



## A most wonderful mess

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### review of

Vásquez, C. and T. Kuhn (eds.) (2019) *Dis/organization as communication: Exploring the disordering, disruptive and chaotic properties of communication*. New York: Routledge. (PB, pp. 310, £ 29.59, ISBN 9780367671624)

### Introduction

Like so many other households, mine is doing its best to maintain some sort of order under the current conditions, organizing around the new abnormal of the COVID-19 pandemic as best we can. However, as we enter yet another month of semi-lockdown (this was written in a Copenhagen flat at the end of January 2021) entropy looms large. Routines that used to go unquestioned can now become the main task – and sometimes the highlight – of the day: do I need to shower? Should we prepare a home-cooked dinner?

A recent home-schooling incident alerted me to the underlying problem of the situation: the youngest member of the household needed help with some maths and, glancing at the page sideways, I confidently declared, ‘you just have to order the numbers’. ‘Yes, but how?’ he pressed on, clearly vexed. I looked again and, finding the cause of his anxiety, explained, ‘you have to decide for yourself’. Though not entirely happy (and I share the sentiment), the eight-year-old proceeded to make up and implement a principle of

numerical order, leaving me to ponder what happens when usual rules no longer apply and familiar habits retire their support: do we create new organizational forms, find a way to thrive in chaos, give in to unorderly inertia – or all of the above?

*Dis/organization as communication: Exploring the disordering, disruptive and chaotic properties of communication* was published in 2019, but it seems to be written for 2020 and beyond. The anthology is not only a useful companion in these pandemic times but may point the way forward to recovery from – or learning to live with – the various disasters we’ve seen, disturbances we’ve felt and messes we’ve made over the past year(s). As such, each of the 11 chapters, divided into two sections (one on theoretical explanations, one on methodological approaches) offers a unique approach to and understanding of what it might mean to think about dis/organization, not as exclusionary opposites but as each other’s preconditions. Thus, the book is an apt enactment of the many ways in which one may explain and investigate dis/organization as communication, richly illustrating the value of doing so.

On this basis, I thoroughly recommend the edited volume in its entirety, though I cannot entirely recommend reading it front to back. One might argue that it is in the spirit of the topic of dis/organization to leave the reader to ponder its many facets, finding one’s own ins and outs. Having chosen the conventional route, however, I unexpectedly found myself getting lost along the way, longing for clearer instructions or a more articulated organizing principle (cf. the introductory anecdote). This review, therefore, can be read as my attempt at (re-)orientation, which I hope will not only be useful to me. Yet I urge the more adventurous reader to leave the review here and dive straight into the depths of *Dis/organization*.

For those of you who are still with me, I will begin with a general introduction to the themes of dis/organization and communication as they appear across the book, then consider the various ways in which the chapters combine the two to conceptualize dis/organization as communication (or establish subdivisions of the communicative constitution of dis/organization, if you like). Next, I will focus on the topic of digital dis/organization, which is a recurrent theme of the book’s second part – and one I found especially

interesting. Finally, I will reflect on whether we should and how we might organize (for) dis/organization.

### **Dis/organization and communication**

Arguably, disorganization has always been at the root of organization studies as practitioners and scholars alike have sought to bring smaller groupings and/or entire societies out of 'the state of nature', creating order where before chaos reigned, establishing patterns and procedures where previously happenstance ruled. The main attraction of *Dis/organization as communication* is that all contributions to this edited volume begin from the fact of disorganization in a different sense: regarding it as a necessary companion to organization rather than its antecedent or adversary and focusing on the ways in which the two interrelate. As Consuelo Vásquez and Timothy Kuhn assert in their editors' introduction, 'order and disorder are not simply opposed to each other; they are mutually constitutive' (p. 2). Disorganization, then, is necessary and not necessarily evil. Recognizing this foundational truth enables studies that focus on the entanglements of dis/organization without preconceptions about their shape and value.

Having established dis/organization as a fundamental condition of possibility, Vásquez and Kuhn go on to assert the communicative constitution of dis/organization by emphasizing its excessiveness: While organizations are constituted in and through ordering, disorganization agonizes arrangements, breaks boundaries, corrupts combinations, exceeds expectations...in short, makes meaning multiple. Or, as the editors say, 'the indeterminacy of meaning generates *at the same time* the call to order and disorder' (p. 5, emphasis in original). Thus, turning to dis/organization is also a turn to communication; 'communication [...] is the locus of disorganization: That which explains the mutual, creative and co-constitutive relations between order and disorder' (p. 6). This is the common premise on which all chapters proceed and the argument to which they contribute: order and disorder are mutually constitutive and communicatively constituted.

## **The communicative constitution of dis/organization**

As Dennis K. Mumby notes at the onset of his chapter on 'branding and the politics of neoliberal dis/organization' (chapter 11), the claim that communication constitutes organization '...has, in many ways, become a defining feature (one might say 'constitutive!') of the field of organizational communication' (p. 125). All contributions to the anthology share this starting point, but beyond that they testify not only to the array of things that can be explained from the perspective of communicative constitution of organizations (CCO), but also to the variety of explanations offered within it.

Indeed, Mumby's chapter constitutes one outlier, as it provides a (constructive) critique of the ways in which CCO tends to assume that organization will prevail (even if disorganization is assumed) and to neglect the political economy of dis/organization. Communication, Mumby argues, does not only constitute organizations but capitalism as such; in support of this argument, he offers a historical overview of managerialist discourses that have variously shaped organizations and employee identities in the service of the accumulation of capital. Throughout history, Mumby shows, communication has become more and more central, moving from the organization of capitalist production to the direct production of value: under current conditions of neoliberalism, capital even '...harnesses communication as its principal mode of production' (p. 133). With this claim, Mumby's chapter points beyond organizations to suggest how 'communication constitutes capitalism' (CCC) – and it points beyond usual CCO approaches towards critical and/or performative theories of communicative materialism (Fuchs, 2017; Greene, 2004).

When asking what is communicatively constituted, then, the answer may be 'the economy', 'society' or, simply, 'everything'. But the perspective may also be taken to deal with a delimited set of organizational phenomena and to explain specific organizational processes. The latter view is apparent in Linda L. Putnam's chapter, which departs from Cooper's (1988) seminal text on organization/disorganization to arrive at CCO. Further, it is present in Gail T. Fairhurst's and Matthew L. Sheep's contribution, which focuses on organizational paradox. Both these chapters detail the relationship between order and disorder, suggesting that the dynamics of tension, contradiction

and paradox, as these unfold in and through communicative processes, should be at the centre of attention for studies of communicative constitution.

In so doing, Putnam argues that CCO may appropriately account for dis/order by adopting three assumptions (as these emerge from her discussion of Cooper): 1) organizing is a communicative process; 2) order and disorder are mutually constitutive; 3) communicative performances are sociomaterial (p. 22). For Fairhurst and Sheep, the starting point is a similar but somewhat more particular assumption of the interrelations between order and disorder, which they specify as occurring in and as 'tensional knots'. Tying such knots, they argue, is always paradoxical and involves environmental, cognitive and discursive dimensions that interweave to constitute paradoxically productive tensions. In sum, where Mumby's chapter offers CCO scholars an occasion to broaden their purview to include the macro-processes of societal constitution, the chapter by Putnam as well as Fairhurst and Sheep's contribution suggest ways of zooming in on the specifics of communicative constitution, whether at the linguistic or the systemic level of organizing. The rest of the chapters may be seen to mark specific positions on the continuum that stretches from the specific communicational to the general constitutive aspects of CCO.

When asking how communicative constitution happens, the answer may be equally varied, but in the broader CCO literature three explanatory modes recur: first, the Four Flows approach focuses on the processes of communicative organizing; second, the Montreal school details the organizational properties of communication; third, the Luhmannian approach seeks to explain organization as communication systems (Brummans et al., 2014; Schoeneborn and Vásquez, 2017). In this volume, only the second and third approaches are explicitly referenced. The Montreal school is presented by Francois Cooren and Pascale Caidor, who offer a close analysis of an organizational conversation to show how the organization gets constituted in and through the tensions that arise during the conversation. The chapter by Anindita Banerjee and Brian Bloomfield is also explicitly inspired by the Montreal school in presenting a textual-contextual re/reading (including de- and recontextualizations) of the experiments that enabled socio-technical systems theory to gain prominence within organization theory and practice. Further, Frédéric Matte, in his chapter on 'a large-scale

vaccine campaign in the DR Congo', makes use of the concept of ventriloquism, as developed by Cooren, to explain how an 'extreme' context becomes normalized in and through communication. In combination, these three chapters demonstrate the empirical scope and analytical depth of the Montreal school's focus on how communication organizes.

In their chapter on project-based organizations, Michael Grothe-Hammer and Dennis Schoeneborn present the Luhmannian perspective, which posits that communication is, basically, the operation of reducing complexity; the means of creating order in an otherwise overly complex world (p. 61). From this starting point, the relevance of systems theory to CCO, generally, and CCO-inspired studies of dis/organization, more specifically, lies in the account of meaning making as '...the process of constantly drawing distinctions' (p.62), which enables decisions to be made (and, hence, organization to occur). Here, then, 'decisions are communication' – and must be accounted for as such (p. 63). Illustrating the empirical purview of this assumption, Grothe-Hammer and Schoeneborn conclude: 'when organizations are restricted to a temporary existence, there is a discontinuation of the oscillation process between closing and opening of meaning that is constitutive of organization' (p. 77). Paradoxically, when the organizational form is stabilized, it cannot prevail; order only exists in relation to disorder.

While Grothe-Hammer and Schoeneborn provide an account of how too much order may lead to organizational breakdowns, Karen Lee Ashcraft explores what happens when disorder prevails. In her study of 'hoarding and the dis/organization of affect', Ashcraft, like Mumby, extends the horizon of communicative dis/organization beyond current CCO perspectives. However, where Mumby explicitly offers his take as an expansion of the notion of communicative constitution to include the capitalist mode of production, Ashcraft sidesteps the perspective (in fact, her chapter does not refer explicitly to CCO at all) and offers affect as an alternative lens for studying dis/organization. While the introduction of affect troubles the notion of constitution, it does not imply a turn away from communication. Instead, affect theory offers increased attention to the materiality of communicating – albeit a 'new materialism' rather than a critical one (Lettow, 2016). As Ashcraft summarizes her main argument, '*addressing hoarding is a communicative practice which enacts and circulates the affective boundary*

*between human and nonhuman bodies*' (p. 100, emphasis in original). Illustrating this claim, the chapter uncovers the affective dis/organization of dominant narratives of hoarding as enacted within psychiatry and popular culture, respectively – and offers a compelling personal alternative that articulates and addresses affective relations between meaning and matter. 'Address,' Ashcraft explains, 'is not a discursive *as opposed to* material mode of attention' (p. 114, emphasis in original); to the contrary, it focuses on the ways in which the two are affectively related. Thus, affect is posited as the dis/organizing force of what in other chapters is referred to – and explained as – communicative constitution.

### **Digital dis/organization**

As much as I enjoyed the details of each chapter, I was increasingly confused by the overall division of the book into an explanatory and methodological part. Or rather, it seems that the chapters in the first section provide as much empirical analysis as they do theoretical explanation, and the chapters in the second section are not distinctly about methods but offer an array of empirical analyses that support both theoretical and methodological arguments – much like the chapters in the first part. Thus, the book, as I read it, is a collection of studies of communicative dis/organization, showcasing the many different forms that such dis/organization might take. And try as I might, I could not establish my own organizing principle. However, one recurrent theme did catch my eye (possibly, because I was looking for it): digital dis/organization.

In her chapter, Oana Brindusa Albu discusses how digital technologies may serve as tools for both building and dismantling the master's house (to counter Lorde's famous maxim). More particularly, she shows how civil society organizations may use information and communication technologies to hide their activities from government control while making them visible to allies and, conversely, how agents of the state (in this case the kingdom of Morocco) may use the same set of technologies to gain access to activist networks and control their activities. Thereby, incumbency as well as insurgence is dis/organized by digital (in)visibility.

In Amanda J. Porter and Michele H. Jackson's study of digital civic participation in/capacity causes dis/organization, since the involved technologies turn out to be useless in many respects (they don't work/people don't know how to work them) yet continue to be lauded as successful means of civic engagement (at least by those human actors who have a particular stake in their success). Hence, human interest shapes and is shaped by technological innovation, leading to new constellations of sociotechnical dis/organization. As Banerjee and Bloomfield show in their chapter, sociotechnical dis/organization as such is by no means new; what Porter and Jackson show is how digital technologies invite specific manifestations of underlying dynamics.

Similarly, political and cultural satire is nothing new, but with the digitalization of communication it has found new forms of expressions – or styles, as Winkler and Seiffert-Brockmann (with inspiration from White) denote the patterns and practices that emerge in online communication. More specifically, their chapter is about memes as subversive style; establishing a typology of memes, they identify different forms of memetic subversion, which have the common feature of destabilizing established meaning. Thus, memes create new networked communities through the patterned disordering of given orders, exemplifying how re/purposed online re/circulation drives dis/organization.

These three chapters all deal with digital dis/organization (or rather, that is what made them stand out to me), contributing to current debates within organization studies (see Beverungen, Beyes and Conrad, 2019) by highlighting how the interrelations of order and disorder are re/produced in and through digital technologies. However, the internal variation of this group of chapters is arguably as great as that between the group and the other chapters of the book, and focusing on different features (say, the conceptualizations of discursive and material dis/organization vis-à-vis each other) might have produced entirely different groupings. And made sense of the book differently – given how any and all classification sorts and distorts our understanding of and interactions with the world (as no one has shown better than Bowker and Star, 1999). When trying to 'sort things out', we invariably repeat and renew processes of dis/organization (as brilliantly illustrated across the chapters of the book at hand).



## On not not communicating

In summing up the contributions of the anthology, it may be useful to begin from the common conception that ‘one cannot not communicate,’ which Mumby contends that ‘every student learns in Communication 101’ (p. 135). In the present context, ‘not not communicating’ incurs dis/organizing, as meaning and matter are continuously and variously entangled. All processes of sensemaking involve their own excesses and overflows, leading to disorder amidst order. And all processes of disruption are patterned and re/ordering, creating stability within chaos. For some contributors, the explanation ends here: the communicative constitution of dis/organization is the process of dis/ambiguating the meanings we produce as we go about interacting with the world. For others, more is needed, because communication itself is materialized – e.g., as value production (Mumby) or affect (Ashcraft).

Whatever the particular take, understanding dis/organization may seem a rabbit-duck type exercise (both are always present, but can never be seen at once), yet all contributions insist that the way forward is to insist on their relationality. And all illustrate the value of focusing on neither separately; instead, zooming in on the lines that make up both and keep them together, apart. Thus, each chapter provides a unique account of the rabbit-as-duck (or duck-as-rabbit), constituting the entire volume as a most wonderful mess.

‘Staying with the trouble’, Haraway (2016) instructs us, is the best way of dealing with the messes we have made. This advice may, in itself, be troubling to some, as we encounter the unease of being left to (and with) our own devices. However, with global crises continuing to mount and multiply, the necessity of heeding it is becoming ever more apparent. In grabbling with the possibilities of staying troubled (and troubling stays), *Dis/organization as communication* offers ‘equipment for living’, as Burke (1973) might have it, reflexively, critically and productively.

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