

# Connecting Nonprofit and Communication Scholarship: A Review of Key Issues and a Meta-Theoretical Framework for Future Research

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*The purpose of this review is to analyze the current relationship between communication and nonprofit studies, and to demonstrate how the field of communication can make a significant contribution to nonprofit scholarship by offering a unique way to analyze and explain nonprofit phenomena. To accomplish this we begin with a brief review of communication research in the nonprofit literature to see how scholars in this interdisciplinary field understand communication. Next we review key developments in the history of communication as an academic discipline in order to situate contemporary perspectives toward our field. We then explain how communication scholars have progressed from our intellectual origins. Our subsequent review of communication scholarship in and of the nonprofit sector highlights this evolution toward a more complex and nuanced approach to communication. From there we develop a distinct “communication perspective” toward the nonprofit sector based on a constitutive view of communication—a key meta-theoretical framework currently influencing the field of communication. Our primary contribution is thus to explain the implications of a constitutive approach to communication and how such an understanding can advance nonprofit—communication scholarship, as well as provide a meta-theoretical framework to further galvanize all scholars interested in this kind of work.*

*Keywords: Nonprofit Sector; Constitutive View of Communication; Organizational Communication; Communication History; Discipline of Communication*

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Communication is central to nonprofit organizations and the activities of the nonprofit sector. Fundraising and donor relations, client relationships and service delivery, volunteer management and board governance, collaboration and cross-sector partnerships—all involve dynamic processes of human interaction. For this reason, communication scholars have developed a considerable amount of theoretical and empirical research on the nonprofit sector and with nonprofit organizations.<sup>1</sup> Yet despite the importance of communication to the nonprofit sector and the research done in our field, communication *scholarship* is noticeably absent from, and has had relatively little impact on, the interdisciplinary field of nonprofit studies. This absence is notable because the study of communication offers valuable insights that can enhance our understanding of the nonprofit sector beyond economic, managerial, and public policy perspectives that currently dominate nonprofit research. Certainly there are many reasons for the lack of engagement between communication and nonprofit scholarship, such as the institutional barriers that often prevent various academic communities from interacting and the lack of familiarity with differing intellectual histories that make it difficult for interdisciplinary work to even get started. However, we suggest the primary reason for the absence is that as communication scholars we have not clearly articulated a distinct contribution of communication research or explained how it can make a difference for nonprofit scholarship. This review seeks to address this problem.

We represent a burgeoning group of communication scholars devoted to research on the nonprofit sector and within nonprofit organizations. Over the last ten years there has been a more deliberate effort—especially in the subfield of organizational communication—to build a scholarly community and develop a clear line of research associated with the nonprofit sector. Much of this began with Lewis<sup>2</sup> seminal article on the civil society sector, which reviewed critical issues and outlined a research agenda for communication scholars. This was followed by conference panels and workshops in subsequent years, culminating in a 2012 issue of *Management Communication Quarterly*<sup>3</sup> that profiled several essays about communication scholarship in and of the nonprofit sector. These were important first steps toward galvanizing communication scholars interested in the nonprofit sector and building a community of like-minded researchers and educators. However, in order to have larger impact we need to go further and consider how our work can extend beyond our intellectual community and forge stronger connections across the broader interdisciplinary landscape of nonprofit scholarship.

Accordingly, the purpose of this review is to analyze the current relationship between communication and nonprofit studies, and to demonstrate how the field of communication can make a significant contribution to nonprofit scholarship by offering a unique way to analyze and explain nonprofit phenomena. To accomplish this we begin with a brief review of communication research in the nonprofit literature to see how scholars in this interdisciplinary field understand communication. Next we review key developments in the history of communication as an academic discipline in order to situate contemporary perspectives toward our field. We then explain how communication scholars have progressed from our intellectual

origins. Our subsequent review of communication scholarship in and of the nonprofit sector highlights this evolution toward a more complex and nuanced approach to communication. From there we develop a distinct “communication perspective” toward the nonprofit sector based on a *constitutive* view of communication—a key meta-theoretical framework currently influencing the field of communication. Our primary contribution is thus to explain the implications of a constitutive approach to communication and how such an understanding can advance nonprofit—communication scholarship, as well as provide a meta-theoretical framework to further galvanize all scholars interested in this kind of work.

### Communication in the Nonprofit Literature

Although communication *scholarship* is not well represented in the nonprofit literature<sup>1</sup>, the *topic* of communication certainly is. Our review of the leading nonprofit journals found over 40 articles since 2000 that had “communication” in the title and/or keywords. As we might expect, this literature generally presents an instrumental approach to communication that is focused on message transmission and information sharing—communication used as a tool to achieve some notion of effectiveness. For example, Guo and Saxton<sup>4</sup> investigate how advocacy organizations use social media as a communication tool to execute various message strategies, Bennett<sup>5</sup> examines message strategies that affect the likelihood of charitable donations, and Campbell<sup>6</sup> identifies information sharing as an important management strategy for effective nonprofit mergers and restructuring.

An instrumental approach is also evident in the term *communications* (with an “s”), which is common across this literature and implies a message-centered view of communication (e.g., email communications,<sup>7</sup> nonprofit communications planning,<sup>8</sup> nonprofit organizational communications<sup>9</sup>). Also prevalent is an emphasis on information communication technologies<sup>10</sup> and communication channels,<sup>11</sup> which reinforces assumptions about message transmission and functionality. Even research that claims a deeper theoretical foundation still tends to depict communication in utilitarian and strategic terms. For example, Waters<sup>12</sup> study of donor relationships and fundraising efficiency draws from a generic sense of “communication theory” to outline strategies that enhance the effectiveness of a nonprofit’s fundraising

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<sup>1</sup>We recognize that defining what a particular literature is/is not is problematic. In our analysis we see the nonprofit literature in terms of recognizable nonprofit journals that signify conventional institutional boundaries. These journals include *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, *Nonprofit Management and Leadership*, *VOLUNTAS*, *The International Journal of Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Marketing*, and *The Journal of Nonprofit and Public Sector Marketing*. Conversely, we see communication scholarship in terms of research done by scholars who identify with the field of communication and are connected to the discipline through academic departments and professional associations. Certainly any study conducted with a nonprofit organization could be considered part of the nonprofit literature, and any study that investigates communication could be considered communication scholarship. But however arbitrary, institutional boundaries represent real distinctions that affect scholarship and knowledge production, and one of our goals in this article is to understand these distinctions and how scholars can navigate this landscape in order to enhance the quality of nonprofit scholarship.

programs. The clear implication from this nonprofit literature is that communication is primarily about message transmission and information exchange in order to accomplish strategic goals and improve organizational effectiveness. Consequently, one of the biggest challenges for communication scholars seeking to engage with other disciplines is that others often have a narrow understanding of communication and what our field can contribute. We need to understand how we got to this point in order to better position our current work.

### How We Got Here

Traditionally the study of human communication has found a home in speech departments throughout American universities, with strong ties to English and programs of debate and forensics. Yet the current makeup of the discipline is heavily influenced by mid 20th century developments in American universities, especially the post-war emphasis on mass-media and social influence and the advancement of social sciences throughout the academy. During this time several journalism departments gave birth to separate communication programs that emphasized message effects and public relations, while other universities created interdisciplinary communication institutes with similar foci.<sup>13</sup> These developments were underwritten in part by significant advancements in the science of information throughout the 1940s—most notably the invention of the transistor (which won the Nobel Prize in physics) and the rise of information theory. Coupled with the prevailing intellectual ethos that science could—and even should—solve most social issues, the time was ripe for an explosion of communication research and social-scientific approaches to studying human interaction.

Yet sustaining this expansion would require an over-arching scientific paradigm to warrant academic programs in human communication, and Claude Shannon's work on information theory provided this justification. Claude Shannon's *Mathematical Theory of Communication*<sup>14</sup> offered communication scholars an early quantitative model for explaining human interaction, and thus the scientific respectability needed for institutional support and research funding. Shannon's work focused on the efficiency of information transmission between senders and receivers, with the goal of enhancing channel capacity through appropriate encoding and decoding systems. Although Shannon's theory emphasized impersonal processes of technical systems, his work provided communication scholars a vocabulary to articulate a scientific model of communication for social systems and a conceptual framework to quantify human interaction. Consequently, "information" became the central concept in the academic study of communication with "message effects" as the primary dependent variable.<sup>15</sup> Thus a broad notion of *functionalism* emerged as the prevailing intellectual paradigm for the discipline of communication during these formative decades and has persisted as the main paradigm through which other disciplines understand the academic study of human communication. A functionalist approach to communication—based on information transmission and message effects—offered a straightforward way to comprehend and explain human interaction in ways that

conform to many people's common-sense experience of communication. More importantly, functionalism provided researchers a scientific approach toward communication that aligns with variable-analytic methods that are dominant in many social science disciplines. Not surprisingly, it is this historical understanding that informs how communication has been conceptualized and studied in the nonprofit literature, as well as how many other disciplines understand our contribution to social-scientific research.

To be clear, we are not suggesting there is anything inherently wrong with this approach. This research offers valuable insights into message strategies, information sharing, technology use, and overall communication efficacy. However, it does reflect a limited view of communication that does not represent most contemporary communication scholarship in the nonprofit sector, thus effectively capping the level of engagement between nonprofit and communication scholarship. Such a barrier would be unfortunate because communication scholars have developed a wealth of research to enhance our understanding of nonprofit organizations and the nonprofit sector that moves beyond this functionalist view of communication.

### Dissatisfaction with Functionalism

Although functionalist<sup>2</sup> approaches to communication based on Claude Shannon's work in information theory offered the scientific respectability necessary to develop new academic programs and achieve institutional legitimacy, from the beginning this move was fraught with complications that lay just below the surface. Most importantly, Shannon always claimed that his model did not apply to human communication. His model was designed for static, technical systems that involved intentional, formal, explicit, and logical transmission of information. Things like nonverbal communication, unintentional messages, and interpretive differences had no place in Shannon's model—these were all considered “noise” that interfered with channel capacity and the efficient transmission of information. Communication scholars responded with adaptations of Shannon's model that transformed engineering concepts in human terms; for example, conceptualizing message receivers as having the capacity for emotion and sense-making.<sup>16</sup> These adaptations worked fine for many communication scholars, but others grew increasingly dissatisfied with adapting a theoretical model that was never intended for human interaction in the first place.

Furthermore, there was also a growing suspicion among many scholars about the negative implications and applications of a functionalist approach to communication, especially in terms of deception, manipulation, and power. This was evident in much of the work on propaganda, public relations, and societal control.<sup>17</sup> Even more so, the changing cultural landscape of the 1960s and 70s revealed that functionalist theories of communication based on information transmission were inadequate to account

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<sup>2</sup>We use the term functionalism/ist interchangeably with *informational* approaches or *transmission* models of communication.

for the complexities of globalization and an increasingly diverse society. Added to this were other intellectual developments in the social sciences that were sweeping across the academy during this time. The most notable for the field of communication was the so-called linguistic turn in social theory, which depicts language as producing (not merely reflecting) social reality.<sup>18</sup> Thus language replaced consciousness as the core philosophical problem to be investigated.<sup>19</sup> The upshot of these developments was that more hermeneutic and cultural approaches began to dominate the landscape of communication theory and research (even though functionalism was still the main paradigm taught in undergraduate classes and disseminated through workshops and the popular press literature). For example, in the early 1980s scholars in the rising subfield of organizational communication leveraged these theoretical changes in the discipline to craft their own intellectual identity and break from more traditional management programs which emphasized functional approaches to communication. The seminal text that emerged from their work—Putnam and Pacanowsky's edited volume, *Communication and Organizations: An Interpretive Approach*<sup>20</sup>—explicitly called functionalism into question and developed an alternative approach to organizational communication based on the centrality of meaning in social action.<sup>21</sup> These ideas were rooted in notions of social construction<sup>22</sup> and social-psychological approaches to organizing<sup>23</sup> that challenged conventional management research. Similar moves were also being made during this time in other areas of the communication discipline, such as interpersonal communication,<sup>24</sup> intercultural communication,<sup>25</sup> and media studies.<sup>26</sup>

The primary critique of a functionalist approach to communication is that it fails to account for the complexities of human interaction that are essential to most communicative events. People communicate for so many more reasons than to transmit information, and communication is rarely just a linear process that can be assessed solely in terms of message effects. Also, communication is filled with intricacies such as nonverbal behavior, unintended messages, multiple interpretations, conflicting motivations, and changing contexts that cannot be explained in terms of a sender-message-channel-receiver model of communication (even if we include components like noise and feedback). At a deeper level, the problem with a functionalist approach is that it depicts communication as a relatively neutral “conduit”<sup>27</sup> that transmits already-formed realities—inner psychological states that await expression through communication. Communication from this perspective is seen as separate from realities themselves and not significantly involved in their production. This renders communication as *epiphenomenal*, a surface-level manifestation that is driven by other structural mechanisms or the “natural” order of events.<sup>28</sup> Communication is how we transmit pre-existing meanings between people, but those meanings are formed and reside elsewhere. The problem is that meaning and information are not synonymous, and any approach that reduces the complex processes of human interaction (i.e., communication) to the mere transmission or exchange of information (i.e., functionalism) is problematic.

Others have developed this critique against functionalist and informational approaches to communication more extensively.<sup>29</sup> Our purpose here is to briefly

explain why communication scholars departed from their functionalist roots so we can better understand the current state of the communication discipline and how it can make a unique contribution to nonprofit scholarship. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s scholars wrestled with the implications of the linguistic turn in social theory to develop alternative conceptions based on meaning, interpretation, and social construction. The evolution of this thinking is evident in the extant communication literature in and of the nonprofit sector, which we review next. Our goal is to demonstrate the breadth and depth of communication research and reveal how communication researchers have approached subjects and questions that are of interest to the nonprofit scholarly community. We show how this work reflects the development of the communication discipline as we move beyond our functionalist roots toward a more nuanced and complex understanding of human interaction.

### Communication Research in and of the Nonprofit Sector

As we reviewed Communication literature<sup>3</sup>, we identified over 50 studies that explicitly focus on the nonprofit sector or nonprofit organizations. Other studies were less explicit about their investigation of nonprofits *per se*, but nonprofits provided the context for their investigations of various social and organizational phenomena.<sup>30</sup> Together these articles and books cover an array of topics and methodological approaches. Most of these studies were published after the year 2000, signaling a rising interest in nonprofit studies among communication scholars. After coding these articles for initial topics, foci, and keywords we collapsed our codes into seven over-arching themes listed in Table 1: membership, structure, legitimacy, differentiation, stakeholders, communication strategies, and linkages. We recognize that these themes are not mutually exclusive and represent subject domains that often overlap with some studies possibly fitting in multiple areas. In order to introduce the breadth of this work, we summarize each theme below and discuss specific studies as exemplars. Our goal is to concisely review the main areas of research that compose the communication literature in and of the nonprofit sector and set the stage for articulating a distinct contribution that the field of communication can make to enhance nonprofit scholarship.

#### *Membership*

Membership research examines the communicative elements of the actors within nonprofit organizations. The membership literature explores the actor in the organization through issues such as identity,<sup>31</sup> employment,<sup>32</sup> and emotional labor.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>3</sup>Our review focused on the 16 journals associated with the International and National Communication Associations (e.g., *Communication Monographs*, *Communication Theory*, *Journal of Communication*, *Journal of Applied Communication Research*), as well as seven journals associated with the four major American regional associations (Western, Southern, Eastern, and Central). Additional journals outside these associations are also traditionally recognized as part of the broader communication literature (e.g., *Journal of Business Communication*, *Journal of Communication Management*).

**Table 1** Research Themes of Communication Scholarship in and of the Nonprofit Sector

<b>Membership</b>	<b>Stakeholder</b>
Personal	Individual Interests
Supervision	Community Engagement
<b>Structure</b>	State Partnership
Management	Agency
Technology Use	<b>Communication Strategies</b>
Constitution	Direct Messaging
<b>Legitimacy</b>	External Communication
Formal	<b>Linkages</b>
Informal	Collaborative
<b>Differentiation</b>	Networking
External	
Internal	

This incorporates both paid staff and volunteer groups that are members of particular nonprofits. For instance, Sass<sup>34</sup> explored how emotional labor and communicating the cultural performance of care creates a sense of identity among nursing home staff. This research looks at the personal communicative events that are present in nonprofit membership. Other membership research examines the ways in which nonprofit management interacts with staff and volunteers,<sup>35</sup> or how we understand the relationship between volunteering and professionalism.<sup>36</sup> For example, Steimel<sup>37</sup> examined different types of memorable messages created by management, and found that those messages focused on the meaningfulness of the work being done resonated most with volunteer identity. The key idea across this literature is that communication is central to understanding nonprofit membership as people in a variety of positions negotiate their sense of belonging with nonprofit organizations.

*Structure*

One of the largest themes of research in the communication literature is focused on structure. This research looks at general management processes such as professional identities and models of management<sup>38</sup> as well as ways of leading.<sup>39</sup> As mediated technologies became a presence in the development and growth of the organization, several studies also examined technology introduction and use,<sup>40</sup> specifically communication technologies (i.e. emails, blogs, and social media). Structure research also incorporates the growing research on how communication can be understood and constituting the organization and processes within nonprofit organizations,<sup>41</sup> which is a core area of development to be discussed later in this article.

*Legitimacy*

Following a more traditional track in nonprofit research, communication scholars have also examined elements and aspects legitimacy. The more formal aspects of



legitimacy incorporate research on how nonprofits communicate and achieve goals, the role of mission statements, and creating and maintaining a recognized organizational identity. Each of these areas expands on a larger body of research by examining the communicative creation of legitimacy. For instance Sanders<sup>42</sup> explicates the contradictory space nonprofits inhabit where financial imperatives and mission are in tension with one another and how nonprofit marketization can moderate communication about mission and goals. Another area of legitimacy research examines the informal efforts to create reputation and status. Informal efforts are those that may not directly relate to the goals or mission of a nonprofit organization but are none the less part of creating and exercising its reputation. This research introduces a critical perspective on nonprofit legitimacy and looks at concepts such as power and the privileged voice a nonprofit can have on certain topics.<sup>43</sup>

### *Differentiation*

Differentiation research follows a long line of nonprofit scholarship examining the difference between for-profit, state, and nonprofit organizations. This research looks at the ways in which these three major sectors affect each other. Topics such as marketization, capitalism and professionalism are explored as part of differentiation research.<sup>44</sup> Internal differentiation has also been explored, examining how nonprofits themselves carry different status, arrangements, and practices compared to other organizations. Research on internal differentiation looks differences between nonprofits in the global North versus South, donation versus grassroots organizations, and local versus national nonprofits. For instance, Acharya and Dutta<sup>45</sup> examine HIV campaigns created by larger national nonprofits and the consequent lack of local voice in program planning.

### *Stakeholder Communication*

By far the largest amount of communication research in and of the nonprofit sector focuses on stakeholder communication. There are several different areas that scholars are exploring within this topic. Individual interest research looks specifically at different types of stakeholder groups and how the interactions with these different stakeholders can affect the nonprofit.<sup>46</sup> Another area explores the connection nonprofits have with the clients they serve and the community they engage with in order to accomplish the goals of the nonprofit. For instance, Livesey, Hartman, Stafford, and Shearer<sup>47</sup> found that by forming a shared history, nonprofits and farmers could better agree on what good farming means and how both entities can work together to protect the environment. A smaller area of stakeholder research examines the connection and tension with government agencies that can enable, constrain, and regulate the operations of nonprofits.<sup>48</sup> Finally, there is branch of stakeholder research that looks at how nonprofit organizations create agency among their clients. Issues relating to marginalized voices and groups along with the creation of an alternate space or discourse that counters traditional notions of stakeholder

participation from an important critical/cultural tradition. For example, Norander and Harter<sup>49</sup> recounted the efforts of nongovernmental organizations trying to create a space that challenged the traditional notions of war victims and allowed marginalized voices to participate in community rebuilding efforts.

### *Communication Strategies*

Communication strategies research focuses on messages and strategies nonprofits use with their clients and stakeholders. While stakeholder research looks at communication in many different facets, communication strategies research is channel-oriented and examines specific communication patterns and campaigns. Direct messaging research addresses more traditional notions of communication that might be held outside the field and evaluates health campaigns, issue advertising, and corporate branding communication. Much of this research is less related to the creator of the message (i.e., the nonprofit organization) than to the message itself and its effect on an intended audience. Notable exceptions to this are Olufowote's<sup>50</sup> analysis of local resistance to a vaccination campaign due to the perceived connection the nonprofit had with delegitimizing organizations, and Pillsbury and Mayer's<sup>51</sup> research on technology use in reaching a community about reproductive health issues. Additional strategies research explicates the different client messaging used and investigates different external communication practices. For example, Lee and Desai<sup>52</sup> discuss how Indian culture can shape the public relations channel and consequently cause difficulties in how nonprofits target their populations.

### *Linkages*

The final theme of research encompasses a large body of research on linkages within nonprofit collaboration, alliances, and networks. Communication scholars have unpacked issues of collaborative membership,<sup>53</sup> resources,<sup>54</sup> and identity.<sup>55</sup> This research has also examined the effects of foundational membership in predicting alliance success,<sup>56</sup> partnership patterns,<sup>57</sup> and North/South alliance differences.<sup>58</sup> These investigations begin to parse out the numerous and complicated connections nonprofit organizations consistently make within and across sectors in order to address certain issues or operate in a particular environment.

In summary, the communication literature in and of the nonprofit sector has significant breadth and explores topics of interest to nonprofit scholars and practitioners alike. Some of this research is grounded in a functionalist approach that emphasizes information transmission and message effects, while other research is based on a more dynamic and complex understanding of communication. As a result, our review of this literature not only identifies the scope of our field, but also demonstrates the maturing of the communication discipline beyond concerns with message effects and information transmission toward a more sophisticated understanding of the complexities of human interaction. Yet despite the variety and importance of this work, it remains somewhat scattered and fragmented. Existing

communication nonprofit research lacks the coherent vision or underlying theoretical framework necessary to have a substantive impact beyond our field and across the broader landscape of the nonprofit sector. We address this concern next.

### Developing a Distinct Communication Perspective for Nonprofit Scholarship

Now that we have reviewed how communication has been studied in the nonprofit literature, and how communication scholars have studied nonprofit organizations and the nonprofit sector, our goal in this section is to convey a unique contribution that the field of communication can make to enhance nonprofit scholarship. This enables us to articulate a distinct “communication perspective,” with several important implications for subsequent nonprofit research.

#### *Communication as Constitutive*

The challenge to functionalism and the influence of the linguistic turn gave rise to many new developments in the field of communication and alternative conceptions of human interaction. Leading scholars—most notably Craig<sup>59</sup> and Deetz<sup>60</sup>—identified that what these new ideas all had in common was a *constitutive* approach to communication. That is, we constitute—not just express—our social realities in our interactions with others. Communication is a dynamic, interactive process that involves constant negotiation over interpretation and meaning, not just the transmission of information. Social realities are not “fixed” such that they can be reflected or expressed unproblematically, and things we take for granted in the social world—organizations, institutions, relationships—only maintain their existence through sustained patterns of interaction. In a seminal essay published in *Communication Theory*, Craig<sup>61</sup> articulated the notion of *communicative constitution* (or communication as constitutive) as a meta-theoretical framework to encompass all communication scholarship. In fact, Ashcraft, Kuhn, and Cooren<sup>62</sup> (2009) call communicative constitution the “overarching principle that guides the discipline [of communication] today.”

This does not mean that every communication scholar claims to be doing research that is explicitly constitutive. Rather, communicative constitution is a higher-order framework that provides a general orientation for our work, the way functionalism provided a similar orientation and institutional identity for previous communication scholarship. Communicative constitution gives communication scholars a meta-theoretical framework to guide research, an intellectual coherence across different schools of thought within our discipline, and a clear theoretical stance in relation to alternative perspectives outside the field of communication. Of course there is no conclusive division between functionalist and constitutive approaches to communication in the development of our discipline—constitutive thinking was present from the beginning and functionalism still dominates the practitioner literature and many textbooks today. However, the important thing to understand is that the field of communication is currently centered on developing constitutive approaches to

human interaction, and this is how we can make a significant contribution to nonprofit scholarship.

### *Implications of Communicative Constitution for Nonprofit Scholarship*

A thorough review of a constitutive approach to communication is beyond our purposes here.<sup>63</sup> Instead, we explain three key implications of communicative constitution, all of which involve a “rethinking” of communication and nonprofit scholarship. Together these implications form an overall “communication perspective” that can enhance our understanding of nonprofit organizations and the nonprofit sector.

### *Rethinking communication as a mode of explanation*

The most significant implication of a constitutive approach is elevating communication from a unit of analysis to a mode of explanation. This means that communication is not just a phenomenon to be explained, but rather provides an explanatory framework from which to understand a host of other social phenomena. At first it may seem odd to think of communication as a mode of explanation, but we certainly appreciate this move in other academic fields. Biologists, for example, do not only study biology but also develop biological explanations for many aspects of the social world; psychologists not only study the human psyche but also provide psychological explanations for a variety of social behaviors, and economists do not just study specific economies but likewise offer economic explanations for countless social phenomena. If our social realities are constituted in and through human interaction then it stands to reason that communication can provide a framework from which we understand and explain the social world, what Craig<sup>64</sup> calls a “communicational perspective on social reality.” Traditionally communication has been understood as a unit of analysis—instances of talk and message exchange that happen in certain contexts. Thus scholars focus on different “kinds” of communication (e.g., superior-subordinate communication, instructional communication, family communication, crisis communication, volunteer communication), but which are formed and explained psychologically, sociologically, or economically. Conversely, a constitutive approach to communication reverses the explanatory direction: studying psychological, sociological, or economic phenomena as formed and explained “communicatively” or “communicationally.”<sup>65</sup>

For nonprofit scholarship, this relates to how we theorize and explain the nonprofit sector and the operations of nonprofit organizations. Most nonprofit theorizing is influenced by economic thinking, which attempts to explain why nonprofits exist and how they function in a market economy.<sup>66</sup> However, economics represents only one way to understand the nonprofit sector, and assuming the primacy of the market economy to develop theoretical explanations has notable limitations.<sup>67</sup> Economic theorizing tends to “black box” social interaction<sup>68</sup> and assumes human behavior is primarily about consuming goods and services and

acquiring resources. Furthermore, economic theories tell us very little about the lived experiences of the nonprofit sector or the processes of organizing. This is not to deny the value of economics, but merely to recognize its limitations for explaining the nonprofit sector. To address these limitations we do not just need better economic theories because the shortcomings of economic theorizing are outside the logics of economic thinking.<sup>69</sup> Instead, why not start from different assumptions about the nature of collective experience to understand and explain certain aspects of the nonprofit sector? This is what a constitutive approach to communication can provide. Lohmann<sup>70</sup> argues that the central economic facts of the nonprofit sector are “episodes of communicative interaction” because services are primarily “social acts and not physical objects.” If this is the case then we should also pursue *communicative* explanations of nonprofit organizations and the nonprofit sector to complement economic theorizing.

For example, in his study of homelessness in Denver, Colorado Tompkins<sup>71</sup> argues that homelessness is not only an economic problem, but also a communicative problem stemming from a breakdown of communication networks that supply social capital. He reconceptualizes homelessness and poverty from a communication perspective in order to explain homeless service providers as organizational links that restore breakdowns in social capital. There are even hints in the nonprofit literature that portray communication as a mode of explanation as scholars have begun to explore the importance of language, discourse, and underlying assumptions to understand issues such as marketization, democracy, international development, and civil society governance.<sup>72</sup> The key difference is that these studies do not depict communication only as something to be investigated, but rather move toward understanding communication as a vantage point from which to comprehend a host of nonprofit phenomena.

### *Rethinking core concepts*

A second and related implication of a constitutive approach to communication involves challenging the taken-for-granted or “natural” character of nonprofit concepts and phenomena. We often take for granted terms like *volunteer*, *nonprofit*, *mission*, *faith-based*, and *sector*. A functionalist approach to communication (where social realities are pre-existing and exchanged/transmitted as information) lures us into accepting these concepts as given or natural, when in fact they are quite fragile, artificial, political, and arise from very particular social circumstances. A constitutive approach to communication helps us see that language matters because it calls into being specific social realities that enable or restrict social action with real material consequences—it is not just a matter of perception. Volunteers do not simply “exist” but rather are created and sustained through how we use this term. Labeling someone as a volunteer or categorizing specific actions as voluntary has important consequences, especially if this is done by certain kinds of people or organizations. Rather than asking what things “are” a communication perspective asks how things are constituted communicatively, whose interests are represented in these

constructions, how they are sustained or transformed through interaction, what identities are produced or suppressed, and what kinds of actions are supported or constrained. An example of this is Hilhorst's<sup>73</sup> study of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in the Philippines. She demonstrates how the term "NGO" should not be understood as a neutral characterization, but rather as a claim-bearing label that activates particular assumptions about legitimacy, power, and identity. By using the term "NGO" workers assumed certain relations of power, gave themselves specific identities, and made possible particular modes of development work. When we understand communication as the production (not just the expression) of meaning we gain valuable insights into *how* important aspects of the nonprofit sector are constituted versus merely explaining *that* they exist.<sup>74</sup> A constitutive approach to communication helps us see how the social realities we often take for granted are actually created, sustained, and/or transformed depending on how people interact with each other.

One area where this is especially relevant is the ongoing discussions in the literature about whether or not nonprofits should be more "business-like."<sup>75</sup> Terms like "efficiency," "bottom line," or "effectiveness" may have common dictionary definitions, but they do not refer to a neutral or natural state of affairs. Instead, they are used in practice to constitute particular social realities that may favor certain interests and marginalize others. Taking a "communication perspective" toward various nonprofit phenomena means exploring the processes and patterns of human interaction that constitute specific social realities and not just accepting them as given or inevitable. Sanders'<sup>76</sup> study of the mission-market tension facing many nonprofits does just this. As he describes, "The notion of being business-like in the nonprofit sector can be understood as a communicative construction whose meaning is not fixed but is negotiated and transformed in practice." He goes on to explain how specific understandings of "business-like" enable or restrict nonprofit's pursuit of their social missions. Sanders' study is the lone example in the nonprofit literature that explicitly works from a constitutive model of communication. It demonstrates the value of a communication perspective for understanding important aspects of the nonprofit sector and exemplifies the kind of scholarship we are advocating for in this article.

### *Rethinking organizations as communication*

A third and final implication of a constitutive approach to communication involves rethinking how we conceptualize nonprofit organizations. In common vernacular we talk about communication that happens *within* organizations, which is consistent with an informational approach to communication that emphasizes message transmission inside pre-existing systems. This "container metaphor"<sup>77</sup> implies that communication "flows" depend on the literal or figurative shape of the organization. The key is that communication is seen as something existing separately from the organization itself. Yet this is problematic because it requires us to account for the ontological status of organizations apart from human interaction.<sup>78</sup> In contrast, a constitutive approach to communication encourages us to think about organizations *as* communication.

This ontological shift challenges our conventional wisdom about what nonprofit organizations are based on the lived experiences of those involved. We know that organizations are not the physical structures or material resources we encounter in their operations, nor are they merely the corporate charters that give them a virtual existence in our legal system. What makes an organization truly an *organization* are specific processes, practices, and procedures that set them apart from other collections of people. An organization is basically an ongoing assemblage of interactions, decisions, interpretations, symbols, negotiations, agreements, contracts, relationships, and so forth. Organizations are not neutral structures that exist apart from human interaction; they are the visible manifestations of human interaction (i.e., communication)—thus the shift from thinking about communication *within* organizations to understanding organizations *as* communication.

After all, few people experience nonprofit organizations as financial entities, and the most fundamental aspects of the nonprofit sector cannot be reduced to legal abstractions. For most people what constitutes their experience of nonprofit organizations is fundamentally social, relational, interactive, and meaningful—in short, communicative. We cannot fully account for what a nonprofit organization *is* by just reading its articles of incorporation, reviewing its organizational chart, or going through its financial statements. That misses the true character of the organization and tells us nothing about the actual experience of being part of the organization as a volunteer, employee, client, or donor.<sup>79</sup> The spirit of the nonprofit sector is grounded in social entrepreneurship, civic and political engagement, service delivery, and even religious faith,<sup>80</sup> and these essential aspects of the nonprofit sector are created and sustained through ongoing patterns of human interaction. Therefore communication is much more than mere information transmission; communication is indeed a way of *being* for nonprofit organizations.

What does this mean for nonprofit scholarship, and how can it enhance our knowledge of the nonprofit sector? When we see that organizations exist as the very communication processes by which they are constituted we gain a fuller understanding of what nonprofits “are” based on how people experience these interactions. Lutgen-Sandvik and McDermott<sup>81</sup> demonstrate this in their study of dysfunctional relationships at a nonprofit women’s community center. Working from a constitutive approach, these communication scholars argue that we should rethink what this particular nonprofit “is” based on the communication patterns that constitute the organization. Accordingly, they claim that this nonprofit should be understood as an “employee abusive organization” because of the ongoing patterns of negative interactions that made up this organization. Calling this a “nonprofit organization” tells us very little about what this organization actually was for the people involved. In fact, the term “nonprofit” was misleading in this case because it suggested a level of altruism, charity, and motivation beyond financial concerns that was not true of this organization. But analyzing this case from a communication perspective enabled these researchers to develop insights about workplace bullying and abuse that are not accounted for through other theoretical frameworks.

When we privilege the financial and economic status of organizations we can miss important insights about the actual lived experiences of the people involved. We recognize that it may seem unusual to conceptualize organizations based on their *communicative* versus legal or economic constitution, but that is exactly the point. In order to advance our knowledge of nonprofit organizations and the nonprofit sector we need to explore new ways of thinking and alternative perspectives that can enhance our understanding. We are not claiming we should jettison economic, financial, or legal theorizing—clearly these approaches have fostered tremendous insights and are essential for understanding the nonprofit sector. Nevertheless, understanding organizations *as* communication complements these established approaches and can help advance our thinking.

## Conclusion

The purpose of this essay has been to review key issues related to communication and nonprofit scholarship in order to articulate a distinct “communication perspective” toward the nonprofit sector that can guide future research. Based on a *constitutive* view of communication, this perspective emphasizes the production of meaning and social reality, rather than the mere transmission of information to increase effectiveness. Researchers who bring a communication perspective to nonprofit studies will explain a variety of nonprofit phenomena through a framework of human interaction, they will explore how important nonprofit concepts are constituted communicatively and the different interests represented in those processes, and they will examine how the communicative existence of nonprofit organizations shapes the lived experiences of key stakeholders—all of which promise to add valuable insights to the nonprofit literature and complement other fields that compose the interdisciplinary study of the nonprofit sector.

In doing so, we have analyzed the currently relationship between the nonprofit literature and the field of communication studies and reviewed research that communication scholars have conducted. Our goal has been to demonstrate how a constitutive approach to communication provides the necessary disciplinary framework for communication scholars to identify and explain the impact of their work to the broader field of nonprofit scholarship. We are not calling for uniformity or standardization, but rather a meta-theoretical framework to orient and define our work and a rationale that enables us to clearly articulate the value of communication to those in other fields.

In saying this, we also recognize the difficulties of interdisciplinary research, and the challenge of synthesizing intellectual positions and learning alternative disciplinary perspectives. Yet the diverse nature of nonprofit research and the complexity of the nonprofit sector itself necessitate such engagement because that is where the greatest insights emerge. Biologists and geographers use the term “ecotone” to describe the area where two different ecosystems intersect and integrate. It is a place of tension, but it is also the place where more diversity and more new life forms exist than anywhere else on earth. This is the value of interdisciplinary research—an



intellectual ecotone where academic disciplines converge to create fresh and innovative ways of thinking. We believe that communication scholarship can and should play an important role in this ecology to enhance our understanding of the nonprofit sector and we hope this review offers a meta-theoretical framework to guide this endeavor.

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