human beings making sense of their organization—otherwise, it would take for granted the very result it sought to reach. These four points could, in fact, be seen as different formulations of the same principle: to avoid giving ontological priority to one being or set of beings at the expense of others, by presuming that they already exist and are available to shape, interpret, or otherwise bring into existence.

While, for instance, ethnography and ethnomethodology share a commitment to following action as it unfolds (see Llewellyn & Hindmarsh, 2010; Ybema, Yanow, Wels, & Kamsteeg, 2009) and seem well aligned with Simondon’s program, the French philosopher diverges from the two research traditions significantly when it comes to the fourth item of the agenda: namely, not to consider any being as already existing. This important difference is attributable to the different claims that each approach seeks to make in relation to communication. Ethnography views communication as a privileged vehicle with which to access culture, including the beliefs, rules, and principles that guide action. For ethnomethodology, communication is, so to speak, the construction yard where social reality is continuously constructed. Simondon’s interest, in contrast, was in the communicative processes themselves, which to him were not distinct from the constitution of beings and social reality alike, including the researcher’s own constitution. Said otherwise, the process for Simondon was not so much to use communication to gather data about constitutive process, but to view any data that is involved in constitutive processes as communication. Communication, therefore, is not a gateway to one aspect of reality or another, but reality itself.

An empirical example

To illustrate the analytical power of a Simondonian perspective on communication and how it fully embraces the constitutive power of communication, we now turn to the analysis of real-life data, drawn from prior empirical work. Also, while Simondon’s notion of information is usually associated with media and communication technology research, this simple case will allow us to illustrate that the philosopher’s work has broader relevance, and show how the principles laid out above can be mobilized to conduct empirical research.

The case is an excerpt from a meeting of a committee that serves as a coordination platform for community organizations in a particularly underprivileged and diverse district of Montréal, Québec, Canada. In the excerpt below, Marie, the representative of a member organization, shares an idea that she and other members of a subcommittee on diversity developed and would like to see implemented. It consists in federating the various activities that organizations carry out for the integration of immigrants under the umbrella of a special week: the Integration Action Week (IAW).
The case was selected because Marie, in a sense, makes very explicit a Simondonian theory of communicating and organizing. We include here the transcript of her intervention, which was translated from French and edited to exclude some less relevant portions for the sake of space.

Excerpt

1. Marie: It’s the Integration Action Week, here in [district]. Uh... So, it’s a week,
2. you have heard about it a little bit at the last general meeting, ... you may have
3. received a first document inviting you to register. Let me explain a little bit what it
4. is. So, my goal here today isn’t to do a report. Of course, you will learn some things,
5. but I mostly want that you, uh... that you commit with us in this: uh: this celebration.
6. Okay? So, uh, because the IAW, it integrates in the Council’s work, in relation with
7. the priorities we just talked about the uh: social housing priority on [location], now
8. it’s the concerted work on intercultural relations. I remind you that ... [quoting from
9. sheet] “That the Community Council multiplies and strengthens the ties with groups
10. and members from cultural communities, in order to unfold uh their participation
11. uh in the Council”. So, it’s also in relation with the accessibility project that
12. we’ve got with [funding agency]. Uh: so, the IAW (...) I will distribute the sheets. [...]
13. So, from Monday to Thursday. We want to highlight [mettre en valeur] the
14. wonderful work that we do regarding integration, in our respective groups.
15. But now we would like it to be seen, that we let it be known in the media, among
16. others, and so we want to set up a calendar of activities. It’s not about making up
17. actions you’re not doing, but maybe about saying “there is that thing we’re doing
18. with parents, where we encourage exchanges, where we foster mutual help” or
19. whatever formula you’ve got. Uh, well, that’s integration work. It’s integration
20. work, we’ll take it in a broad sense. Even if you can’t welcome more than 20
21. people in your premises, it’s worth saying, inscribing it in the calendar and
22. saying “that, it exists.” Or maybe to invite a person or two from another group
23. to see what’s happening, to get acquainted, to highlight it, in the media, uh, on the
24. map, but also among ourselves, because isn’t the work of knowing each other part
25. of integration? You know it, we develop many things, we do a really extraordinary
26. work, but we have to highlight it. So, uh, during that week, well, uh, first, I am
27. talking to you as a member of the Intercultural Concerted Work committee,
28. and of the IAW sub-committee.
29. [...] 
30. Marie: Uh, uh, it’s the committee that had the idea of doing
31. this week, but the week, it’s not the committee’s week. It’s everyone’s
32. week. That of all the community workers in [district], and we were even saying
33. uh there’s extraordinary work from the community groups, at least that’s what I
34. see as a member of the Community Council, but there are other kinds of groups
35. there are other uh other interventions that are being done in the district
36. that are entirely in the spirit of integration, of facilitating integration, for example
37. in institutions, whether the [French-learning] centre across, whether the [proximity health
38. centre] services, or others. So, what we want to do is a calendar
39. of activities (1), so I invite you to register in that calendar. Uh, we also want to do
40. a “passport for integration” and a web site. So, the passport uh will give uh uh
41. (inaudible) to the residents and to the community workers. So, we are aiming at
42. workers a lot, of course, eh, I think that it’s up to us to share information
43. on what we’re doing. But obviously, our members, there are many other groups,
The first author was present at the event and witnessed many similar meetings of that committee over his years as an ethnographer. I saw the organizations change, people come and go, struggles won or lost, partnerships formed and dissolved. In that respect, my knowledge of the organizations, people, or events is also a knowledge of their individuation: of the way they became who or what they are. This knowledge is not simply based on observation: these organizations, people, and events also affected me. I changed along with them in significant ways: I got a PhD thanks to them, I became committed to community-engaged research, and I made several friends. The meaning of my fieldwork, therefore, comes from the way it contributed to ordering relations, including to make me who I am (proposition 4).

Marie’s speech is reminiscent of Simondon’s conception of communication. Indeed, she recognized herself that her goal was not to report, but to get others to “commit with us [...] in this celebration” (l. 5). She therefore had in mind a view of communication (or at least of her speech) as aiming to create new connections between people and organizations. For instance, she presented the subcommittee as being ordered in a particular way: as believing in the “wonderful work” (l. 14) and the “really extraordinary work” (l. 33) that the organizations were doing in terms of integration and in the importance of holding the week in a particular way. Now, Marie wanted to propagate that ordering to the rest of the Council. Marie wanted to “inform” her fellow Council members, not only in the sense of letting them know about the subcommittee’s idea, but also because she wanted to organize her colleagues and their organizations into the Integration Activity Week. Seemingly espousing Simondon’s understanding of the notion, her goal was not only to transmit pieces of information, but to give a new shape to the Council, order it in a particular way, and provide it, so to speak, with new organs that would allow it to capture “integration work” and, thus, (re)organize it (Cooren, 2018). Indeed, as she reminded the Council later, the week would not only belong to the subcommittee, but “it’s everyone’s week” (l. 30–31), with her effort thus consisting of leading others to appropriate it (Bencherki & Cooren, 2011).

To do so, she showed that, in fact, the Council was already ordered in a way that made it receptive to the new information. First, she established that her suggestion agreed with prior decisions and priorities of the Council, by quoting from her notes. For instance, she explained that the week was “in relation with the priorities” (l. 6–7) that they had just talked about, quoting one such priority regarding ties with cultural communities (l. 11). Then, she explained that she was, in fact, not asking colleagues to do new things: it was not a matter of “making up actions you’re not doing” (l. 16–17),
but of highlighting existing actions and providing them with a new and heightened meaning through inclusion in the week.

She then provided the ordering principles that would allow constituting the IAW and, therefore, connect individual actions in a new way: the calendar, in which she invited her colleagues to write down the integration actions they were doing. For Marie, there was an equivalence between inscribing an activity in the calendar and creating a new ordering of these activities: “to get on the calendar (0.5) to get in the network of integration” (l. 49–50). She presented the calendar as a solution to giving more meaning to their activities: “we would like it to be seen [. . .] and so we want to set up a calendar of activities” (l. 15–16). This ordering therefore proceeded from kin to kin, in the minutiae of how people would register using the document they received (l. 3) or the sheets she distributed (l. 12). Later, she explained, this would be turned into a “passport” (a flyer with the calendar printed on it) and added on the committee’s website, both of which would offer materializations of the activities’ ordering. At each step, relations were established or strengthened between the various actions—but also between the organizations—and were defined by the week in which they would participate. Each time, also, the existence of both the week and of its activities were highlighted. This existence was established as the week’s ordering propagated from a sub-committee’s conversation, to a speech, to the committee, to the sign-up sheets, to the calendar, to the passport, and so on (proposition 1).

Marie promised that eventually, when the IAW would take place, the “wonderful work” the organizations were doing would gain more existence and signification: as she explained, “we want to highlight” (l. 13; also l. 14) that work. The French mettre en valeur is even more explicit, as it literally translates to “put in value,” thus stressing that the activities would be more valuable if they were part of the week. Contributing their actions to the week would allow the activities to “be seen” (l. 15) and to get “on the map” (l. 23–24). “Inscribing [an activity] in the calendar” amounts to “saying, ‘that, it exists’” (l. 22). The week consisted in ordering otherwise scattered actions into a new, coherent, collective being; what ordering the actions into a week also did was order the organizations and other partners in a more significant way.

The result of Mary’s speech was not only that her audience was better informed, in the conventional sense of the word, but also that an ordering that existed within the subcommittee (their perception of the connection between diverse action and their value, their commitment to integration, their understanding of the Council’s mission, and so forth) was propagated outside, to other members of the Council, who were then similarly ordered. This new ordering did take place: the IAW saw the light of day, thus giving meaning to actions of the community-based organizations, but also rebounding on Mary’s speech and showing its significance and signification as a founding moment of the new initiative.

This analysis makes a certain number of assumptions: we suppose that whoever participated in that meeting understood the French language in which it originally took place, could read the various documents, and knew the conventional meaning of each of the words, expressions, tables, and so forth. We could argue that each
of those elements may also be explained by referring to the four propositions above. For instance, an immigrant’s ability to use French—and there were indeed many immigrants at the meeting, including the first author—is the outcome of that person’s continued individuation in a French-speaking society (say, Québec), and their knowledge of French is also a knowledge of how they have changed over the past months or years, along with their adoptive country or city (proposition 4). The same could be said of native speakers, if we extend the timeframe to each person’s whole biography. Indeed, what the words, expressions, and so forth signify to that person is what the words have done to them and how they have changed them.

Conclusion

Ruth Smith’s (1993) formulation of the root metaphor equating communication to organization, has received, for the most part, a one-sided treatment in organizational communication theorizing, showing how communication builds collectives, but not the other way around. In a sense, communication scholars interested in its constitutive power have been researching the emergence of organizations and other collectives more than they have studied communication and how it may be conceptualized from an organizing perspective. Obviously, our goal is not to suggest that communication scholars start looking exclusively in the other direction, but rather that they find theoretical positions where communicating and organizing are truly a single process. We provided one example of a theory of communication that is genuinely “organizational” in its treatment of communication; Simondon’s (1958/2005) notion of informational individuation. By showing how communication organizes, in a single process, the domains through which it circulates, Simondon fused communicating and organizing; that is, his theory of communication is a theory of organization in the making.

The example of a Simondon-inspired transductive perspective on communication illustrates that there are still unexplored ways in which (organizational) communication scholars could conceptualize communication for the sake of redefining the organization-communication relation. Our hope with this paper is to elicit more debates over the relationship between organization and communication, as well as on underlying conceptions of communication. We think this is needed to rejuvenate the sorts of methods that communication researchers use, the kinds of knowledge they produce, the understandings of organizations that they adopt, and the ways they relate to communication practitioners. This paper has attempted to at least question the assumptions on which organizational communication theories have been constructed, while making explicit the understandings of communication that are at the heart of organizational communication research.

References


