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Envisioning PR research without taking organizations as collective actors for granted

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Abstract
In a recent article in *Public Relations Inquiry*, Jenny Hou has fittingly argued for a stronger focus on agency and actorhood in PR research. We point to two crucial aspects in which we think her arguments need to be extended, namely: (a) embracing the constitutive role of communication for organizational actorhood and agency, and (b) rethinking the role of PR in the constitution of organizational actors. We argue that such extension would allow for an important and radical twist in perspective that highlights a widely neglected question in PR research: What if the collective actorhood status of organizations is not treated as a given but rather arises from *communicative attributions* of such actorhood status to social entities? Finally, we develop key implications from this shift in perspective for PR scholarship, education, and practice.

In a recent article in *Public Relations Inquiry*, Jenny Hou (2020) has identified "agency" as a vital meeting ground for mutual attention and exchange between PR scholarship and neo-institutional theory. Agency, defined here as the capacity of individuals or collectives "to act independently and reflectively while interacting with contexts" (Hou, 2020: 2), is taken both as a conceptual relay and key shared concern of the two research

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domains. We wholeheartedly endorse Hou's article to be among the most important publications in PR research of the past few years, as it opens up important opportunities for PR scholarship to become inspired by recent developments in institutional scholarship (for similar endeavors see Sandhu, 2009, 2017)—especially "communicative institutionalism," which rests on the assumption that "it is in and through communication that institutions exist, are performed and given shape" (Cornelissen et al., 2015). Vice-versa, Hou demonstrates that PR scholarship (especially when *taking on board* the notion of communicative institutionalism) can "amplify the explanatory power" (Hou, 2020: 16) at the intersection of both fields.

Hou's argument, however—in alignment with large parts of contemporary PR scholarship and practice— tends to stick with a realist ontology of (organizational) agency, where agency "is exercised" (Hou, 2020: 16) *by* the organization as actor. In line with the above definition, agency is understood here as the "capacity to act." However, with this notion of agency, Hou does not seem to make full use of the radical turn in perspective that communicative institutionalism implies (Meyer and Vaara, 2020): that organizations as collective actors do not exist independent from communication—but that they are created and maintained in and through communication. Accordingly, in this rejoinder, we extend Hou's vital ideas asking what are the consequences for the research and practice of PR if we do not take the existence of (collective) organizational actors as given?

We believe this shift in perspective is both highly consequential and fruitful for PR scholarship, since the field is strongly concerned with questions surrounding the communicative management of organizations' identity, relationships, legitimacy, reputation or trust while generally *presupposing* such organizations as collective social actors in their own right (Buhmann and Ingenhoff, 2018). This presupposition is limiting, however, given that the constitution of an organization's identity, relationships, trust etc. is likely to vary significantly (and lead to different effects) depending on how (and how much) actorhood is ascribed to an organizational entity in the first place.

In what follows, we want to point to two crucial aspects in which we think the arguments by Hou (2020) can benefit from extending the premises of communicative institutionalism (Cornelissen et al., 2015; Meyer and Vaara, 2020) toward their logical limit: First, what would it mean to fully acknowledge the constitutive role of communication for organizational actorhood and agency? Second, what is the role then of strategic communication and PR for the constitution of organizations as collective actors? Finally, based on these extensions to Hou's (2020) arguments, we spell out implications for PR scholarship, education, and practice that arise from the radical shift in perspective that we suggest.

Acknowledging the constitutive role of communication for organizational agency and actorhood

In her article, Hou (2020) tends to rely on an everyday notion of agency, referring to collectives' and individuals' *capacity* to act "reflectively" (Hou, 2020: 2) or even "strategically" (Hou, 2020: 10). With this focus, however, Hou's article tends to neglect recent conceptualizations of collective actorhood in works from institutional theory

(e.g. Bromley and Sharkey, 2017; Hwang and Colyvas, 2020; King et al., 2010), which are grounded in social constructionist epistemologies and which emphasize that agency and actorhood are first and foremost *communicative attributions* to a social entity (Bromley and Sharkey, 2017). In other words, from the viewpoint of communicative institutionalism there is no institution of *the* organization without recurrent communication practices that *create* and *maintain* that institution. More specifically, communication is understood here as a process through which collective forms such as institutions are recurrently constructed in and through interaction, instead of being merely a conduit for enacting discourses ("communication as constitutive of institutions"; Cornelissen et al., 2015: 14).[1] Consequently, communicative institutionalism fundamentally questions the existence of *the* organization as collective actor (e.g. Savage et al.'s, 2018, notion of the organization as "fictional games of make-believe"). In this view, the collective entity (e.g. an organization) as such is not much more than a "social address" (i.e. a reference point for the coorientation via communication) which gains collective actorhood status through recurrent communicative and cognitive attributions (cf. Bencherki and Cooren, 2011; Dobusch and Schoeneborn, 2015).

For instance, in the case of the hacktivist collective Anonymous, it is far from clear whether behind the label sits an actual organization, including formal rules, membership, hierarchies, etc. (see Coleman, 2014). Nevertheless, the recurrent identity claims that are performed on its behalf (i.e. speech acts that assert or declare what Anonymous is or does) maintain the public impression of a (powerful) organizational actor (Dobusch and Schoeneborn, 2015). While this somewhat unconventional example allows us to illustrate our theoretical argument *in nuce*, it is important to note that the basic mechanisms can be assumed to work in similar ways in more established, formal organizational settings, as well. Also here, collective actorhood status needs to be *recurrently reinstantiated* via communicative attributions (see Bencherki and Cooren, 2011). The main difference to the more unconventional exemplars is that more formal organizations tend to rely on formal membership, hierarchies, legal categories, and/or a physical address, and thus have more established and "hard-wired" ways of making the regular occurrence of such attributions likely—for instance, through contractual relations and salary payments to organizational members, which helps ensure that they show up to work on a daily basis to make the organization (and its actorhood status) happen in and through communication (see also Schoeneborn et al., 2019).

What is the role of strategic communication and PR for the constitution of organizational actors?

In most public relations (PR) and corporate communication research, it is taken as a given that organizations are collective actors to begin with. Accordingly, organizations are widely thought of as collective actors based on concepts such as purpose, mission and strategy, which already imply strong ideas of organizational agency and actorhood (Fredriksson and Pallas, 2015). Both communication professionals but also PR researchers usually imagine organizations as existing *a priori*. However, turning to a social constructionist notion of agency and actorhood allows to study the foundational and

constitutive role that such communication practices play for the emergence and mainte-nance of the status of organizations as actors in their own right.

Although Hou's (2020) article is focused on notions of agency in institutional theory and their implications for PR scholarship, her argument seems to neglect recent advance-ments in institutional theory on organizational actorhood (Bromley and Sharkey, 2017; Halgin et al., 2018; Hwang and Colyvas, 2020; King et al., 2010; Meyer and Vaara, 2020), that is, works which are concerned with the question of how societal expectations that organizations are considered as collective actors in their own right become institu-tionalized[2] (see Bromley and Sharkey, 2017). One key insight from these literatures, which has particular relevance for PR scholarship, is that social entities tend to mutually reaffirm each other of their actorhood status (King et al., 2010). This, in turn, leads to a relational understanding of organizational actorhood (Meyer and Vaara, 2020) as being maintained through relationships and interactions among organizational entities. Also, this point highlights especially the co-constitutive character of external communication for organizational existence (see also Kuhn, 2008).

Not taking organizations as collective actors at face value and instead acknowledging that such actors emerge from communicative attributions of actorhood status to a 'social address,' in parts exactly *by way of PR practices*, has several implications for research, practice, and education in PR. Simply put, not presupposing the existence of organizations as collective actors opens up the possibility to treat their actorhood as a *variable*. Accordingly, the constitution (and "communicative management") of identity, relation-ships, reputation, etc. can then be considered in relation to varying attributions of organiza-tional actorhood to the organization as social entity (Bromley and Sharkey, 2017), both on the level of communication and individual cognition.

In turn, these considerations raise several important yet rarely addressed questions for PR research: How to rethink PR-centered theories and models that rely on strong assump-tions about organizational actorhood via concepts of responsibility attribution (such as in crisis communication or CSR communication)? What are key PR practices and tactics that either "boost" or "downplay" the status of organizations as actors? And how, if we consider actorhood attribution as a PR target construct in its own right, would we need to adjust our understanding of PR as an organizational function? Based on this shift in perspective, we highlight below some new pathways for PR research and practice by relating our argument to extant models and empirical research, in a next step.

PR research without taking organizations as collective actors for granted: Ways forward

Many of the focal constructs in PR rely on (often implicit) assumptions about organiza-tional actorhood. Prime examples of this are legitimacy and reputation which "are both perceptions of approval of an *organization's actions*" (King and Whetten, 2008; own emphasis added). But only if organizational actorhood is treated as a variable in its own right can we fully understand the constitution and effects of these important constructs. For instance, the degree to which an organization comes to be considered as an object of legitimacy assessments most likely depends on its public portrayal and imagination as a powerful actor in the first place. Hence, we can further assume, that varying degrees of

organizational actorhood attribution can be presumed to "expose" organizational entities to social evaluations in different ways and with different effect. For instance, in the recent debates on the responsibility of social media firms for the content that is shared on their platforms, these firms initially tried to position themselves primarily as tech infrastructure providers (and not so much as players in the media market), thus "lowering" their exposure for social evaluation (Carlson, 2018). However, in the meantime, they have more and more resumed actor-like responsibilities to filter certain kinds of content (e.g., hate speech or fake news; see Iosifidis and Nicoli, 2020).

Also when shifting the focus from social (external) evaluations to perceptions and behaviors of organizational members, actorhood attribution to the organizational entity can serve as a valuable construct. Research by Castano et al. (2003) or Yzerbyt et al. (2020) would suggest that stronger attributions of organizational actorhood may lead to higher identification of members with the organization. As such, organizational actorhood can constitute a relevant factor in the cultivation of organizational identity among internal stakeholders, which carries implications for internal PR and employee-organization relationships (Men and Stacks, 2014).

A further analytical perspective that opens up when shifting attention to organizational actorhood as a variable relates to research on corporate social responsibility (CSR) communication and crisis communication. This is because of the centrality of "organizational responsibility attribution" as a variable, and its (often implicit) reliance on related assumptions about organizational actorhood. Attributions of organizational-level control and responsibility for crises are central to models explaining effects of crises and the effectiveness of organizations' crisis response strategies (Coombs and Holladay, 2008). Based on our theorizing, organizational actorhood attribution could be introduced as a central discrete antecedent of responsibility attributions; in other words, while extant research on CSR communication and crisis communication tends to assume that organizations are actors and thus can influence (ir)responsibility attributions by other stakeholders, we propose instead that organizational actorhood is rather a matter of degree. Accordngly, (ir)responsibility attributions can be presumed to depend on how much actorhood is attributed to the organization as a collective entity (e.g. whether the 'Dieselgate' scandal is the responsibility of Volkswagen as a collective actor or rather of individual managers; see Hulpke, 2017).

Finally, even if our considerations may come across as somewhat abstract at first glance (especially due to the high degree of abstractness of the agency debate in institutional theory, for example, Hwang and Colyvas, 2020), they nevertheless entail very concrete implications for PR as a practice area, and as an educational area, as well: If indeed communication is not only a specialized function of organizations (that to large degree the PR or corporate communication department is concerned with) but also affects the very creation of organizations as actors in the first place, then it implies to reconsider the role of communication professionals, as well, incl. the ambition level that we (as educators) convey to PR and communication students. Such a clearly communication-centered understanding of organizational actorhood calls for educating and preparing students of PR and organizational communication for a broader set of strategic managerial roles in organizational settings (incl. forms of internal and external stakeholder communication beyond the PR or corporate communication department as such). This is

because, if indeed communicative relations between an organization and its environment are what "creates" the collective actor, then communication-centered competences and sensitivities (should) move from the tactical periphery to the strategic core of the organizational process.

At the same time, we argue that sensitizing students in university education for considering the constitutive and formative role of communicative relations for organizations, equips them for the "new reality" businesses are operating in today, that is, in the continuous need to maintain and nurture communicative relations with stakeholders on various levels and facilitated by digital media—to ensure the "societal license to operate" (Scherer and Palazzo, 2011). This is important especially since we are moving into an age of the digital economy (Bukht and Heeks, 2017). With this comes the emergence of new forms of organizing that allow for significant flexibility in communicatively constructing organizational actorhood: digital platform infrastructures, which allow for fluid and open boundaries, create new ways for organizational endeavors and new opportunities for different actors to be involved in them (Bencherki and Snack, 2016; Puranam et al., 2014). As such, organizational actorhood in general and new forms of organizing in particular present ample opportunities for PR practice to advice on and contribute to the strategic development of the organization beyond the communication function (Zerfass and Volk, 2018).

Conclusion

While we see much merit in the considerations by Hou (2020), we have tried to highlight and extend on some omissions in her utilization of recent developments in institutional theory. More specifically, we have proposed in this paper to question and problematize the taken-for-granted assumption that organizations are collective actors in their own right. Instead, by understanding collective actorhood of an organization as a *variable*, PR research can open up exciting new scholarly avenues. For instance, it then becomes a question to what degree the various communicative relations that an organization has with its stakeholders contribute to the recurrent re-enactment and mutual reconfirmation of that (otherwise precarious) collective actorhood status of an organization (cf. King et al., 2010). Such a constitutive focus of PR scholarship would also allow for building stronger cross-connections with the neighboring area of organizational communication (see Christensen and Cornelissen, 2011). While organizational communication scholarship tends to be primarily concerned with how communicative interactions between organizational *members* create and sustain organizations (e.g. McPhee and Zaug, 2000), the distinct value of PR scholarship can instead lie in shedding further light on how the communicative relations between organizations and their (external) environment become constitutive for the existence of organizations as actors (see also Kuhn, 2008).

Importantly, with such a move toward a constitutive understanding of communication for the existence and perpetuation of organizations as collective actors, we believe that PR scholarship has a unique chance to build further inroads into the larger field of organization and management studies—similar to the ways in which organizational communication scholarship has found increasing recognition in organization and management studies over the past years (e.g. Ashcraft et al., 2009; Bourgoin et al., 2020; Cooren et al., 2011,

Koschmann et al., 2012; Schoeneborn et al., 2019). At the same time, a constitutive view has also found increasing resonance in PR scholarship lately (e.g. Osswald, 2019; Torp, 2015; Van Ruler, 2018; Wehmeier and Winkler, 2013). What constitutive views of the communication-organization relationship have in common is that they draw on communication as explanatory lens for organizational phenomena (incl. the constitution of organizational actorhood; see Bencherki and Cooren, 2011) and in that way can fruitfully complement the argumentation by Hou (2020).

Taken together, even if a move toward considering the actorhood of organization as questionable may shake PR scholarship to its very foundations, since it questions one of the key assumptions the field is built on (i.e. the existence of organizations as actors), it can also open up the view for new research opportunities and for tapping into a distinct source of theoretical contributions PR scholarship can offer toward neighboring disciplines in the social sciences, that is, to explain the emergence, perpetuation and variance of organizations as collective actors out of their communicative relationality.

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Notes

1. In this regard, communicative institutionalism exhibits a strong proximity to neighboring theories that consider communication as constitutive of organization (CCO) (Ashcraft et al., 2009).
2. Also in a legal sense, see works on corporate criminal law (e.g. Hulpke, 2017)

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