Alternative Forms of Organization and Organizing

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The term "alternative organization" has become popular within the multidisciplinary arena of organizational studies and is a focus of a great deal of attention in organizational communication as well. "Alternative" is of course an evocative term in theory as well as in practice; it is as much aspirational as it is descriptive. Consistent with many other uses of the same adjective, "alternative" in the context of organizations and organizing derives meaning chiefly from dialectical pairings. Alternative organizations are understood in opposition to the familiar, traditional, mainstream, predominant, or hegemonic institutional arrangements. Frequently, this means organizations that are less hierarchical, less bureaucratic, and more attuned to human and environmental needs than the well known players in any of the three major sectors of economy and society: private, public, and nonprofit. The adjective is also suggestive of organizational arrangements that are novel, creative, untried, or untested, and perhaps radically different from those to which a group or part of society is accustomed. Such entities and projects can range from transformations of traditional organizations toward more democratic forms; to comparatively leaderless networks; and to relatively untested means of structuring areas such as commerce, education, or community interaction (see especially Parker et al., 2014).

Of course, "alternative" may have a general or undifferentiated counterpoint (e.g., "business as usual"), be posed against a specific category or case (e.g., a new model in a particular industry or sector or a novel theoretical formulation, as contrasted with familiar models or concepts), or be used as a form of marketing to promote a specific new organization (e.g., "Our difference is … "). The term has in fact become a rallying rubric within theoretical formulations and to a significant extent in contemporary social movements as well (consider "globalization from below" initiatives). "Alternative" is also used widely in reference to lifestyle, art, music, architecture, and many other domains of human activity. In most if not all of these arenas, the use of "alternative" suggests breaking free from tradition and institutional and cultural constraints.

In order to situate alternative organizing today, it is important to place the concept within a variety of practical as well as intellectual contexts. We may observe alternative organizing as a response to any one or more of the following societal trends (offered here in no particular order): (1) responding to globalizing capitalism and growing

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inequalities (as is now discussed widely, even in the mainstream media), (2) promoting obvious and nonobvious forms of resistance to predominant trends of global capitalism and consumerism (that is, in terms of efforts to reconfigure citizenship and reconstitute contemporary "lifestyle"), (3) addressing cultural imperialism and related homogenizing forces (e.g., through advocacy for various subcultures and via techniques such as "culture jamming"), (4) reinvigorating democracy and the public sphere (e.g., with respect to multiple levels of participation and bridging segregated groups/networks), (5) supporting a variety of identities and differences (by building upon yet transcending identity politics toward new connections and levels of attachment and action), (6) counterbalancing fragmentation in its social and psychological dimensions (with new kinds of connections and operating principles), (7) confronting the global environmental crisis and moving toward a new kind of realism (i.e., in terms of confronting mounting data on the need for drastic reformulations of "civilization"), (8) taking full advantage of communication technologies for fostering connections (and recognizing the fluidity of organizational boundaries), (9) constructing a kind of translocalism (i.e., to bind local activities and movements to macro issues and trends), and (10) building in transformational change to our practices and institutions. With respect to these impulses, there is a family resemblance in that prevailing assumptions about organizations, capitalism, bureaucracy, power, and praxis are challenged. Also, it may be said that the notion of "alternative" is voiced to reject unitary solutions and to open up options, including those not previously experienced or readily seen.

Broadly speaking, we may consider alternative *communication* practices to be those that are less "mainstream" and less oriented toward the reproduction of the status quo than more accustomed practices, especially within work contexts. For the study of symbols, interactions, discourses, and networks, this means that communication can function in service of the development of alternative forms of organizing (for example, when traditional ideas of persuasion are adopted by new social movements) or can represent and indeed function as alternative organizing itself, as when experimentation with different forms of *dialogue* – as genuinely interactive communication aimed at intersubjective understanding – and *participation* become institutionalized in a new organization (see, e.g., Dutta & Pal, 2010). *Openness* is also a feature of alternative communication practice, as when leaders of an organization are especially attuned to feedback and providing opportunities for it. This is often operationalized in the form of transparency when leaders practice open book management as is done in some worker owned enterprises (Case, 1995). A third type of communication practice that can be posited as alternative involves *reflexivity* and the potential for transformation in the sense of using communication situations for deep reflection on what is being done (or not done) in a way that manifests the fullest expression of value based rationality. Concretely, this is manifested in organizations that regularly reflect on and revise their own practices, especially so as to realize core values more authentically (see Cheney, 2002).

In addition, *silence* itself may be considered "alternative" within the context of communication in that the entire field and its applications are biased toward "talk" and messaging; a number of indigenous and religious/spiritual traditions remind us that the implicit maxim "More talk is better" is not at all universally appreciated. For example,

Covarrubias and Windchief (2009) demonstrate how Native American groups often use silence to maintain their cultural identities as well as to thwart potential threats to their existence. This perspective on communicating and organizing poses challenges to received views of information and communication that tend to privilege utterances and messages for their own sake. Furthermore, alternative organizing frameworks facilitate listening to the ways in which silence works in organizational settings, both as an expression of vulnerability in the face of exploitative power of dominant groups and an act of resistance against such power.

In a manner parallel to earlier uses of "new media," the notions of alternative organizing and alternative communicating ask us to consider developments and possibilities we may not have entertained previously. In fact, advances in information and communication technology itself make multicephalous, "leaderless," anonymous, and sometimes concealed forms of organizing more possible than they were in the past. However, this trend has as its counterpoint the proliferation of surveillance of individuals as well as groups and intrusions into personal spaces, sparking ethical questions around political, social, and economic freedom. The myriad consequences of implementations of new communication and information technologies remind us of the nuances and vagaries involved in any assessment of societal trends, and the fact that with alternative structures, like those considered conventional or mainstream, pure types do not exist in reality but are nevertheless important points of reference.

The term "alternative" is unstable and fluid in part because yesterday's divergent practice can easily become today's conventional one. This was the case, for instance, with team based organizing in the 1990s and beyond, although many different kinds of participatory and collaborative practices were grouped together under that rubric (see, e.g., Cheney et al., 1998). The patterns of absorption and cooptation are even more apparent in the arts and entertainment where yesterday's "cutting edge" or visionary genre becomes today's accustomed style. Part of the dynamic of capitalism is expansion with absorption of "alternatives"; this has become much more pronounced in an age of ubiquitous marketing and a system driven more by exchange and consumption than by production (see Harvey, 2010). We can see this tendency even within environmental, simple living, and slow food movements. From the standpoint of communication, the evolution, use, and cooptation of a term such as "alternative" bear study in themselves – and for both practical and theoretical reasons.

Historical and contemporary organizational models for the most part have their corresponding *lay or everyday forms*. Managers, employees, and customers/clients experience and reproduce organizational practices as they go about their daily business, yet very few people are encouraged to think about how organizing can occur differently from along established norms. Thus, sheer imitation and organizational isomorphism are prevalent (DiMaggio & Powell, 2012). This is one reason that sometimes ill-fitting bureaucratic procedures (here used in the lay sense) are so readily adopted even in small organizations – and by the very people who love to hate bureaucracy. Reproduction of social structure, even with calls for innovation, may be seen in industries as diverse as education, finance, energy, health care, and manufacturing (Atzeni, 2012). Being part of the cultural crowd often is elevated in practice over innovation despite loud noises to the contrary. Importantly, the tendency to reproduce familiar structures

in socially driven or even radical forms of organizing was recognized decades ago within social movements themselves and has been supported by numerous case studies (e.g., Barker, 1993).

A variety of critical and systemic approaches remain important in examining and generating "alternatives": these include neo-Weberian critiques of rationality, feminism, postcolonialism, neo-Marxist structural analyses, critical theory in general, Foucauldian perspectives, and structurational analyses of system-level maintenance and change. More recently, efforts have been made to bring the biophysical as well as political environments into organizational theory and practice to argue for sustainability, stewardship, and survival (e.g., Munshi & Kurian, 2015). From each of the major theoretical standpoints – or constellations of positions – listed above, organizing is reconfigured in significant ways from accustomed or dominant viewpoints represented in both lay and theoretical thinking. Received views on fundamental concepts may be challenged: what constitutes an organization, who its members are, how the members relate to one another, how their roles are established and defined, how decisions are made, how rewards are distributed, what goals are pursued by the organization, what counts as productivity in organizing, what effectiveness and efficiency mean in a given case, how the organization represents itself, and what is the process of organizing itself. These are all questions subject to reflection and revision. A major theme running through all of these alternative viewpoints and their applications is undoubtedly *control* and its exercise (see, e.g., Deetz, 1992). Calls for and studies of alternative organizing frequently are aligned with efforts toward more equitable distributions of power and resources, whether the focus be a corporation, an industry, a community, a profession, or the economy and society as a whole. Consider Cloud's (2011) study of union democracy at Boeing and the organizing efforts of workers to shift the power balance from the unspoken collaborations between labor leaders and the management to the needs and priorities of the workers themselves. Alternative organizing is therefore often associated with "democratizing work," although this term, too, is subject to many interpretations and transformations. At the same time, of course, there are experts who do not at all agree that democratizing work is a good idea, and of course many observers in all sectors continue to regard worker control with suspicion.

Attitudes associated with alternative organizing

As already implied, one may also speak about a set of *attitudes* that accompanies alternative organizing. The first of these is *not taking for granted assumptions about organizing*. Indeed, this is where the importation of new ideas and energies into any organizational system is vital. For example, postcolonial scholars have shown how modern organizations are still shaped by colonial processes; alternative organizing in postcolonial terms, therefore, presupposes indigenous ways of doing things and acknowledging a much wider range of concepts and methods relevant to specific global–local contexts (Broadfoot & Munshi, 2007). This is also where, in network terms, "the strength of weak ties" is as relevant to organizational change and transformation as it is to an individual's career shifts and job searches. Despite

its wide influence in organizational communication, network theory has not been exploited or applied extensively to this critically oriented perspective. However, even largely descriptive-empirical studies of organizational communication networks offer realizations of forms of segregation, divergent worldviews, and conflict, and thus offer seeds of possible avenues for education and intervention.

A second attitude is *cultivating imagination and visualization in terms of the possible* (or even what is thought to be impossible). There is a shortage of publicly available and well developed models alternative to that of corporate–consumer capitalism as the chief point of reference for institutions today. The sheer lack of vision – literally of not being able to *see* other ways of doing things – is one reason why there is *a discourse of inevitability* (Aune, 2001) around such trends as free trade agreements, the privatization of social services, and that unchecked growth has no strong competitor. However, the hegemony of the growth perspective fostered by powerful corporate interests, which may be seen in the domains of finance, agriculture, education, energy, technology, and many others, is beginning to be challenged as people form cross-national alliances to look for new ways of organizing dissent and paving radically new pathways for the future (Teune, 2010).

A third attitude is *the promotion of experimentation*. Alternative organizing requires the value driven energetic efforts of groups as well as individuals embodied in social entrepreneurialism (e.g., Roper & Cheney, 2005). For communication, entrepreneurship is pertinent for a range of activities, including building mechanisms of social support toward innovative, collaborative, project based activity. Importantly, some research in organizational studies – as well as some practical efforts in the domain of cooperatives and related ventures – has attempted to appropriate symbols of entrepreneurship in contexts of shared leadership and collective pursuits (see, e.g., Mook et al., 2015).

Principles associated with alternative organizing

There are a number of principles commonly associated with alternative organizing and these have their parallels in communication related terms. The first is *autonomy*, as supported by recent surveys of workers and on work life. The largest survey of workers in US history, detailed in the book *What Workers Want* (Freeman & Rogers, 1999), highlights autonomy as being one of the keys to job satisfaction and productivity – across classes of occupations – yet at the same time shows this sense to be lacking in most work settings. While, at first blush, autonomy would seem not to relate directly to communication, it is connected strongly to how messages (directives, recommendations, discussions) set parameters for further reflection and action. Autonomy is manifest in communication terms through the right to select and frame issues, initiate discussions, and offer voice consistently. Research on voice and participation considers the right to be heard at the highest level of the organization about relevant work matters to be crucial to the health of an organization.

A second principle is *equality/equity* in the sense of shared stake and opportunity. The worker cooperative movement, which has gained steam during the years since the

global economic crisis began in 2007–08, offers a model that at least in principle unites labor and capital and establishes a one-person, one-vote means of governance, that is, for the major policies of the company (Webb & Cheney, 2014). Communication, of course, can be productively viewed as a resource, and the "voice" metaphor for communication is suggestive of such a perspective. But, communication also holds useful insights into how structures invite or exclude considerations of new ways of doing things. For example, the framing of new managerial regimes or programs is often univocal in the sense of insisting on a particular trend or technique as the "one best way" (and this, in effect, becomes a type of discursive closure; see Deetz, 1992).

The principle of *participation and democracy* is seen on multiple levels from work group or team to the organization's relationship with the larger society (Pateman, 1970). Today's efforts at bringing socially inspired companies out into the community are manifestations of a vision of participation that seeks to invigorate the public sphere. Participation is a complicated matter, however, implicating motivation, origin, authority, technique, goals, self-reflection, and capacity for revision, among other factors (Stohl & Cheney, 2001). Participation itself is constituted in important ways by communicative practice.

A fourth principle is *solidarity and connection in terms of the embodiment of commitments to the community*. This principle, which ties in with the responsibility to pursue value based policies and practices, is used for something that goes far beyond, say, strategic philanthropy, important though that may be in terms of fostering community ties as well as socially responsible development (see, e.g., the now well known "triple bottom line"). Insights from indigenous entrepreneurship are in fact very useful in framing ideas about community based organizing. Examples of such organizing include Kaupapa Maori organizing in Aotearoa-New Zealand, which is based on improving the health, wealth, and well-being of communities rather than individuals (Henry, 2007). The idea of community, linked inextricably as it is with communication, is a constantly regenerative way of both living and organizing (Munshi, Broadfoot, & Smith, 2011).

Conclusion and prospects for future research

What, then, does alternative organizing look like, and how do we know an alternative organization when we see it? As is the case with Weber's ideal types of authority and organization, we should not be tempted to look for or build perfect cases. Rather, we may look to alternative aspects or dimensions of organizations that may be present in varying degrees: take, for example, the contributions and limitations of microcredit or finance institutions, gift economies, and so on. Or, consider the surprisingly forward looking dimensions of presumably conservative institutions, such as many family owned businesses. Also, it is important to note that some alternative organizing efforts will be more context specific or domain based (consider alternative organizations for immigrants not associated with or protected by any nation-state) while others will be more generally applicable (consider how principles of mediation and dialogue may be

applied across a variety of organizational activities). Sensitivity to the degree of transferability or generalizability (even from a contingent standpoint) is especially important as we look across nations, cultures, and ethnic groups where, for example, "professionalism" may have very different implications for policy and interactions and for groups such as refugees and the homeless where organizing must take on creative, ad hoc, and contingent qualities (Ferrell, 2014).

Returning to the term "alternative organizations," we can consider its heuristic and practical value for the future. The term itself is not yet tired or hackneyed, and that supports its continued usefulness. But, questions remain as to whether it can be employed in new ways and new contexts as well as about its ability to inspire. Future research should also consider how the term and processes of alternative organizing relate to the use of various traditional and new media. These are just some of the important issues to investigate as we consider not only the life of the term, but also the larger question of how best to advance the values and goals most commonly associated with "alternative" and "organization."

SEE ALSO: Alternative Work Arrangements; Capitalism; Change, Organizational; Clandestine/Hidden Organizations; Collaboration; Dialogic Perspectives; Feminist Approaches; Organization–Society Relationship; Postcolonial Approaches; Power; Resilience Processes; Silence; Workplace Democracy

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