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The role of communication in governance: Universities and (new) media

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A b s t r a c t

This commentary examines the emerging role of public relations as a strategic management tool for universities. She argues that the almost ubiquitous introduction and adoption of new communications technologies has affected the ways in which organizations operate, how work happens and the roles that people play in these evolving arrangements. She argues that communications professionals now face not only the challenge of working effectively in environments where the mechanics of the profession are changing rapidly, they must also find ways of explaining the nature and the increasing importance of the work they do.

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The introduction and adoption of new communication technologies has affected the ways in which organizations operate, how work happens, and the roles that people play in these evolving arrangements. However, managing change in practice is of course a great deal messier than simple sweeping statements allow. We experience it through small and incremental, non-linear and informal shifts in everyday routines, as well as the more obvious attempts to implement structured policy and planning programs (with varying degrees of success). Most of all, change is mediated: It does not happen in a symbolic vacuum, but in large part through the way people engage with narratives, interpret texts of various kinds, and make meaning with each other in organizational settings. In other words, change happens through communication.

From this standpoint, I want to discuss two general, interrelated issues of importance for communications practitioners. The first is the role of communication in organizational governance.

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It may be time for us to rethink our ideas about the nature and scope of public relations in practice, from the viewpoint of communication as a fundamental aspect of organizational governance rather than a particular set of services to be provided through a designated office or by a specific individual. This would mean adopting a broader and more nuanced understanding of the role of communications professionals in organizations.

The second issue is that of the effects of new media, particularly digital communications technologies, on the governance of organizations. These technologies alter the processes and possibilities, the scale and scope of relationships between an organization and its participants, stakeholders, and publics. Yet it seems that many organizations have not found ways of putting these media to good use, or indeed managing the issues that arise when their use becomes problematic.

Bringing together these two threads of discussion, I focus on several key questions:

What is the role of communication in organizational governance and how do new modes (and technologies) of communication relate to this role? What are the characteristics of new media – who uses them, and with what potential consequences for organizations? Lastly, what are the implications of these changes for communications practitioners?

As a specific example, I examine a rather unique type of organization - the university. Individual universities, which are often critiqued for not changing quickly enough in these turbulent times, could be said to belong to a larger and long-established institution *(academe)*. This is one reason why the effects of "newness" may be felt keenly by members, yet addressed more slowly in formal terms. Additionally, communication and its technologies are foundational to all aspects of the university's organizational functioning because of its nature as a "knowledge institution," one that has increasing amounts of attention directed to it from a variety of publics and stakeholders. Universities also have a unique structure, since each department or unit is usually based on an academic discipline and these often function as microcosms that may or may not be well connected to an overall organizational culture.

There is a good deal of pressure on existing organizational arrangements from within and beyond the assumed boundaries of the university, for example in the rhetoric of "disruption" that has become pervasive in media accounts of impending or required change. From the predicted overhaul of academic publishing models through open access, to the much-evangelized changes to teaching and learning heralded by various forms of online education, the need for radical change is taken by many as a given. In this context,

communication can be seen not only as a potential source of "disruption" but also as a means of constructing, mitigating, and translating this process.

Public relations, communication and governance

What is the role of communication in governance? It could be seen as a process through which people form an understanding of, and determine appropriate roles and behavior within, an organization. Both within and outside official structures, communication helps people to tell a story about an organization and their experience within it, a story that is further shaped through sharing and which informs their feelings and actions. Functionally then, communication is the basis of governance, and this involves much more than what is dealt with explicitly through formal channels such as an office of public relations.

Public relations as everyday practice is about connecting, cultivating and maintaining relationships with stakeholders. For universities this presents a special challenge because they are organizations with multiple, often conflicting missions and many internal divisions, operating in an environment of reduced resources and increased uncertainty in terms of economics, technology, and the shifting expectations and demands of a variety of groups. The context for Canada's universities is that as public institutions, they must balance students' (and increasingly, parents') needs and expectations with those of governments, donors, corporate partners and sponsors, academic staff, non-teaching staff, and others. It's no coincidence that universities are also being presented with new demands for "engagement" at a time when accountability is an increasingly political aspect of communication.

External communication, situating the university in a larger context, serves to cultivate and articulate relationships between its members and non-member groups, as well as with future members such as prospective students. For Canadian universities, the quasi-marketized governance environment has involved an increase in advertising and marketing. Universities must "position" themselves to stand out in a competitive market for potential students, for donors, even for the best professors. This has happened alongside the development of consumerism in education, which has been a result of tuition increases and an accompanying emphasis on the (private) economic benefits of higher education. Public attention on the university also means attention to branding and reputation management, practices that have changed with the advent of new media.

Internal communication, too, is crucially important in that it tells organizational participants about their role and status in, and relationship with, the university itself. Even the least "important" communication sends a second message, one about the organization, its "climate," culture, and function. This can enable involvement in or exclusion from the culture and practices of the organization. So communication, which affects what people get to know (or not know) about, is closely tied to the question of transparency and accountability. Who will be involved in the governance process, and will stakeholders be sure that they have had a say and that someone took their opinion into account? For institutions that are still primarily publicly funded and have developed methods of governance where academic staff and (often) students have input, the issue of process is a major focus.

New and old media: Communication, print governance and e-governance

New media technologies change the nature of communication and, in the process, unsettle underlying assumptions about how an organization should work. Print as a medium, for example, assumes a higher degree of control over the production of "messages" by an authorized organizational source. Print is more static than flexible, less easily modifiable; less transparent and accountable; more private and "closed" and less inclusive (in terms of process). But universities have been slow to move beyond the "print paradigm." We can see this because the paradigm doesn't merely entail new media carrying the content of older ones. It also entails new (types of) relationships: closed vs. open; mobile vs. immobile; informal vs. formal; monologic vs. dialogic.

In this context, universities – as part of academe in general – now face a conflict between open and closed forms of governance and communication. What we're currently witnessing is an attempt to transfer the university's current organizational and communicative models into this new environment. The idea of the Learning Management System is an excellent example of this, since it is usually an attempt to duplicate the physical and conceptual space of the university in a "virtual" environment - segregated, structured and inflexible, and specific rules imposed (which seem to be made for the benefit of the system, not users).

Digital communication upsets a sense of stability because it pushes existing limits, blurring the imagined edges of the organization. Internal-external

boundaries become porous, and knowledge of institutional problems can leak into the public realm, making "private" issues into matters of public debate and amplifying remarks that reflect individual opinions not "vetted" by any official mechanism.

Yet closed, controlled communication involves too much restriction on the new media, which produce statements impossible to police. Such tactics are easily parsed as such by savvy audiences familiar with digital discourses. Informal communication generates anxiety for universities, because while it's becoming more visible through social media tools – messages can be shared publicly, and they can "go viral" – it's just as uncontrollable as ever. This is why social media in particular have provoked a crisis of control - they skew a careful communicative and governmental balance that has been worked out in practice over a long period. While that control may have been an illusion before, now even the illusion can't be sustained.

The university as an institution has not yet undergone the transformation from the print-dependent mode of communication to the electronic one. This difficult process has been grudgingly recognized in a token fashion, with the implementation of internal tech systems that seem perpetually behind the times and always somehow separate from the larger "digital world." The shock to the institutional system still runs deep, because until this point, the need for a genuine transition has not been addressed.

Final thoughts

The unique relationship between the university and its social context has been more of a focus over the past 40 years as universities have expanded to take on more tasks and include more people in their day-to-day activities. New communication technologies have only added to this increasing visibility by enabling modes of (sometimes unintentional) transparency. Alongside the push for more timely institutional change and "flexibility", this has created new pressures on old governance processes since the success or failure of change is tightly bound up with communication and organizational culture.

In part because of new technologies, universities, ever more concerned with their reputations, must deal with what has been the reality of communication all along - its flexible nature, and its tendency to adapt to, and counteract, monologic messages. In practical terms this means that while messages actually framed by the organization itself are privileged in certain ways,

they are by no means the exclusive or even the primary means of making sense of what happens in the organizational context. An organization has no monopoly on the definition of transparency, and neither does it have a monopoly on its own message.

A lack of one kind of order doesn't entail chaos. This world of informal communication existed long before new media came along and made it visible to us, the difference being that spoken words carried no clear trace. The potential for amplification of casual discourse has also engendered a struggle over which words will have formal consequences (prompting the development of social media policies and guidelines). Like the Facebook "drunken party shots" that can now be shared with a click, these words are "on the record" in ways they never would have been in the past.

One answer to the increasing lack of control over communication could be a cultivated organizational ethos that allows us to be proactive and operate by principles - rather than relying on "reactions" and rigid rules. At the root of this approach is the culture of the organization, a point already recognized by managerial theories that recommend working to create the correct organizational culture (or alternately, assume it already exists).

But the university has a unique lesson for us in this regard. What managerialism leaves out is a means of operating on terms of perpetual conflict. For universities this is particularly difficult, because corporate models of governance that may assume the possibility of consensus or common goals don't work in an environment where members are encouraged – by the very nature of the institution – to critique change and to resist it. This is why the kind of ethos required could not function by outright prohibition of criticism; it must help us find ways to work through significant disagreements.

Part of this issue is that it's not only professionals who communicate - everyone does, and this affects the culture and practices that become entrenched over time. Membership means being drawn into the web of words that helps to structure everyday life in the organization. For universities, re-imagining communication as both strategic and participatory means they will need to leave behind the reactionary tactics frequently employed in the past, a process that becomes more important as they are pressured to demonstrate their "value" to skeptical publics. Rather than upending the inclusion of different groups in the governance process, communication can and should facilitate it.

Communications professionals in universities and in other organizations now face not only the challenge of working effectively in environments where the mechanics of the profession are changing rapidly, they must also find ways of explaining the nature and the increasing importance of the work they

do. Their role should reflect the fact that more than simply the management of messages, professional communication is deeply implicated not just in how change happens, but in the fabric of everyday organizational life.