

## Introduction: Organizing/Communicating Sustainably

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### Introduction: Organizing/Communicating Sustainably

The organization-society problematic—or the roles and responsibilities of different organizations in broader social practices—has long been a core concern of organizational communication scholars (Putnam & Mumby, 2014). However, despite a large body of research examining themes such as corporate social responsibility (CSR), ethical and transformational leadership, institutional networks, and workplace diversity, relatively under-examined is the polysemous term “sustainability” in the context of organizing, and how communicative practices enable (and restrain) sustainable organizing in different contexts. While there is a growing sub-field of environmental communication, with many studies exploring the organizational aspects of environmental sustainability, too often has the dichotomy between “environment” and “organization” been reified in mainstream organizational communication scholarship. Thus, for this Special Forum, we asked some leading lights of our field, who have been actively exploring the organization-society problematic, to reflect on and critique “sustainable organizing,” and suggest new, exciting avenues for organizational communication research and practice.

Notwithstanding disagreement among policymakers about what counts as sustainability, most interpretations of the term derive from the United Nation’s Brundtland report, which takes sustainability to be development that “meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (WCED, 1987, p. 43). As the so-called “green economy” surges, with more than 8 million “green jobs” estimated worldwide, a veritable industry has evolved around sustainable organizing, involving consultancies, public relations, marketing, manufacturing, engineering, architecture, and design, to mention but a few fields (Sommers, 2013). Nevertheless, actual implementations of sustainability have been critiqued as being inauthentic, mere face-saving “greenwashing” exercises, doing little to curb consumerist

tendencies or wasteful manufacturing, and co-opting marginalized voices under the guise of stakeholder dialogue (Ganesh, 2007; Peterson, 1997). Organizational communication scholars can add much to this debate, by examining the communicative practices and broader discourses within and among different organizations (i.e., corporations, nonprofits, and government agencies) that shape sustainability, make sense of the complex environmental risks encountered, and recommend innovative strategies that have successfully overcome operating obstacles. In the remaining portion of this essay, we draw on the included forum pieces to outline four key facets of this proposed agenda of sustainable organizing/communicating research.

First, we note the importance of moving beyond traditional stakeholder management theories to conceptualize sustainable organizing, so that we may recognize the broader structures and processes at issue. Stakeholder conceptions of responsible organizing have long been critiqued as too organization-centered and as neglecting marginalized entities unfamiliar with the rules and procedures of strategic negotiation (e.g., Sachs & Rühli, 2011). The organization-centric stance's short-term, myopic perspective often is at odds with the systemic and holistic nature of sustainability. One suggested way of moving beyond stakeholder theory is importing frameworks of deliberative decision-making and critical dialogue, which are both attuned to the ongoing interaction of multiple entities with their own interests, and to the complex power relations that underlie inter- and intra-organizational interactions (Deetz, 2010; Mitra, 2013). Thus, Munshi and Kurian's forum essay highlights "citizenship" as an important frame, whereby entities not hitherto considered stakeholders might contribute productively, while Polk and Servaes emphasize the informal networks of practice involved.

Second, although we recognize the dangers of overly open-ended meanings of sustainability, often used to justify organizational delays in implementation, we emphasize the

creative tensions that may be enabled by viewing sustainability as “aspirational talk,” subject to changing interpretations by different entities over time (Christensen et al., 2013). As Christensen, Morsing, and Thyssen note in their essay, this approach entails an understanding of how discourses and meanings of sustainability are dynamic, portending new practices through “talk,” which may not accurately represent the existing situation on the ground. Rather than decry such rhetoric-practice gaps as hypocrisy, they call for studies probing the ongoing emergence of “license[s] to critique” organizational sustainability, or how communities and corporations iteratively co-create these norms and best practices. We would further urge attention to how the “talk” and practices of sustainable organizing are shaped by the material conditions at hand—such as the distribution of resources sought to be managed, the geographical and topographical features of locations studied, and the embodied/bodily implications of sustainability jobs. For example, the communication-constitutes-organization (CCO) framework is well-poised to examine these issues, with its emphasis on co-naming interactions between human actors and nonhuman actants that ventriloquize each other, to create social and organizational realities (Robichaud & Cooren, 2013).

Third, research should examine the socio-historical structuration of sustainability policy in different contexts, given the ongoing shifts in the meaning of sustainable organizing. Scholars have noted how the concept gradually evolved from a “hard” environmentalist stance focused on conservation, to a “softer” view seeking to effect change within dominant socioeconomic paradigms and organizational structures (e.g., carbon credit trading, investiture of Chief Sustainability Officers in corporations) (Prasad & Elmes, 2005). Both Ihlen and Christensen et al. in this forum note that, while this shift from the radical to the mainstream, with its emphasis on measurable outcomes and universal standards, helped broaden sustainability’s appeal, it also

diluted the potential transformations sought. From our own purview of the field, we trace the beginning of yet another shift—one that seeks to revision the organizational structures shaping social life, and renegotiate the underlying policy deliberations. This shift toward introspection becomes crucial, with the failure of established political and economic institutions to enact meaningful policy despite rapid environmental change (e.g., rising sea levels, extreme weather) (McKibben, 2013). Organizational communication scholars have a unique role to play here, examining the individual and collective, human and nonhuman, discursive and material, agents that constitute and negotiate policy (Cheney, 2007). Examples of emerging policy structures in this vein abound, ranging from the “benefit corporations” that situate sustainability as foundational to their legal charter, to the Transition Networks Polk and Servaes study in their forum essay.

Finally, increased environmental risks foreground the necessity of incorporating resilience in institutional structures, in a variety of contexts (Andries et al., 2013). Organizational communication scholars might explore how different entities negotiate and manage the risks encountered, and regain their footing following crisis events (e.g., governments re-designing city layouts in response to extreme weather, insurance companies re-evaluating risk parameters). Researchers should also focus on the intersubjective negotiations of resilience, “imagining new normalcies into being” through interpersonal and inter-organizational or network communication (Buzzanell, 2010). Finally, resilience involves the deliberation and adoption of innovative strategies to ensure long-term adaptability. While Transition communities, as Polk and Sevaes note, are a good example of such creative organizing structures, researchers also should note grassroots practices of indigenous and other marginalized groups, who might have been engaged in sustainable organizing for centuries, in the shadows.

An important challenge for scholars and practitioners would then be to help connect, empower, sustain, and scale-up these successful practices, enabling a wider network of practice focused on resilience and transformation.

Sustainable organizing, then, is fundamentally about transforming social systems, and the essays gathered in this forum posit that organizational communication researchers play a key role in effecting this transformation across multiple contexts. Although we recognize the significant limitations of systemic transformation through corporate sustainability, an important goal of this forum is to reiterate that, even as sustainability is mainstreamed and professionalized by capitalism, it also transforms mainstream organizing in profound ways that deserve study.

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