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Unplugged - Book Reviews Special Forum: Around the Communicative Constitution of Organizations perspective

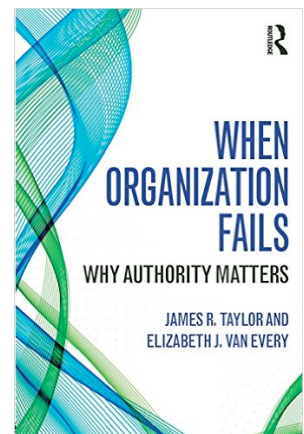James R. TAYLOR & Elizabeth VAN EVERY (2014), When organization fails. Why authority matters, New York, NY: Routledge.

reviewed by

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The unplugged section edits some book reviews special forums dedicated to a topic, an author or a theoretical perspective. This second forum considers three important volumes gravitating around the communicative constitution of organizations perspective. Originated in a seminal contribution from one of our reviewers, Robert McPhee, who based his work on Giddens's structuration theory, this perspective experienced different avenues and forms now a "rather heterogeneous theoretical endeavor" (Schoeneborn et al., 2014). Montreal School of organizational communication constitutes one of the main pillars of this perspective; James R. Taylor and François Cooren recently offered some stimulating volumes, carving out their own path within organizational communication studies. The CCO perspective has significantly disseminated in the field of organizing studies and an effective conversation henceforth unfolds with various discursive studies.

Following *The Emergent Organization* (2000) and *The Situated Organization* (2011), James R. Taylor and Elizabeth Van Every pursue their inquiry into the communicative constitution of organization in their latest book, entitled *When Organization Fails: Why Authority Matters* (hereafter, *Why Authority Matters*). As the third part of what can be thought of as a trilogy, this book extends the communicational framework developed by the authors in their previous books to study organization and organizing. This framework can be summarized by the following thesis: organization essentially consists of interconnected processes of communication; this is defined as the recursive articulation of conversations and texts. Hence, for Taylor and Van Every, organization emerges in communication as *described* in text – organization becomes an object toward which actors co-orient their actions – and *realized* in conversation – organization is enacted by actors through situated interaction.

While The *Emergent Organization* offered the theoretical grounding for developing the 'communicative constitution of organization' or CCO thesis, The *Situated Organization* presented the pragmatist standpoint of this framework and put it to work through several empirical studies. So what does *Why Authority Matters* add? As the authors themselves suggest in the opening sentences of the introduction: '[this book] is an inquiry into the role of authority in the constitution of organization' (Taylor & Van Every, 2014, p. xiii). The focus on authority as the 'foundation' and the 'unifying force' of organization (p. xx) is thus the driver behind and the main contribution of this book. Let us note that Taylor and Van Every's interest in authority has come a long way (cf. Taylor, 1993; Taylor & Van Every, 2000). Yet it is in *Why Authority Matters* that the authors are able to offer a strong and systematic account of the nature and practice of authority in organization. More specifically, the main contribution of this book lies in its attentiveness to authority as a communicational phenomenon, and one that is key in the establishment of organizations. It follows that when authority is not accomplished – when there is confusion about who has authority and how it must work – then, as the title of the book suggests, organizations fail.

To inquire into the role of authority in organization, the authors propose a two-step structure based on their pragmatic approach to the study of organizational phenomena: the first part of the book presents the conceptual framework, while the second part puts the framework to work through two case studies. Taken together, the two sections of the book allow us to understand authority as a property of communication *in practice,* which is one of the main arguments developed in *Why Authority Matters*. In what follows, I will sketch out the main ideas of the two sections of the book. I will then reflect on some of the questions that this book poses for further engaging with the 'communicative constitution of organization' or CCO thesis.

The theoretical framework presented in Part 1 is based on three premises: (1) communication plays a constitutive role in generating the system of authority that holds organization together; (2) organization is constituted by a transaction linking agents to a beneficiary associated with the organization and thus with its purposes and values; and (3) the beneficiary (i.e., the organization) is a source of authority for those who represent it, yet it can only act through their voices and agencies. This results in different and often conflicted readings of the purposes of the organization, which, if not properly negotiated, can result in organizational crisis. Following this reasoning, the main question Taylor and Van Every ask is: How is the organization to exercise authority when its values and purposes have become confused and problematic? The answer can be found in what the authors call imbrication, which 'involves a sequential authorship that gives actions and activities a new meaning at each new phase of re-authoring' (2014: 28, see also, Taylor, 2011). In other words, imbrication allows the construction of a common narrative about organizational purposes, values and goals, while recognizing different interpretations or micro-stories of the different communities of practice that compose the organization. When successful, imbrication establishes and legitimizes the collective authoring that gives meaning to the activities and actions of these communities. In keeping with this idea, an organization fails when imbrication fails; that is, when communities of practice are not able to collectively rewrite the organizational text and give this text the authority required to guide the actions and meanings of organizational actors.

The second part of *Why Authority Matters* invites the reader to follow the intricacies of two case studies that deal with authority (or the lack of it!) and the ensuing organizational failures related to the confusion between different interpretations of authority (in other words: no imbrication!). The first case narrates the events that led to the cancellation of *Seven Days,* a popular Canadian television program aired in the 1970s by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC). The second case presents the story of the Integrated

National Crime Information System (INCIS), introduced during the 1990s by the New Zealand Police and abandoned a few years later at a cost of millions of dollars to the New Zealand Government. I will not discuss the details of these cases here but rather focus on their commonality and on what they tell us about authority in practice.

While these cases happened in very distinct organizational and societal contexts, and in different times, they both present stories of innovation: a new genre of television program and mode of production, and a new technology of surveillance, respectively. Innovation plays an important role here as it sets the context for re-questioning authority; the authority of expertise (related to knowledge) and that of position (related to hierarchical structures) are confronted in both cases by new ways of doing and organizing. For example, in *Seven Days,* the new television genre that the producers of the program proposed – and that was very well received by the audience – changed top managers' traditional conception of television broadcasting. This led to two questions: who was in charge – the person with the expertise or the person in a position of authority – and how decisions were to be made. As for INCIS, this new technology entailed new procedures, activities and tasks for the Police Department, which were developed and managed by a new team in charge of the implementation, called the INCIS team. This team, mainly composed of software designers and internal consultants, had to battle for their authority as INCIS representatives, which was an extremely difficult task considering the culture and hierarchical structure of the Police Department. In both cases, innovation mixed up the lines of authority and generated opposition between the authority of expertise and the authority of position.

These cases also show the importance of the socio-historical context of organizing: Canadian television broadcasting in the 1970s and the New Zealand governmental context in the 1990s were characterized by particular issues that had major implications for the development of the events narrated in *Why Authority Matters*. As Taylor and Van Every aptly recall, 'None of what happens in the organization, […] takes place in a vacuum' (2014: 202). *Seven Days*' producers and managers, as well as the INCIS designers and internal consultants, understood that the implications of their decisions were wider than the organization they worked for: other rules had to be taken into account. Context mattered in these cases because it grounded the accomplishment of authority, but also because it showed that authority also depends on 'the outside' of the organization. Another issue that mattered in these two cases was leadership. Both cases show how leadership failed, not because it did not exist, but because it was not collectively authorized as such. The founder and main producer of Seven Days was not legitimized by top management as the being the person 'authorized' to make the decisions related to the program. The same goes for INCIS's project manager who was never recognized in the Police Department as the legitimate spokesperson for this project. Leadership can be gained only if it comes with authority: not only a formal and normed authority, but also a practical and sensible authority that needs to be legitimized for it to be exerted.

To summarize, these cases illustrate well the idea that authority is not a property of an individual or a position: authority is enacted in practices, but more importantly it governs those practices. Authority is both the frame for action and, as mentioned above, the law or contract of the transaction between the agents and the beneficiary. As Taylor and Van Every note, it is the double nature of authority – that of 'authoring' and 'authorization' – that makes it a crucial phenomenon for 'holding the organization together'. As the cases show, if there are too many lines of authority, if the purposes and goals of the organization are distinct or if different views (managerial and experts) conflict, then there is no common understanding of the governing rule; there is no authority. Innovation triggers the need for renegotiating the rules of the transaction between the agents

(organizational actors) and the beneficiary (the organization), which also implies the renegotiation of who is authorized to talk on behalf of the organization.

Now that I have reviewed the main ideas presented in *Why Authority Matters*, let me now explore some of the questions regarding the communicative constitution of organization or CCO thesis that were triggered by reading this book. The first question relates to the way authority is described and applied in the case studies. As mentioned above, the definition of authority presented by Taylor and Van Every is quite general (and I think this is an advantage of such a definition): a property of relationship that holds organization together. Yet, in the cases, authority is often referred to in terms of the distinction between the authority of position and that of expertise. It is worth noting that the starting point of Taylor and Van Every's (2014: 3) definition of authority is Barley's (1996) well-known analysis of technicians' work, in which '[he] identified the basis of all claims to authority as either hierarchical office (position) or skilled practice (expertise)'. Based on Barley's work, Taylor and Van Every (2014) argue that today's organizations strongly rely on a horizontal distribution of work in which authority is defined by expertise. Yet, the vertical distribution of authority (authority of position) is still the main model for many large organizations. This paradoxical arrangement is, following the authors, what defines (and makes difficult) the accomplishment of authority – an argument that they defend in the analysis of the two case studies.

Now, I wonder if authority is really only about the conflict between expertise and position. What about other forms of organizing, such as project organizing, nonprofit organizing, freelancing and entrepreneurship, that do not follow a horizontal distribution of authority? The two cases described in the book refer to formal and public organizations – the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation and the New Zealand Police – and Barley's research was based in hospitals. Could it be possible that these particular organizational contexts illustrate only one of the many ways that authority works in organization (albeit a predominant one)? I would suggest that reducing authority to 'position versus expertise' is quite problematic as it does not account for the array of modes of organizing. If we consider that authority is a property of relationship (i.e., communication) and we agree that communication constitutes organization, and that there are many forms of organizations 'out there', then it seems possible to envisage that different configurations of authority could exist.

My second question relates to the materiality of authority. Again, the definition of authority deployed in the book, both in the theoretical framework and in the case studies, suggests a language-based view of authority. This view is emphasized, for example, by the narrative approach that underlines the case studies (see p. xxi) and also by the conversation/text dynamic which, as mentioned above, is at the heart of Taylor and Van Every's definition of organizational communication (and thus of authority). And yet the cases present material contexts of innovation related to television broadcasting and the implementation of a new technology. Considering the emphasis on materiality that has lately emerged in organizational communication, and more specifically in the communicative constitution of organization approach (see for example, Ashcraft et al, 2009), I was expecting a deeper engagement with the materiality of authority. Taylor and Van Every do mention that, in the INCIS case, technology played an important role in the position versus expertise conflict, but this remains a general argument about the 'plenum of agencies' (Cooren, 2006) that characterizes organization. What about the role of artifacts, such as procedures, norms, charts, PowerPoint presentations, in legitimizing, authorizing, and contesting? And the physical arrangements of the organizational environment or the bodies and emotions that express or retain manifestations of authority? Materials have inherent properties for enduring through space and time and for

holding together the organization, which seems to be an important feature of authority. How do they contribute to the constitution of authority?

A final question concerns the pragmatic approach that sustains Taylor and Van Every's proposition for studying authority and, more generally, for understanding the communicative constitution of organization. Pragmatism, as the authors note referring to Peirce, begins with observation. It follows that theoretical propositions are not built *a priori* from observable facts but generated by a mode of reasoning that Peirce called 'abduction'. This inferential mode of reasoning, which is at the basis of the pragmatist approach, implies a search for the meaning of the facts *situated* on the facts themselves. While I completely agree with Peirce's proposition, and I do believe that the abductive mode of reasoning fits well with an inquiry into the communicative constitution of organization, I had the feeling, while reading the book, that this reasoning followed rather a deductive thought process (i.e. the development of a hypothesis which is then validated or contested by empirical studies). Can this feeling be related to the structure of the book, which, as mentioned, presented first the theoretical framework and then the case studies? Is it because the studies relied on second-order data (for Seven Days) and only on interviews (for INCIS), and that the 'facts' were difficult to observe directly? The result was for me somewhat disturbing and made me think about the need in organization studies for alternative – and maybe unexplored – methodological avenues for rendering and writing about the process of abduction when inquiring about organizations.

Reading When Organization Fails: *Why Authority Matters* – like any of Taylor and Van Every's books – was thought-provoking as it opened new theoretical horizons for the inquiry into the communicative constitution of organization. By adding authority to the communication–organization equation, this book adds a missing piece to the organizational communication and organization studies puzzle. Indeed, authority matters, we may conclude. As for when (or how) organization fails, I believe more empirical studies are needed to further (abductively) explore this idea.

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