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Clandestine Organizations, al Qaeda, and the Paradox of (In)Visibility: A Response to Stohl and Stohl

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Abstract: In a recent article published in this journal, Stohl and Stohl (2011) examine the phenomenon of clandestine organizations from a communication-centered perspective. The authors draw primarily on the work of the 'Montreal School' of organizational communication, which stresses the constitutive role of communication for organizations. In this response, we argue that the Stohls' paper does not make full use of the paradigmatic turn that the Montreal School offers to organization studies. In our view, the authors overemphasize the role of communication among organizational members in the constitution of organizations. In contrast, we argue that organizations can also be 'talked into existence' by the communicative acts of third parties (e.g., the media), a view that is consistent with the Montreal School's work. Moreover, drawing on the Stohls' central example of the terrorist organization al Qaeda, we suggest that the attribute 'clandestine' does not capture the essence of that organization because it is characterized by extreme invisibility of its governance structures and by extreme visibility of its terrorist activities. We believe it is the reversion of the relation between invisibility and visibility that differentiates al Qaeda from legitimate organizations such as private businesses and ensures its perpetuation against all odds.

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A Response to Stohl and Stohl

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Abstract

In a recent article published in *Organization Studies*, Stohl and Stohl (2011) examine the phenomenon of clandestine organizations from a communication-centered perspective. The authors draw primarily on the work of the 'Montreal School' of organizational communication, which stresses the constitutive role of communication for organizations. In this response, we argue that the Stohls' paper does not make full use of the paradigmatic turn that the Montreal School offers to organization studies. In our view, the authors overemphasize the role of communication *among organizational members* in the constitution of organizations. In contrast, we argue that organizations can also be 'talked into existence' by the communicative acts of third parties (e.g., the media), a view that is consistent with the Montreal School's work. Moreover, drawing on the Stohls' central example of the terrorist organization al Qaeda, we suggest that the attribute 'clandestine' does not capture the essence of al Qaeda as an organization because it is characterized by *extreme invisibility* of its governance structures and by *extreme visibility* of its terrorist activities. We believe it is the reversion of the relation between *invisibility* and *visibility* that differentiates al Qaeda from legitimate organizations such as private businesses and ensures its perpetuation against all odds.

Keywords

al Qaeda; terrorist organizations; organizational communication; Montreal School; communication constitutes organizations (CCO); social constructionism

Introduction

In a recent article published in this journal, Stohl and Stohl (2011) reconstruct the phenomenon of clandestine organizations from a communication-centered perspective. The authors primarily draw on the work of the 'Montreal School' of organizational communication (e.g., Cooren, Taylor, & van Every, 2006; Robichaud, Giroux, & Taylor, 2004; Taylor & van Every, 2000). The Montreal School's work is part of a broader stream of research in organization studies that grasps *communication as the constitutive element of organizations* – a perspective also referred to as 'CCO' (for recent overviews, see Ashcraft, Kuhn, & Cooren, 2009, or Cooren, Kuhn, Cornelissen, & Clark, 2011). The CCO perspective is an umbrella term encompassing a heterogeneous body of research that shares the fundamental ontological claim that organizations emerge and are perpetuated *in and through language use* (Kuhn, 2008). This view is based on the assumption that communication is not 'simply one of the many factors involved in organizing, and it cannot be merely the vehicle for the expression of pre-existing "realities"; rather, it is the means by which organizations are established, composed, designed, and sustained' (Cooren et al., 2011, p. 1150). According to this view, organizations essentially consist of interconnected events of communication (Luhmann, 2000; Taylor & van Every, 2000). Consequently, in the absence of communication, organizations cease to exist (Luhmann, 2000; Schoeneborn, 2011).

In their paper, Stohl and Stohl (2011) put forth the argument that the existence of clandestine organizations (such as the terrorist network al Qaeda) challenges the Montreal School's implicit assumption that *visibility* is necessary for the communicative constitution of organizations. They conclude that, if we want to achieve a better understanding of clandestine organizations, we need to pay attention to the particular socio-historical context in which their communicative constitution occurs. We regard the paper by Stohl and Stohl as a valuable contribution to the field of organization studies because it shows how the work of the

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Montreal School (and the CCO perspective more generally) can be fruitfully applied to advance our understanding of highly relevant contemporary organizational phenomena, such as al Qaeda and other clandestine organizations. Their article also benefits from the authors' in-depth knowledge of the academic literature on terrorist organizations over the last decades (e.g., Stohl, 1983). However, as we will argue in this response, we believe that their paper does not make full use of the Montreal School's theoretical potential and the paradigmatic turn it offers to organization studies.

Our article is structured as follows: first, we discuss why we believe that the authors tend to overemphasize the role of membership in the communicative constitution of organizations. Second, we argue that their study does not fully embrace the underlying social-constructionist epistemology and processual ontology of the Montreal School and the CCO view more generally (e.g., Cooren et al., 2011). As a result, their study does not make full use of the CCO view's heuristic value, which we believe lies primarily in identifying communication events, rather than individuals, as the key units of analysis.

The Role of Non-Members in the Communicative Constitution of Organizations

One major line of argument in Stohl and Stohl's paper (2011) centers on the idea that organizations are constituted by *communication among their members*. The authors explain that clandestine organizations are constituted by members who 'mutually agree upon keeping their own and others' affiliations secret' and that 'the organization may remain clandestine to protect its members' (p. 1199). In their view, the precondition for the communicative constitution of such organizations is the membership of individuals. The authors' focus on membership reminds us of the classical work by March and Simon (1958, p. 110) who maintain that 'an organization is, after all, a collection of people and what the organization does is done by people'. Quite in contrast to this, according to the Montreal School and the broader CCO view (e.g., Cooren et al., 2011) as we understand it, organizations are

constituted and maintained not necessarily by individual membership but instead by the continuous flow of communication events, which serve as the constitutive elements or 'building blocks' of organizations (Ashcraft et al., 2009). According to that view, organizations are conceptualized 'as ongoing and precarious accomplishments realized, experienced, and identified primarily […] in communication processes' (Cooren et al., 2011, p. 1150). In other words, organizations are literally 'talked into existence' (Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005, p. 409).

Consequently, Taylor and Cooren (1997), two of the founding figures of the Montreal School, argue that the constitutive force of organizations lies in particular forms of *language use*. To illustrate their arguments, the authors draw on the example of Columbus when he proclaimed Cuba to be Spanish territory. By using the phrase 'In the name of the King of Spain, I proclaim', Columbus engaged in a performative speech act; in other words, his utterance served as the means that allowed him to act as an agent on behalf of a principal, the Spanish Crown. As Taylor and Cooren elaborate:

> One [...] way to make the utterance performative other than saying *In the name of* [...], is simply to substitute for the I in *I hereby recognize* the *name* of the principal, as in *The House recognizes* [...]. Here [...] the House is a collective, not a singular entity, and its voice can only be expressed through an agent. By saying 'The House', rather than 'I', the speaker constitutes himself as such a voice, and therefore comes to give expression to the organization itself, i.e., the House. This is how the *many* voices of a collectivity become, institutionally, the *one* voice of an organization. It is also how an organization comes to exist, in discourse, and how it comes to be constituted as a reality. (Taylor & Cooren, 1997, p. 428; emphases in original)

This quote highlights an important turn in perspective on how an organization comes into being and is maintained; that is, not by and through individuals but in and through language use. According to Taylor and Cooren's view, this can be achieved in two ways: either through utterances proffered by the organization's members or direct representatives who talk on its behalf (such as Columbus's statement 'In the name of the King of Spain, *I* proclaim…'); or

through the communicative acts of *third parties*, who refer to the organization by '*it*', i.e., communicatively construct the organization as a collective actor (e.g., a news media report stating that '*al Qaeda* has executed another terrorist attack'). This idea is deeply rooted in speech act theory (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969), which argues that certain utterances can have a *performative* character: speech acts 'perform' or 'act' in the sense that it is the utterance itself which creates the very reality it is referring to (e.g., a promise represents an 'act' that has no existence other than through language use). From that viewpoint, the constitutive force of communication lies in the very use of language, so that literally every speaker (i.e. also third parties like the media) can become an agent who acts on the organization's behalf and thus contributes to its communicative construction.

The linguistic mechanisms that enable the communicative constitution of organizations, i.e. rhetorical tropes such as analogies, metaphors, or metonymies, have been examined in recent studies (e.g., Cornelissen, 2008; Sillince & Barker, 2012) that can be seen as representative of a broader CCO view (Ashcraft et al., 2009). Metonymies are figures of speech where one word stands as a substitute for another (Cornelissen, 2008; Manning, 1979). For instance, in a frequent form of metonymies (the 'synecdoche') one part stands as a substitute for the whole (in Latin: *pars pro toto*) or the whole for its parts (*totum pro parte*; Sillince & Barker, 2012). In the case of al Qaeda, media reports often use such metonymies in their descriptions of terrorist acts. For instance, reports on attacks range from references to a local group, 'Ansar al-Shariah', attributing it to 'Yemen's al Qaeda branch', and ultimately to 'al Qaeda' as the overarching organizational entity (The Wall Street Journal, 2012). Part-whole substitutions of this kind are often used by the media and may create the impression of a single pervasive, globally operating terrorist organization, thus figuratively 'completing' the organization (to borrow a term from Ahrne & Brunsson, 2011) and representing it as a larger organizational phenomenon than potentially deserved (Stohl & Stohl, 2011, p. 1205). We believe that research on rhetorical figures (e.g., Cornelissen, 2008; Sillince & Barker, 2012) can

complement the work of the Montreal School by providing important insights into how specific rhetorical tropes can foster the constitution of al Qaeda as an organizational phenomenon.

Embracing the Social-Constructionist Epistemology and the Processual Ontology of the Montreal School

In their article, Stohl and Stohl (2011) use the jihadist terrorist network al Qaeda as the paramount example of clandestine organizations. Having elaborated on why we believe the authors tend to read the work of the Montreal School (e.g., Taylor & van Every, 2000) too narrowly, we will now look at the organizational phenomenon of al Qaeda from our expanded notion of the CCO approach. In our view, Stohl and Stohl's study of al Qaeda fails to embrace fully both the *social-constructionist epistemology* (Putnam, Nicotera, & McPhee, 2009) and the *processual ontology* (Taylor, 2011) that underlie the work of the Montreal School and the CCO view more generally (e.g., Ashcraft et al., 2009; Cooren et al., 2011).

Our argumentation differs from that of Stohl and Stohl in two main respects. First, in our view, the Montreal School puts forward a processual notion of organizations: according to Taylor and van Every (2000), organizations emerge and are sustained through alternating processes of conversation (where the organization is accomplished *in situ*) and textualization (where the organization becomes stabilized as a recognizable actor through textual representations). Hence, every organization (including al Qaeda) essentially consists of a network of interlocking communication processes (Taylor, Cooren, Giroux, & Robichaud, 1996). According to this ontological assumption, al Qaeda has to accomplish its processual perpetuation under extreme circumstances, given that it constantly faces confrontations with governments, military and police forces, secret agencies etc., all of which strive to inhibit the terrorist activities executed on its behalf (Schoeneborn & Scherer, 2010a, 2010b). For these reasons, al Qaeda needs to be seen as a rather improbable organizational phenomenon. We find that Stohl and Stohl (2011) fail to provide an answer to the question of how al Qaeda

overcomes this inherent improbability and is nonetheless perpetuated (i.e., survives as an organization). The authors draw on the terminology of the Montreal School (especially Robichaud et al., 2004, p. 624) to argue that, because of al Qaeda's clandestine nature, there is a lack of mutual 'quasi-contractual understandings' and 'co-orientational relationships' between its members (Stohl & Stohl, 2011, p. 1203). This assessment, however, does not account for the organization's need to be perpetuated as a *communicative* phenomenon.

This argument brings us back to the issue of membership: normally, an organization establishes a somewhat fixed and visible membership base (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2011) that ensures the succession of its constitutive communication processes and therefore increases the organization's chances of perpetuation. However, al Qaeda seems to be able to maintain its perpetuation even though it most likely lacks an overview and cannot decide about who is a member and who is not (in this regard, as Sageman, 2008, has persuasively argued, al Qaeda shares many characteristics with social movements). In the same context, CCO scholars emphasize the importance of identity formation for stabilizing the organization as being emergent in communication; identity, in turn, is considered to be established and maintained through continuous processes of communication (e.g., Chaput, Brummans, & Cooren, 2011; Seidl, 2005). It is important to note that this identity formation can also occur through speech acts that are expressed in public (e.g., media reports) and that help to stabilize and reinforce the organization's identity 'from outside' (Kjærgaard, Morsing, & Ravasi, 2011), thus contributing to the organization's perpetuation.

For instance, in the case of the 2004 terrorist attacks in Madrid, we lack evidence of any direct or indirect connection by the executors to the terrorist network al Qaeda or to the 'core group' under Osama Bin Laden (Corman & Schiefelbein, 2008, p. 71; and acknowledged also by Stohl & Stohl, 2011, p. 1207). Nevertheless, in many news media reports, terrorist attacks like the ones in Madrid were communicatively attributed first and

foremost to al Qaeda as *the* one and only organizational actor (Corman & Schiefelbein, 2008). Hence, 'membership' (i.e. the Madrid bombers' affiliation and contribution to al Qaeda as an organizational endeavor) is retrospectively attributed in these cases through communication by media reports (i.e. third parties) in the aftermath of a terrorist attack.

Assuming that al Qaeda most likely lacks a clear overview of its members and given the opposing forces that aim to stop its activities, there is also the question of how al Qaeda is nevertheless able to transcend its inherent improbability and to accomplish its perpetuation as a processual entity. This leads us to a second and most crucial point where we deviate from Stohl and Stohl's paper (2011). The authors' argumentation is largely based on the *invisible* or *opaque* nature of al Qaeda as a 'clandestine' organization. In contrast, we argue that al Qaeda maintains its perpetuation in a paradoxical manner: while the organization appears largely *invisible* with regard to its collective governance structure, its organizational activities are, in contrast, extremely visible. In this respect, we believe that al Qaeda is actually not much more opaque than any private organization, such as a business firm. On the contrary, al Qaeda is highly transparent in the sense that it is possible to reconstruct how a terrorist act was executed, and the underlying processuality is visible (e.g., how a bomb was built; where it was placed; how it was detonated). This is primarily due to the meticulous efforts of various actors (i.e., the police, the military, political and legal actors, professional journalists, blog-gers; see Weimann, 2008) who collectively strive to reconstruct the organization's activities, what may happen or could have happened, and which organizational actor was behind these plans. In contrast, business firms often do not reconstruct past projects (and why they suc-ceeded or failed) because it is too costly or because it is incompatible with requirements for confidentiality or with established business practices (Newell, Bresnen, Edelman, Scarbrough & Swan, 2006; Schoeneborn, 2008). In the case of al Qaeda, however, such investigations and analyses are provided free of charge by public institutions and the media, prompted by the most horrible terrorist acts that are executed on its behalf. In that respect, the terrorist acts that

are executed in the name of al Qaeda are among the *most visible organizational practices imaginable*, given that they attract enormous attention by a global audience.

While we share the assumption that al Qaeda represents a highly improbable organizational endeavor (Stohl & Stohl, 2011, p. 1204), we argue that al Qaeda fundamentally depends on achieving an *extremely high degree of visibility* and attracting *global attention* for increasing the probability of its own perpetuation through the reproduction of the practices it demonstrates. This seems to occur through two mechanisms: first, every terrorist act that is attributed to al Qaeda as an organizational actor reinforces the organization's identity (Kjægaard et al., 2011) and thus contributes to its perpetuation. Second, every terrorist act triggers the "inflation" of textuality (Cooren, 2004; Kuhn, 2008); that is, an increase in communicative accounts in the mass media, blogs etc., which aim to make sense of and to reconstruct the processual background of terrorist acts. These communicative accounts offer to sympathizing actors various opportunities for mimicking, modifying, and ultimately reproducing such practices. In this context, it is important to note that, in line with the social-constructionist perspective of the Montreal School, it does not matter for the communicative perpetuation (and agency) of al Qaeda whether the communicative accounts and the social construction of a terrorist act correspond to the act per se. This argument is easy to follow if we consider that failed terrorist attempts (e.g., the bomb plot in Germany by the 'Sauerland Group' in 2007) or even vague warnings about potential terrorist acts on al Qaeda's behalf (e.g., the warnings that were issued near the ten-year anniversary of 9/11) can equally contribute to the stabilization of al Qaeda as an organizational actor and can provide templates for planning and executing terrorist acts.

Finally, we need to consider an important distinction between legitimate private organizations (e.g., most business firms) and clandestine organizations whose legitimacy is continuously at stake, or which are by nature illegitimate (such as al Qaeda or the Mafia; see

Gambetta, 2009). The distinction again relates to the paradox of (in)visibility, as outlined above. Legitimate private organizations tend to exhibit a high degree of visibility with regard to their corporate governance structures (for instance, through an entry in the trade registers, the definition and publication of governance structures and individual responsibilities, corporate reports, etc.), which is often mandatory and contributes to the business firms' societal legitimation (Palazzo & Scherer, 2006; Scherer & Palazzo, 2011). However, their internal activities (for instance, the formulation of corporate strategies, innovation processes, standards, or routines) typically remain hidden to non-members (such as competitors, the media, academic researchers, etc.) and are revealed only under special circumstances. One notable exception is the occurrence of a corporate scandal (Kuhn & Ashcraft, 2003) which challenges a business firm's legitimacy. Such a scandal may lead to public investigations (by the media and state agencies) and potentially to a court trial, both of which disclose that company's internal activities and expose them to public scrutiny.

In contrast, in permanently illegitimate organizations such as al Qaeda, while the governance structures generally remain opaque or are subject to speculation, the internal activities of how a terrorist act is prepared and executed continuously receive enormous public attention (e.g., in the detailed investigations by the media or in court cases against suspects). This is fully in line with research from mass communication studies that highlights that the media aim for satisfying people's urge to constantly monitor their environment for information that may signal the possibility of physical danger (Venables, 2005). Given the danger of terrorist activities, becoming aware of or suspecting the existence of a powerful illegitimate organization (like al Qaeda) is sufficient to initiate and continue the processes of public scrutiny by the media, police forces, and other public authorities.

Going back to the processual understanding of organizations as communicatively constituted entities that is put forth by the Montreal School (Taylor, 2011) and applying this

conceptualization to al Qaeda, we argue that this terrorist organization is constituted by the continuous succession of episodes of extreme invisibility (the clandestine and hidden preparation of terrorist acts) and of extreme visibility (the detailed reconstruction of a terrorist act's preparation and execution in its aftermath). We believe that it is especially the reversion of the relation between *invisibility* and *visibility* which differentiates al Qaeda from legitimate organizations such as private businesses (Christensen & Cornelissen, 2011) – and enables al Qaeda to survive as a global organizational endeavor against all odds. The dynamics of this interplay have not yet been sufficiently analyzed in the literature and should be addressed in future research.

Concluding Remarks

As we have already stressed, we appreciate the article by Stohl and Stohl (2011) because the authors have addressed a highly important issue within the context of organization studies; that is, the communicative constitution of extreme organizational phenomena such as al Qaeda. What is more, by drawing on the work of the Montreal School (e.g., Taylor & van Every, 2000) the authors have also pointed out a fruitful theoretical avenue for approaching this issue. However, as we have argued in this response, we believe that there is much more potential in the work of the Montreal School and the CCO view more generally (Ashcraft et al., 2009; Cooren et al., 2011), which can be harnessed if we fully embrace its underlying processual ontology and social-constructionist epistemology. In this regard, our article also illuminates fruitful research avenues for studying the communicative constitution of al Qaeda. We firmly believe that more comparative research is needed, e.g., between cases of extreme and more 'normal' organizations (see Ahrne & Brunsson, 2011), for the heterogeneous CCO perspective to achieve a next level of theoretical focus, analytical precision and granularity. In our brief response, we have highlighted the relation of visibility and invisibility (Christensen & Cornelissen, 2011; Schoeneborn, 2008), the importance of identity formation (Kjaergaard

et al., 2011; Seidl, 2005), and the communicative mechanisms of organizational completion through metonymic referencing (Cornelissen, 2008; Sillince & Barker, 2012), all of which are concepts that may prove particularly valuable in this context.

In our own research on al Qaeda (Schoeneborn & Scherer, 2010a, 2010b) we have drawn on a broader range of CCO theories (see Cooren et al., 2011), i.e., not only the work of the Montreal School but also Luhmann's theory of social systems (Luhmann, 1995, 2000), to examine theoretically the specific conditions of al Qaeda's communicative constitution. In line with the CCO view, we grasp al Qaeda first and foremost as a communicative phenomenon (i.e., an entity consisting of interconnected events of communication) whose peculiarity lies in that it continuously faces the necessity to achieve both extreme invisibility (of its governance structures) and extreme visibility (of the very activities that underlie a terrorist act and can serve as a role model to sympathizers) in order to ensure its perpetuation.

A further objective of this research is to illuminate ways of inhibiting the most horrible and destructive organizational activities that are executed on behalf of al Qaeda. We believe that the largely memberless and even 'leaderless' (Sageman, 2008) character of al Qaeda is exactly what hampers countermeasures against its terrorist activities. Arresting, incapacitating, or even assassinating individual members (even key figures, including Bin Laden; see Scheuer, 2012) is unlikely to be a sufficient countermeasure because, in our view, al Qaeda, as a network of communicative practices, will be perpetuated as long as there is a flow of communication that continues to enact its existence. Consequently, if we want to inhibit the organizational phenomenon of al Qaeda it is necessary to consider ways of diminishing the stabilizing role of communication (see Corman, Trethewey & Goodall Jr., 2008; Hodges, 2011), such as the news media or other political actors that tend to ascribe terrorist acts to al Qaeda as the *one and only* organizational actor (Schoeneborn & Scherer, 2010a, 2010b).

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