

Sustainability of Organizational Communications: A Framework for Performance Accounting

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Abstract

The established role of communication in sustainability studies is mainly to transmit information, *about* or *for* sustainability – i.e., disciplinary knowledge or mobilization of popular support. This paper addresses the sustainability of communication itself, with a performance accounting scheme for sustainability of organizational communication. Communication as ‘text’ (framings provided by discursive formats and genres) and ‘conversation’ (interactive, situational sense-making and exchange) is evaluated through standards of ‘performance’ and ‘accounting’ that extend beyond instrumentalism to encompass narrative and dramatic logics. The framework considers sustainability across these dimensions of communications: (1) their physical-artifactual substratum – i.e., the ‘carriers’ of communication, including technologies; (2) symbolic forms that convey information, meanings, and ideologies; and (3) relations and interactions that are basic to communicative role-playing. The goal is to enhance sustainability of knowledge, meaning, and participation in organizational settings.

Keywords: contextualism, conversation/pliancy; performance; text/program; transaction; triadic field

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“Oh no, I’ve said too much

I haven’t said enough...”

R.E.M., “Losing My Religion”

This paper inquires into the theoretical and pragmatic¹ advisability of evaluating communication in terms of its sustainability. The aim is to establish *communicative sustainability* as a standard that should apply to the study of both communication and ecological sustainability. Hitherto, the perceived significance of communication in sustainability studies has been mainly in terms of the value of scientific or general interest information about sustainability that communications provide, or the likely persuasive impact of this information in advocacy campaigns; and sustainability has been presented as a concept with limited direct relevance to evaluating the quality of communication. Considering signification and communicative performance as core concerns of sustainability projects can contribute to protecting the integrity of communicative practices and of “productive ecological and physical processes” (Norton, 1996, p. 122).

The approach is not to downplay the obvious multivocality of these sensitizing concepts, nor to domesticate their usage, but to map a common analytical landscape in which communication and sustainability can be considered in their relevant relations to each other. The first part of the paper initiates this mapping. The second part presents a preliminary sketch of a performance accounting scheme for sustainable organizational communication. Organizational communication, as a focal concern, provides a useful, illustrative domain in which to sketch out an approach to performance accounting oriented towards sustainability.

Preliminary Perspectives on Communication and Sustainability

Communication and sustainability involve “provisioning” (Jonas, 1974, p. 90), which concerns maintaining an adequate stock of resources required for people to satisfy material needs and wants, and to participate meaningfully in a common life. Many commentators would suggest that modern technological advances have resolved productive problems of scarcity in both domains, though distributive problems of need and equity obviously persist. Today’s multi-media environments allow for vastly augmented communicative production and consumption, and the legacy of industrial and post-industrial expansion makes material provision increasingly a domain of choice, not sheer necessity, for that portion of the world’s population that has benefited from this expansion.

The possibility for choice highlights how “‘provisioning’ requires ‘providence,’ i.e., looking and planning ahead” (Jonas, 1974, p. 92). Equity takes on increased practical and ethical significance, and sustainability emerges as a normative consideration. “... [T]he questions arise: provident for whom? and how far ahead?” The personal and collective freedoms that persons require in order to explore and to communicate their interests become central to the understanding of communication and sustainability relevant to addressing issues of performance accounting.

Instrumental and Expressive Views of Performance and Accounting

Performance and accounting practices, when viewed from a communicational perspective, must be concerned with dual sets of values: *instrumental* – i.e., oriented towards “goal achievement”

(Corvellec, 1997, p. 27) -- and *expressive* – i.e., “proto-aesthetic” (Turner, 1990, p. 8) motives and consequences related to presentation and evaluation of signifying acts and symbolic forms.

Performance as an instrumental, “measurement construct” (Corvellec, 1997, pp. 25 ff.) calls for quantitative accountings dictated by such values as “efficiency ... effectiveness ... output, or outcome ... result ... return ...” (p. 27). Instrumental performance has become a “key motif” (p. 1) that “permeates contemporary societies” to such an extent that it now “shapes the lives of people and organizations in accordance with its logic and demands.”

Expressive performance tends towards dramatic process (Turner, 1990) and reflects the “style and tempo” (p. 9) of theatrical presentations. The “ritualization” (Schechner, 1988, p. xiii) of activity is mirrored in accounts that reflect dramatic (Burke, 1969) logics and assessments. From this perspective, the organization is viewed as a source of narratives that attain credibility and elicit support from stakeholders. Expressive performances also have attained considerable influence in contemporary societies, arguably in combination with the instrumentalities of production. “The whole life of these societies in which modern conditions of production prevail presents itself as an immense accumulation of *spectacles*” (Debord, 1994, p. 12).

Consider an example from a case study (Weick, 2001, p. 266) of how a series of scheduling changes on an aircraft carrier led to a petty officer losing a leg when he neglected to tie down a plane. This incident must be judged *instrumentally* as a failed performance, the non-achievement of group goals associated with complex organizational management, such as an aircraft carrier requires. The overall, *expressive* qualities of coordination, balance, precision, even beauty, that would have to be included in a complete narrative account of the operation, are logically subordinated to the instrumental demand to execute the actions effectively, efficiently, and safely. A contrasting example would be the action of a clown who trips and falls (p. 263) as

the planned result of not tying down the wagon that he intended to have roll into his path in the circus ring; the most adequate account of this performance would be constructed from a mainly *expressive* perspective and would result in an assessment of group success in managing the circus act so as to amuse the audience, which is the relevant *instrumental* concern. Both examples show that group activities reflect organizational purposes and fit into organizational systems; and both instances embody instrumental as well as expressive values. The performance accounting that applies is apportioned differently in the two cases. Still, these examples reveal how instrumental and expressive logics are best seen to combine and complement, rather than inevitably to conflict with each other.

A core level of organizational performance and accounting would involve (1) instrumental aspects of communication, i.e., information exchange, or language as a formal means of symbolic representation. This is the “immediate use context” (Ihde, 1990, 128) of organizational communication. A “primary instrumentalization” (Feenberg, 1999, p. 202) of language and communication media, as types of technology (see Beniger, 1986, p. 9; Taylor & Van Every, 2000, p. 105), is consistent with “*functional constitution* of technical objects and subjects.” Primary realization is a formalizing, technically-motivated moment. A “secondary instrumentalization” (Feenberg, 1999, p. 202) involves “*realization* of the constituted objects and subjects in actual networks and devices.” Secondary instrumentalization is situated, localized and localizing. Secondary instrumentalization extends analysis to encompass (2) the purposive activity of speakers, writers, and interactive senders/receivers. Task-oriented, meaning-based, and relation-building communications in organizational settings bring into consideration the “doubled context” (Ihde, 1990, p. 128) of the “participation framework” (Hanks, 1996, p. 142) and “cultural field” which, together, ‘script’ communications and condition meanings,

interactions, and identities. Questions concerning communicative sustainability depend on “rediscovery” (Taylor & Van Every, 2000, p. 6) of a ‘tripled’ context of communication, (3) “the context of activity in which it is embedded, and which it influences” (p. 56). Here, analysis addresses the full range of factors communicators engage as they deploy technologies and artifacts, construct and interpret meanings, and establish, maintain and repair identities and relations. A *triadic* (Woodward, 1996) communicative context comes into view, constituting “(i) personhood and identities; (ii) environments; and (iii) socio-cultural orders” (Woodward, 2001, p. 282). This “triadic field” (Woodward, 1996, p. 170) engenders the making and remaking of “initiatives, meanings, and consequences” (Woodward, 2001, p. 295) that are described and “realized” (Radder, 1996, pp. 1 ff.) through organizational communication.

Text and Conversation: Program and ‘Pliancy’

The notion that communication could prove to be an exhaustible resource runs counter to much conventional thinking, not only in sustainability studies, but also in other social scientific fields that tend to regard communication mainly in terms of its role in collecting, storing, augmenting, retrieving, and transmitting information.² From such a vantage point, information receives theoretical and analytical priority as an empirically specifiable variable, a basic datum from which more complex practices, such as knowledge building and communication, can be derived; or so the argument goes. Proponents of this position consider information to possess a virtually unlimited potential – i.e., unlimited sustainability -- for its generation, use and reuse. Questions concerning sustainability refer mainly to effective, efficient management of “communication demands, signaling mechanisms, and other rules of behavior which govern the operation of an organized industry” (Lamberton, 1996, p. 39; cites Bradburd & Over, 1982, p. 51).

The alternative position presented here acknowledges the role of communication in conveying information or knowledge but further emphasizes its foundational significance for participation in social life generally and in organizational activities in particular. This expanded conception makes communicative sustainability a normative issue of preserving the potential for communication to make positive contributions to future welfare and freedom – which is what sustainable communications must accomplish.³

Communication contributes both instrumental and expressive value to organizational activities. Communicative processes associated with forming a common focus, or “coorientation” (Taylor and Van Every, 2000, pp. 33 ff; Newcomb, 1953), remain basic, but success is not to be viewed as a matter of ‘rationalizing’ communication, when rationalization involves “destruction or ignoring of information in order to facilitate its processing (Beniger, 1986, p. 15). The gap between language as a “network of typifications” (Taylor & Van Every, 2000, p. 8) and a more scrupulous demand on accounting to address “*this* particular action, *this* event, *this* context” results in “residual ambiguity” that the rationalizing tendency cannot resolve. Many types of communication may retain an instrumental core, particularly in goal-directed settings, such as modern organizations; however, all communication is additionally ‘saturated’ by context, which cannot be ‘destroyed or ignored’, but instead, must be responsibly sustained. Contextualist (see Rosnow & Georgoudi, 1986); Woodward, 2001b) research and theorizing in communication must take into account a range of expressive considerations with methodological, practical, and ethical significance; these include “interplay among linguistic meaning, the situated themes of ... utterances, the ‘temporarily shared intersubjective world’ of the interlocutors, and the broader sociocultural horizon” (Hanks, 1996, p. 151).

In contemporary organizational and social settings, this sociocultural horizon is marked out by technological ensembles or assemblages . “Technologized communications” (Woodward, 2003a) interlink artifacts (most notably communication technologies), human subjects, and the discursive worlds that these subjects both occupy and shape through their communications. A triadic field of activity, or “effective environment” (Altheide, 1995, p. 16; Woodward, 2003b, p. 426) is the methodological object of attention: “The ‘triadic field’ ... includes (1) agents who act communicatively through ‘mediating activities of languages and techniques’; and (2) ‘transactions with the physical/artifactual infrastructure’ to produce (3) ‘social relations and personal and collective cultures’” (Woodward, 2001a, p. 283). Furthermore, these “levels of transaction -- (a) symbolic, (b) material/environmental, and (c) relational – are interdependent and mutually conditioning so that each level must be understood in terms of its connections with the other two” (Woodward, 2003b, p. 424). Communicative sustainability is, accordingly, a triadic standard, encompassing multiple levels of transactions.

Still, certain basic dynamics of communication can be identified. All communication moves in a trajectory towards its situated realization through an interplay between “typification” (Hanks, 1996, pp. 128 ff.; cites Schutz, 1973) and particularity; or – alternatively – between standardization and differentiation; redundancy and variety; conformity and flexibility; generic form and its material/behavioral manifestations. James R. Taylor (1993) labeled these elements as “text” (Taylor & Van Every, 2000, p. 37) and “conversation” (p. 39) and established their intersection as a grid on which to map communication generally, and organizational communication, in particular.

The concept of ‘text’ points to a “structuring principle” that is inherent to communication, since it includes communicators’ foundational dependence on “more or less

systematic ways to produce a coherent, understandable piece of language” (p. 37), or, one should add, an acceptable communicative behavior. Texts are inscribed records ‘of’ (Carey, 1989, p. 29), and scripts ‘for’, communication. Textual inscriptions are usually materially realized – as “something written down, stored, displayed, or sent through the mails” (Taylor & Van Every, 2000, p. 35) -- though they may be retained in collective and personal memory as cognitively retrievable lexicons, grammars, and formulas of usage. These cognitive forms of memory must be encoded in an “extrasomatic form” (Adams, 1988, p. 82) outside an individual’s nervous system in order to enter into culture (see Woodward, 1996, p. 167), at which point, the *material* sustainability of communication comes directly into consideration.

The message sculptured in ice may fail to stay in being long enough to reach its intended recipient, and a drugged mind may be unable to recall the telephone message. All of which is to say that the energetic vehicle can deform information and information can deform the vehicle, whether we deal with human nervous systems or extrahuman material forms (Adams, 1988, p. 81).

Sustainable, textual production/consumption makes available a “repertoire of stored material” (Taylor & Van Every, 2000, p. 37) that is basic to the emergence of ‘conversation’, the other formative dimension of communication. Conversation can be thought of as “an essential sociality” (p. 31) that engenders “the indispensable stream of collective experience” (P. 73). It is the “site” (p. 37) of communication, the space/time, where and when, on-the-spot, in-the-moment “circumstances” (p. 38) render communication as “ineluctably contextual, situated, occasional, grounded, iterative, and cumulative” (p. 40). The “organizational *conversation*” (p.

35) is “the total universe of shared-interaction-through-languaging of the people who together identify with a given organization.” Through the activity of conversation, the triadic character of communication is disclosed. “The circumstances constitute a framework of identities and habits, not just of the participating members, but also their physical and symbolic context” (p. 38).

The dimension of text demonstrates that communication is programmable according to rules of order; these are procedural norms that govern the transformation of “the necessary input to and inevitable output from communication: both raw material and product” (Taylor & Van Every, 2000, p. 39). The dimension of conversation also contains a normative element, which is the required basis of workable concurrence among communicators concerning shared values, mutually acceptable behaviors, and the conditions and obligations of reciprocity that support interactions and transactions. Texts, as programs, are generalizable communicative forms and processes; conversations, as situated performances, are specific responses to the contingencies of the time/space in which any moment or phase of communication actually occurs. Pointing ahead to the construction of a performance accounting scheme, the significance of text can be distilled, for purposes of assessment, into the notion of *program*. The significance of conversation can be comparably distilled into the quality of *pliancy*.⁴

Textual programs operate determinatively when they become hardwired into technologies, for example, as “information about the length of a minute and the number of minutes in an hour is built directly into the parts of a clock” (Beniger, 1986, p. 40). At the level of such information, the story of an hour – its ‘accounting’ -- is always the same, any time and everywhere: It is the technical, instrumental ‘story’ of its linear, temporal measurement. In addition to (a) “mechanical programming” (p. 42) that results in hardwired texts, one can also observe the functions of (b) “genetic programming” encoded in DNA molecules (p. 61); (c)

“cultural programming” (p. 42) encoded in cognitive functions, behavioral habits and customs, internalized values and norms; and (d) “organizational programming” encoded in decision rules, procedures, hierarchical authority.

James Beniger (1986) illustrated the co-evolution and interdependent functioning of these levels with the example of an urban traffic system. He contrasted a program-based analysis with the classical, sociological tradition of assessing personal agency in relation to the constraints of structure. The classical tradition would view traffic patterns as the result of “interaction of goal-directed behavior by individual commuters, the ‘invisible hand’ of rush-hour traffic” (p. 42). An emphasis on programs would highlight the levels of programming involved:

genetic programming, encoded in each cell of each commuter and determining the distributions of reaction times and stress levels; *cultural programming*, encoded in neural structures of the brain and defining certain norms and etiquette of the commute; *organizational programming*, encoded in traffic law and employer regulations and determining patterns of carpooling and parking; and *mechanical programming*, encoded in timing devices of traffic lights and helping to maintain the larger patterns planned by traffic control engineers (p. 42).

Cultural and organizational programming are characterized by their relative pliancy – e.g., commuter etiquette and workplace norms -- when compared with ‘hard-wired’ genetic and mechanical programming. But it is important to recall that modern/postmodern culture and organization, in particular, are constructed on the base, or substratum, of physical-artifactual entities – including technologized communications -- and depend on the viability of these entities

within the environing “ecological order” (Wilden, 1980, p. 517). What we recognize in the organizational context to be “manifest social behavior” (Beniger, 1986, p. 42) is complexly intertwined with the operations of “multiple, multilevel, and densely interconnected programs.” Beniger observed, “By far the most generally programmable structures to be found in any living systems are the brains evolved by the vertebrates, especially the human brain” (p. 40). To be programmable means to be partly determinable by input-output rules, but also to embody degrees of pliancy that engender innovation in applying those rules in circumstances requiring “*situated creativity*” (Joas, 1996, p. 133).

Program and pliancy operate *instrumentally* within economies of means and ends, and *expressively* within ‘life worlds’ (Hanks, 1996, p. 129). These are “zones of relevance” (p. 132), formed from the motivational interests and desires of social actors, and “phenomenal fields” (p. 137) produced through “corporeal involvement in the world through the senses and motion, and the world as perceived, that is, the objects that we construct in meaningful encounters.”

Performance theorist Patrice Pavis (2003) helps to reveal the dynamics of life worlds, zones of relevance, and phenomenal fields by introducing the figure of an “arrow” (p. 18) of experience that organizes “space-time-action” as materiality – i.e., “corporeal presence ... the grain of ... voice, music, a color, or a rhythm ... an aesthetic experience of the material event,” and as signification – i.e., distillation of materiality into “an abstract and fixed sign.” A stage performance, for example, requires actors and audience members alike to remain, for a time, “on the side of the signifier,” since “reading the signs in a performance means resisting their sublimation” – i.e. delaying the culmination of the signifying process, the moment when “the arrow will reach its target, transforming the object of desire into a signified” (pp. 18-19), i.e., a discrete meaning. Pavis’ recommended, alternative “desublimated return to the body of the

performance” (p. 19) depends on the ability “to appreciate its materiality for *as long as possible*” (p. 18) by resisting this movement towards meaning. This stance involves “nonintentionality” (p. 19; quotes Lehmann, 1989) and is advisedly *expressive*: “To experience aesthetically a circus, a piece of performance art, or any production using a diversity of materials, one must allow oneself to be ‘impressed’ by their materiality, and not seek to give them a meaning” (p. 19).

To ‘act’ in an organizational setting is to be both participant and observer at once. Thus, to return to earlier examples, the clown who trips on stage and the petty officer whose negligence occasions an accident on the aircraft carrier are both involved in producing an expressive (aesthetic) moment of organizational performance while also positioning themselves to contribute to an account(ing) of the performance. The participant and observer roles both require an expressive stance towards performance and accounting, one that is based on corporeal involvement and appreciates the materiality of performance *as long as possible*, in order not to act too readily in reducing the event to its ‘meaning’ and, thus, to risk misconstruing and miscommunicating its significance.

Pliant programming

Organizations emerge in and through communication (Taylor & Van Every, 2000, pp 243-244), which has text as its surface and conversation as its site. This emergence is a creative, open process, but also one involving consciously designed “reduction” (p. 93) of communicative elements in an effort to resolve “the puzzle of how organization stabilizes in spite of the seemingly problematical outcomes of ... conversational exchange” (p. 94) – i.e., in the face of the variability and potential unmanageability of the very qualities of pliancy that the argument here valorizes and attempts to recover and extend.

A fundamental dialectic of organizational design is selective ‘closing’ and ‘opening’ of the conditions that support operations, meaning making, and relation building. ‘Closure’ is intended to suggest how organizations address the ‘puzzle’ of how to preserve and perpetuate pliancy while also trying to achieve degrees of stability required for sustainable functioning. Because success of organizational initiatives depends on multiple conditions and factors, both internal and external to the organization as a (somewhat) bounded system, organizational design must be viewed as “a form of communication *limiting contingency*” (Jönhill, 2003, p. 27).

Traditional organization and management theories held that decisions were discrete, occurrent, organizational events that could be identified rationally, instituted instrumentally, and then would dissolve again into the ongoing flow of time and the outreaching extension of space that constitute the organizational context in full. A revised perspective insists that an event is a constitutive ‘programming’ of organizational time and space in such a way that a decision can have the effect of producing a ‘before’ and ‘after’ (Luhmann, 2003, p. 37) and a corresponding pre-decision and post-decision space – an ‘effective environment’ -- for organizational activities. In this view “decisions function as a peculiar medium of communication for organizations” (Jönhill, 2003, p. 28). Decisions are ways in which organizations act, by design, to spatialize and temporalize their own contingencies.

The space-time of organizational context becomes ‘closed’ around a set of designated factors that constitute a sort of “contingency room” (Jönhill, 2003, p. 27). Closure is a way of directedly ‘situating’ creativity. Organizational decision-makers observe, and engage imaginatively, with this space-time similarly to how actors and audiences engage with and observe the settings and events of a theatrical stage. When the ‘contingency room’ is reopened onto the larger settings of organizational and social life, the performances and accountings that

have taken place have the effect of contributing new or revised texts; corresponding processes of conversation may be engendered. Theatrical closure takes place around “1) a special ordering of time; 2) a special value attached to objects; 3) non-productivity in terms of goods; 4) rules (Schechner, 1988 p. 6) ... to govern the activities” (p. 13). This creative process constructs a designed time/space for closure around controlled conditions for experimentation in aesthetic or expressive action and activities. Organizations can be considered as designed time/space for modeling social life in ways that accord with the provision of symbolic and material ‘livelihoods’ in line with an era’s prevailing ‘habitus’ (Bourdieu, 1984, pp. 99 ff.) and ‘habitats’.

A Transactional Perspective on Performance Accounting

The open, variable, and contextual character of communication provides the interpretive circumference of the understanding required to inform standards for assessing communicative sustainability. The methodological operations of selective closure and opening present a definitional center.

Methodological closure for the purposes of performance accounting proceeds by first establishing an axis of interrelations between two fundamental dimensions of text (program) and conversation (pliancy). The dimension of text extends across a continuum of values from hardwired programs at the upper range, to flexible programs at the lower range; correspondingly, the dimension of conversation extends from pliancy at the upper range to ‘compliance’ at the lower range, the latter designation indicating the degree of adaptability that is retained in situations of conformity. Figure 1 illustrates these relations.

Certain categorical modes of communication are likely to prevail within environments reflective of each of the quadrants that have been constructed. For example, hardwired textual

programming, combined with pliant standards for conversation produces various forms of structured debate. While flexible textual programming and pliant conversation fosters dialogue. Hardwired textual programs and compliant conversational standards generate authoritarian commands. Finally, flexible textual programs in a conversational environment of compliancy support institutional rituals, such as lectures with a time-constrained, structured questions and answers session to follow. Figure 2 presents these modes.

Each of these communication modes has specifiable utility within the organizational contexts that characterize contemporary social formations. These contexts, and the social formations alongside which they develop, should not be viewed as inevitable responses to universal human conditions, but rather as contingent situations that are simultaneously the source and the product (Giddens, 1979, p. 5; Bourdieu, 1991, pp. 164-5) of textual programs and conversational pliancies; the former take shape as templates, and the latter are ‘triadically realized’ -- materially, ideologically, relationally -- in a particular social and organizational time/space. For example, authoritative command – as organizational structure and process – is associated with rigid hierarchies, such as military discipline, and develops in conformity with the social, cultural, and economic factors that legitimate such rule. Contrasting sets of factors support dialogue as a communicative expression of egalitarian social relations based on mutual-personal recognition and collective solidarity. All four quadrants can be thought of as categorical ways in which movement, exchange, and transformation occur -- of material-artifactual entities; of information and ideologies; of relations and networks.

The notion of communicative ‘transaction’ (Woodward, 2001b) conveys the broad, variable, contextual possibilities of movement, exchange, and transformation across the dimensions of the triadic field. The proposed philosophical and methodological conception of

transaction derives from John Dewey's pragmatic transactionalism, which insisted on an encompassing view of "Fact such that no one of its constituents can be adequately specified as fact apart from the specification of other constituents of the full subject matter [sic]" (Dewey & Bentley, 1949, p. 122). This 'contextually saturated' view contrasts with dyadic perspectives that rely on "procedure such that its inter-acting constituents are set up in inquiry as separate 'facts,' each in independence of the presence of others" (p, 122).

Transactionalism is directed towards 'opening' the investigation of subject matter to account for the broad context of the performances being considered. However, this commitment does not preclude a "self-referential closure" (Luhmann, 1995, p. 9) that allows for particular dimensions of a performance to be examined in analytical detail. A guide to conducting such methodological closure is economist Oliver Williamson (1985), a contemporary advocate of transactionalism, who provides an operationally closed conception of transaction as what "occurs when a good or service is transferred across a technologically separable interface" (p. 1).

Williamson (1975) derives his transactionalism from pragmatism, by way of Commons' (1934/1990) institutional economics, Coase's (1937/1993) theory of the firm, and Hayek's (1945) views on information and decision-making. Williamson follows Commons (1934/1990) in positioning transaction as the basic unit of organizational activity (p. 58), while emphasizing these "key dimensions" (Williamson, 1995, pp. 187-188) of transactions: "asset specificity, uncertainty, and frequency" (Williams, 1985, p. 52). Of the three, 'asset specificity' is the most important analytically. It refers to investments of physical and human resources that are specific to a particular transaction, in contrast with general assets, which could be applied programmatically to any variety of exchanges. Williamson (1985) explicated the concept by citing Michael Polanyi's (1962) notion of 'personal knowledge', which included "illustrations of

industrial arts and craftsmanship in which the skills in question are so deeply embedded in the experienced workforce that they can be known or inferred by others only with great difficulty – if at all” (Williamson, 1985, p. 53). ‘Deeply embedded’ communicative capabilities are processes of textual interpretation and productivity and modes of conversation that require pliancy from communicators – i.e., the skills of dialogue and responsiveness to the challenges and opportunities of situated creativity. Asset specificity of communications would apply most clearly in the case of relationships that organizations build with stakeholders and clients on the basis of personalized contacts that pay special attention to situational particularities. Two-way flows of communications and an equitable balance of power – i.e., “symmetrical” relations (see Grunig & Hunt, 1984, pp. 42 ff.) are typically required for such contacts to be successful.

Williamson (1985) depicts the second key dimension of ‘uncertainty’ also in terms of situational concerns, that the “economic problem of society is mainly one of rapid adaptation to changes in particular circumstances of time and place” (p. 524; cites Hayek, 1948) With respect to organizational communication and its contributions to decision making and other organizational activities, the uncertainty associated with changing circumstances would be addressed more successfully by the ability to apply textually programmed, communicative solutions in pliant, adaptable ways rather than as strict protocols for action.

The third key dimension of ‘frequency’ concerns the higher costs of developing specialized, situational resources rather than more generalized ones. The extent, or frequency, of utilization of these specialized resources becomes an important economic consideration, since their value is circumscribed situationally in ways that more widely applicable assets are not. Additionally, these resources are more difficult to pinpoint and measure than are “nonspecific” (Williamson, 1985, p. 79) assets.

The general accounting question is the extent to which an organization should rely on situationally specific skills of pliant communication – e.g., relationship building, participatory management, and corporate responsibility -- and how much of a commitment should be made to programmable, or programmatic types of communication. Communicative sustainability concerns the relative contributions of pliant, situationally specific and programmable communication, not only to ‘provisioning’ within present circumstances but also with respect to future conditions and opportunities to extend personal and collective welfare and freedom.

Williamson (1985) introduced a “contracting scheme” (p. 33) that allows for comparison of asset specific vs. asset nonspecific transaction requirements. This approach can be adapted as a way to begin gauging sustainable ways of ‘contracting’ for the various communicative modes. First, predicate a “general purpose technology” (Williamson, 1985, p. 32) that could be deployed to implement and govern communication modes that serve nonspecific, generalizeable purposes through instrumental, programmable performances – mainly authoritative command modes but also aspects of structured debates and institutionalized rituals. Then predicate a “special purpose technology” that could be deployed to implement and govern communication modes that serve asset specific, pliant requirements through expressive performances – mainly dialogue, but also aspects of rituals and debates. Technology is used here to convey the possibility of implementing general or special purposes through a unified, integrative system or process.

Major expenditures of energy and social effort associated with the general purpose technology would involve designing the system and putting it in place. Then various forms of economizing could begin to accrue, as long as the contextual conditions pertaining to nonspecific, instrumental performances remained relatively constant. If the general purpose technology could sustain its ability to program communications successfully while constraining

the demand for pliancy to address circumstances requiring asset specificity, the communication system could evolve a capacity “to act independently, in the absence of its human partner” (J. Taylor & Van Every, 2000, p. 161), that is without regard to the particular people who occupy the roles of communicators, which roles could become increasingly nonspecific. Possibilities for “autopoietic” (Luhmann, 1989, p. 143) functioning – that is, self-organizing, self-reproducing, and self-regulating operations -- would emerge as the central promise of this technology.

The special purpose technology, on the other hand, would be tied to its specific circumstances of use in ways that preclude such cybernetic functioning. Its particular applicability to circumstances of cooperative dialogue, as an active, participatory, and personal mode of transaction, would limit the number of rationalized elements that could be reproduced as part of the special purpose technology. The communicative demands of dialogue would remain situationally specific, requiring basic reformulation or contextualized realization for each usage. Figure 3 indicates the alternative contracting possibilities associated with general purpose and special purpose technologies.

Managers could be inclined to address specific circumstances with general purpose technology in order to seek economies through programmed communications. But this tendency would be offset by a counter impetus to deploy special purpose technology to address particularities that arise in what were thought to be nonspecific circumstances. In actual conditions of practice, the two polar positions would likely yield to a mixed technology alternative. Figure 4 depicts the mixed technology alternative.

The mixed technology model may appear to obviate the usefulness of distinctions between more tightly programmed and more pliant modes of communication. However, further analysis of transactional dynamics suggests a likely movement from general, to mixed, towards

special technology with its asset specific practices and two-way, symmetrical communicative values. For example, authoritarian command depends on non-resistant, therefore passive, receipt of messages; but passive recipients experience difficulty translating interpretive compliance into effective actions, since all action requires a degree of personal initiative and motivation. A transactional perspective points out how meaning making, relation- and identity-building, and transformation of the material-artifactual environment through action are complexly interconnected dimensions of human activity and experience.

Furthermore, as meaning making, relation building, and material action are directed by personal and group motives, communication moves beyond calibration of stereotyped responses to encompass the complex ways in which stakeholders formulate issues according to their own cognitive styles and languages. Consensus about equitable outcomes, rather than mere acquiescence, becomes essential to legitimation. Symmetry, as an equitable balancing of the attributes and outcomes of transaction, calls personal knowledge into play. A “measure of participation” (Polanyi, 1969, p. 152) is basic to all knowledge, but participation “becomes altogether predominant” when personal knowledge derives from two-way symmetrical contact.

To discover relevant cognitive, discursive, and actional particularities requires accentuating the pliancy associated with special purpose technologies. The movement is from an ‘instrumental’ orientation based on “generalized accounts of the antecedents and effects of practical action” (Woodward, 2003b, p. 414); to a ‘reconstructive’ perspective that “requires a particularized understanding of the interpretive frames employed by participants”; ultimately to a ‘practical-critical’ approach that addresses “relevant practices as they unfold in historically specified cultural contexts ... coupled with prescriptive analysis of how these contexts can be managed in ways that expand opportunities for active participation.”

Conclusion: Opening the Transactional View to the ‘Intangibles’ of Context

A transactional approach is challenged to match methodological closure with a movement towards “the widening phases of knowledge, the broadening of system within the limits of observation and report” (Dewey & Bentley, 1949, p. 122). In the organizational setting, closure around text and conversation reveals how these function as constitutive elements of communicative sustainability. But what are the broader dynamics of interconnection between program and pliancy that play out beyond any particular organizational setting?

Richard N. Adams (1988) suggested that participatory qualities of communication are always in jeopardy, and for reasons that have to do with possible interdependencies between energy use and communication. Modern societies, when compared with traditional ones, “require much more energy to be expended in achieving a common culture” (p.138). Expressive ritualization in “low-energy societies has a high-energy counterpart that is crucial to the regulatory process and that is particularly manifest in television, cinema, radio, and other energy-costly means of ritualization of behavior” (p. 138). The modern “regulatory sector” requires increased control to address the possibility of “individuals in high-energy societies ... contributing to uncontrollable societal fluctuations” (p. 137), especially through such activities as “popular demonstrations, mass political actions, and mass religious movements.” Individuals and groups in high technology contexts possess augmented power to disrupt social order, suggesting the relevant parallel, “that instabilities created in complex physical systems will tend to be met by counterforces.” The contemporary social implications are evident.

The continuing invention of antiterrorist methods, of intelligence operations against citizens of countries under the rationale that such knowledge is necessary for internal security, of regulations concerning educational methods and goals, of ways of diverting leisure time into 'profitable' channels, etc. – all are devices to keep the individuals in high-energy societies from contributing to uncontrollable societal fluctuations (p. 137).

As such controls become instituted programmatically within societies, the defining qualities of the various modes of communication may undergo change. Rituals are transformed. Structured forms of communicative exchange, such as debates, shift from a concern with the semantics of arguments to the 'syntactics' of style and image presentation. Understanding of what constitutes 'dialogue' departs from the standards of mutual-personal, reciprocal autonomy over communicative process and contributions of content that formerly characterized it. Systemic changes proliferate.

The media become a message. ... The concern of the commercial television networks in the United States is primarily that people should watch; what they watch is less important. For the tourist industry the issue is that people should travel; where is of little consequence. The book publication industry, taken as a whole, is no different in this regard, nor is the film industry. In the question of storage, the importance of packaging has taken priority over the thing being packaged (p. 138).

Thus, the question of what precise qualities of communication can and should be sustained is ever renewed.

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Footnotes

¹ The intended reference is to “a school of philosophical thought – American pragmatism – and not to that shortsighted, allegedly, ‘practical minded’ attitude towards the world that is a major obstacle to environmentally responsible behavior in our time” (Parker, 1996, p. 21).

² Information is sometimes conceptualized in broad terms, such as observable variation -- i.e., a difference that makes a difference (Bateson, 1972, pp. 271-272) – or as a means of uncertainty reduction (Ritchie, 1991, p. 3); or it is conceived and formulated specifically to be measurable – e.g., as the statistically determinable efficiency of a code based on a circumscribed set of signs (p. 5).

³ Bryan G. Norton (1996) understands the “sustainability principle” (p. 122) to assert “that each generation has an obligation to protect productive ecological and physical processes necessary to support options necessary for future freedom and welfare.”

⁴ Austin Henderson and Jed Harris introduced the notion of “pliant systems” (see Kaasgaard, Henderson, and Harris, 2000, p. 116) to convey the way in which even “rigid technology” (p. 113) may be used in a “pliant way” to “embed the computing process into the social process in a way that gives the social activities much more control over the local circumstances of computing.”

Figure Captions

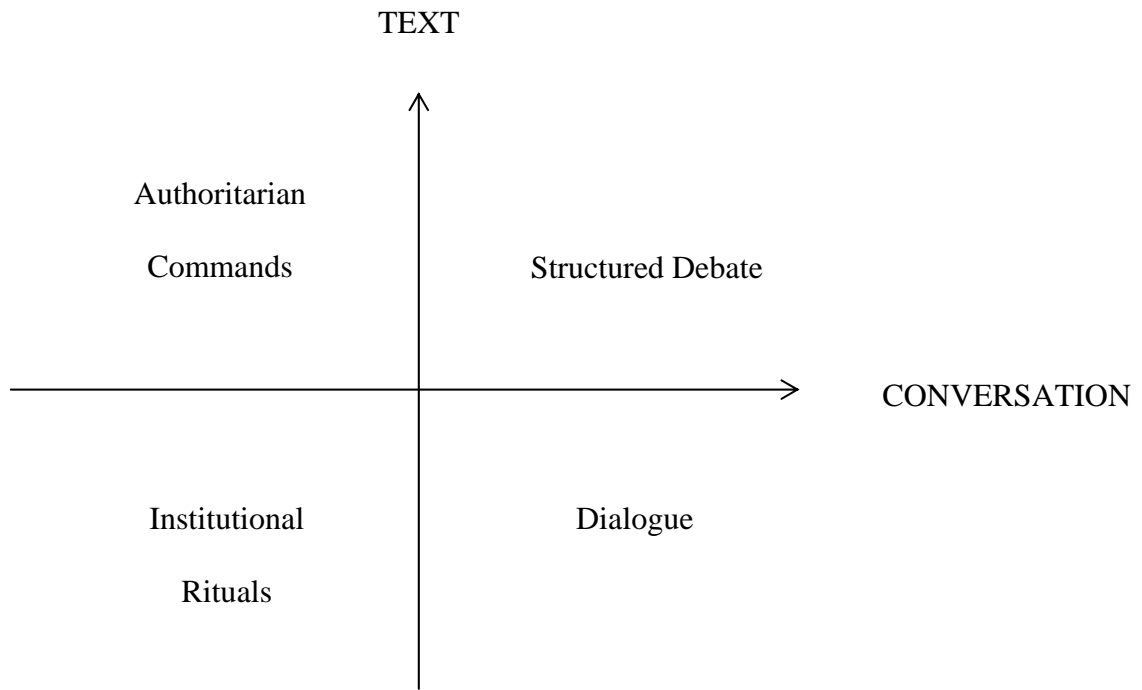
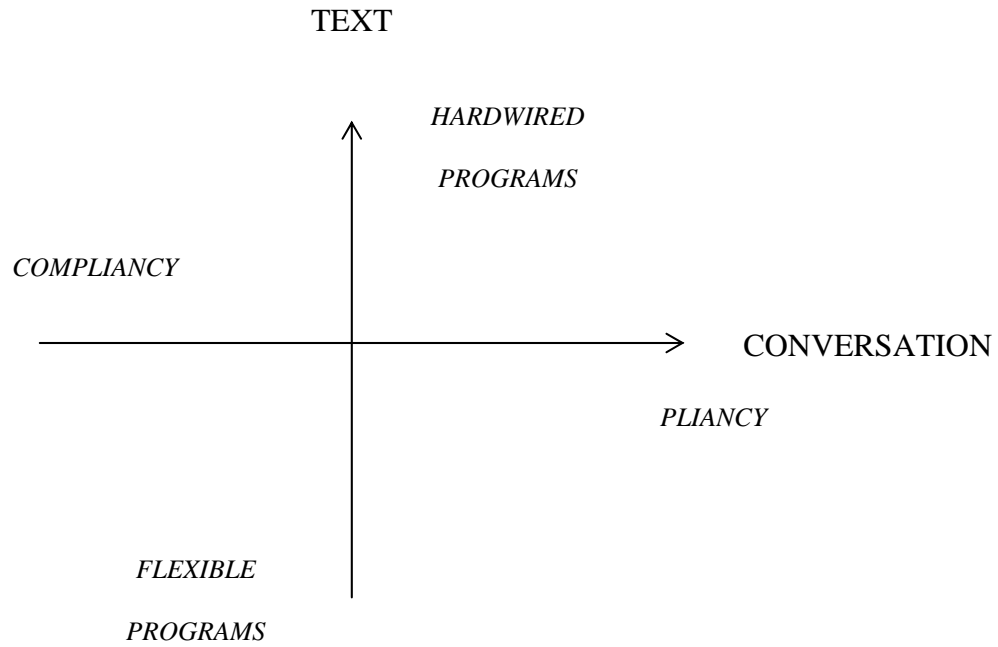
Figure 1. Dimensions of text and conversation

Figure 2. Categorical modes of communication

Figure 3. Comparative performance accounting scheme for organizational communication

Figure 4. Mixed technology performance accounting scheme for organizational communication

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GENERAL PURPOSE

TECHNOLOGY

SPECIAL
PURPOSE
TECHNOLOGY

- Programmed Communication
- Instrumental Performance
- Accounting by Measurement Construct

- Pliant Communication
- Expressive Performance
- Accounting by Narrative/Dramatic Logic

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GENERAL
TECHNOLOGY

MIXED
TECHNOLOGY

- Pliant, Programmable Communication
- Expressive and Instrumental Performances
- Accounting by Narrative/Dramatic Logic and Measurement Construct

SPECIAL
TECHNOLOGY