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Summoning the spirits: Organizational texts and the (dis)ordering properties of communication

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Abstract
This article addresses the question: why does disorder tend to simultaneously accompany efforts to create order when organizing? Adopting a communication-centered perspective, we specifically examine the role of texts in the mutual constitution of order and disorder. Drawing on empirical material from three qualitative case studies on project organizing, we show that attempts of ordering through language use and texts (i.e. by closing and fixing meaning) tend to induce disordering (i.e. by opening the possibility of multiple meanings), at the same time. As we contend, these (dis)ordering dynamics play a key role in the communicative constitution of organization, keeping them in motion by calling forth continuous processes of meaning (re-)negotiation.

Keywords
communicative constitution of organization, cross-case analysis, disordering, order and disorder, organization theory, organizational texts, project organizing

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> Die ich rief, die Geister, werd ich nicht mehr los!
> (The spirits I summoned, I cannot get rid of them!)
> (Excerpt translated from Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1779): The Sorcerer's Apprentice)

A wide variety of scholarly works (e.g. Berger, 1967; Prior, 2012) have used Goethe's poem *The Sorcerer's Apprentice* as an illustration of the uncontrolled forces of nature that, once disrupted, can throw the world into fearsome chaos. In the original tale, the mighty brooms, which the apprentice invokes to tidy up the sorcerer's castle, are set in motion, fetching buckets of water with a mind of their own, nearly drowning the well-intentioned but mischievous apprentice. While Goethe's poem is usually interpreted as a cautionary tale and a critique of science (Paul, 1972), we believe that it also nicely captures a situation commonly experienced in the context of organization: that of people creating and using tools to bring order when organizing, but in doing so, releasing 'spirits' that escape their control. Strategic plans, schedules, minutes, work agendas, and so forth, are all common and mundane tools used for ordering. Yet, when those tools are employed, they often create – *at the same time* – confusion, disruption, misunderstanding; in other words, disorder. To some extent, in real life, as in Goethe's *The Sorcerer's Apprentice*, people who engage in organizing are constantly 'haunted' by the disordering effects of their ordering efforts.

In this article, we begin with this paradoxical yet most common organizational experience in order to ask *why* disorder tends to simultaneously accompany efforts to create order when organizing. While this is an empirical question, it echoes a long-standing ontological debate in organization studies: namely, the orderly or disorderly nature of organization (e.g. Astley and Van de Ven, 1983). In short, this debate is grounded in two opposite views of organization. The first emphasizes the rational and planned features of organization, while the second highlights its emergent and non-rational nature. A major consequence of this dualistic conception is that it implies that order and disorder are conceived as mutually exclusive (Farjoun, 2010): the presence of one means the absence of the other. In that respect, this dualistic conception fails to adequately explain the question of their simultaneity. Furthermore, when applied to organizational practices, it is translated in terms presupposing that order precedes and is 'superior' to disorder – a presupposition that we strongly contest in this article.

To illuminate the simultaneity of order and disorder, we closely examine how they mutually enable and constitute one another (see also Berg and Timmermans, 2000; Bisel, 2008, 2009). To that end, and adopting a communication-centered perspective, we empirically explore the 'perpetual movement between order and disorder' (Cooper, 1998: 154) by focusing on the (dis)ordering properties of communication. We define '(dis)ordering' as communication-based organizing processes through which meaning is simultaneously opened (i.e. disordering) and closed (i.e. ordering). For instance, the minutes of a strategy meeting may delineate meaning by summarizing the main issues, debates and decisions that formed the content of that particular meeting (see, for instance, Spee and Jarzabkowski, 2011). However, whenever language is used and texts are created and shared, meanings tend to multiply and escape the full control of single actors (see also Calás and Smircich, 1999). Consequently, the very same meeting minutes are open to multiple interpretations, especially when the text leaves the initial context of its

creation. Importantly, however, we argue that the locus of (dis)ordering lies in the communication event itself (i.e. as soon as actors make use of language and/or texts) and becomes visible in the (re)negotiation of meaning.[1]

In this article, we particularly focus on the role of organizational texts; namely, documents, templates, or other written artifacts that are created and used in the context of organizing (Fayard and Metiu, 2012). Texts offer useful insights into the mutual interdependence of order and disorder (see Prior, 2012). Usually conceived and designed as tools for ordering, organizational texts are expected to act as reliable and efficient devices that help fix meaning (Chia and King, 2001). Yet, because texts rely on language, they tend to open vast contingencies of potential meanings, thus escaping their initial creators' full control (Cooren, 2004). Accordingly, focusing on organizational texts allows us to explain why, in the process of text creation, writing and use, meaning is both fixed and on the verge of dissolution.

We empirically study the (dis)ordering properties of textual communication through a cross-case analysis of vignettes taken from three cases of project organizing. Our study draws on a framework that covers three analytical dimensions to study the (dis)ordering properties of textual communication: (1) the *genre* of organizational texts, which formalizes (i.e. gives form to) meaning that, in turn, allows for its transformation; (2) the *language* used in organizational texts that excludes (other) signs and (other) meanings, which then 'haunt' those included for ordering; and (3) the decontextualization and recontextualization of organizational texts, which inscribe the process of meaning negotiation in a broader *context*, therefore opening it to multiple spaces and times. As our study reveals, efforts to create order in project organizing are 'haunted' by the simultaneous creation of disorder along all three dimensions of this framework.

On the basis of these findings, our article makes two main contributions. First, we contribute to answering *why* and *how* order and disorder occur simultaneously in organizing. More specifically, we offer an analytical framework that specifies the (dis)ordering properties of communication and allows us to examine the empirical phenomenon of the simultaneous occurrence of order and disorder in organizing. Second, our communication-centered perspective allows us to tackle the ontological question of how organizations come into being and perpetuate their existence. Importantly, the central argument of our article, that order and disorder occur simultaneously in communication, leads us to a new understanding of organizations as communicative phenomena that are constituted through ongoing processes of opening and closing of meaning.

Views on order and disorder in organization studies

Since the seminal works of Fayol (1918), Taylor (1911) and Parsons (1951), classic organization and management theories have traditionally been associated with a rational perspective. From that viewpoint, organizations are systems from which chaos must be eliminated (Nonaka, 1988). Control and order are regarded as the essence of organization and provide means of assuring the system's stability and, consequently, its continuity and survival. Accordingly, disorder is seen as the disruption of this stability: an unplanned event that must be prevented or controlled. To avoid disorder, organizations are thus required to rationalize work processes and introduce operating routines and procedures.

This emphasis on order as the functional and defining state of organizations has been the dominant perspective in organization and management studies and still prevails in some recent notions of organization (e.g. see the definition of organization as 'decided order' by Ahrne and Brunsson, 2011: 84) as well as in various sub-fields of inquiry, such as management accounting (e.g. Lukka, 2007), strategic planning and control (e.g. Candy and Gordon, 2011) or corporate social responsibility (CSR) and governance (Baumann-Pauly et al., 2013). However, most of these works tend to neglect the non-rationality (or irrationality) (March and Simon, 1958), paradoxes (Smith and Lewis, 2011), tensions (Trethewey and Ashcraft, 2004), and emergent actions (Hatch, 1997) that are inherent to day-to-day work in organizational contexts, as various practice-based and process-based studies have revealed (e.g. Levina and Orlikowski, 2009; Manning, 2008).

The orderly and rational conception of organizations has furthermore been challenged by scholars who recognize the disorderly and emergent aspects of organizations and who seek to account for the divergence, instability and contingencies that characterize them (e.g. Hassard et al., 2008). In the literature, we can distinguish two different positions with respect to disorder. The first position, mainly associated with complexity theories (e.g. Morin, 2005; Stacey, 1995), defines organizations as dynamic systems whose outcome is unpredictable although a set of order-generating rules governs them (Burnes, 2005). Unlike the rational view of organization, this perspective acknowledges disorder as an integral part of the system's dynamics. Disorder and order are both necessary for the organization's continuity and survival. If an organization's processes are too ordered, the system dies; if its processes are too chaotic, it collapses (MacIntosh and MacLean, 2001). Although this definition presents a more balanced view of order and disorder, it tends to separate disorder from order at least in the temporal dimension; it suggests that organizations, as dynamic systems, move sequentially from order to disorder (or the other way around; Poole and Van de Ven, 1989). Moreover, by placing the emphasis on equilibrium and perpetuation, this view, like the rational view, privileges order as the primary (or at least desired) mode of organization.

The second position related to the disorderly conception of organization is more radical. It embraces disorder as the characterizing ethos of organizations by directly challenging the order/disorder dualism. Often associated with postmodernist and processual thinking, this stream of the literature portrays organizations as inherently messy and disorderly social phenomena (e.g. Abrahamson, 2002; Cunha et al., 2009). This radical approach is concerned with topics such as tension and contradictions (e.g. Smith and Lewis, 2011), or innovation and emergent development (e.g. Hatch, 1997), and highlights the situated and contingent nature of organizations. However, one shortcoming of this perspective is that it tends to overlook regular patterns, such as routines and procedures (e.g. Feldman, 2000; Pentland and Rueter, 1994), or organizational memory and path dependencies (e.g. Sydow et al., 2009), which are key to explaining how organizations endure in time and space.

Taken together, these different views of organization form a continuum that ranges from 'organized order' to 'disorganized disorder'. Each of these conceptions foregrounds one dimension and downplays the other. Importantly, the separation of order from disorder implies that the presence of one presupposes the absence of the other. However, the most mundane experience of organizing (e.g. planning a party or moving from one house

to another; Cooren and Fairhurst, 2009) reveals that both order and disorder tend to simultaneously arise in the course of organizing.

Let us explore a context where this issue is especially salient: project management. In the literature on project management, order is seen not only as a desired outcome (e.g. Shenhar and Dvir, 1996), but also as an imperative of success (Cicmil et al., 2009). The prevalence of order is reflected, for example, in the importance given to planning and control (Packendorff, 1995), or in the standardization of the life cycle of projects (e.g. Lewis, 2002). In this view, projects go through a succession of phases (from concept to closeout) during which disorder is expected to decrease. The mainstream project management literature tends to be based on a model of action that is rational, sequential, predictable and standardizable (Cicmil et al. 2009; Söderlund, 2005). In that context, disorder is usually perceived negatively, as something that threatens projects and should be fought and eliminated. However, studies focusing on the everyday practices of project work (e.g. Sergi, 2012; Söderlund et al., 2008) have shown that, while these endeavors are marked by conscious efforts to establish order and control, there is a constant need to grapple with contingencies. Such works vividly illustrate how challenging ordering can be and reveal that managing projects is as much about creating order as about creating disorder. Yet, these studies fail to adequately explain *why* this happens at all.

In this article, we address this empirical issue by looking at the simultaneity and mutual constitution of order and disorder in organizing. We take inspiration from Cooper's (1986) ontology of organization/disorganization, whose main premise is that organization as a process – which for Cooper is the only way of thinking about organization – is constantly intertwined with disorganization. However, while we share Cooper's ontological premise, we differ from his work and that of his followers (e.g. Chia, 1998; Hassard et al., 2008) in that we *empirically* address the processuality of organization/disorganization by developing, as we describe next, a communication-centered perspective on the phenomenon we call '(dis)ordering'.[2]

A communication-centered perspective on (dis)ordering

In the field of organization studies, the fundamental and formative role of communication in organizational phenomena of all kinds is particularly emphasized in an emerging stream of literature (Cooren et al., 2011), known under the label 'communicative constitution of organization' or 'CCO' perspective (see Ashcraft et al., 2009; Brummans et al., 2014; Putnam and Nicotera, 2009). The main proponents of this perspective claim that communication 'is the means by which organizations are established, composed, designed, and sustained' (Cooren et al., 2011: 1150). According to this view, organizations essentially *consist of* interconnected processes of communication, defined as the recursive articulation of conversations and texts (Taylor and Van Every, 2000). Here, 'text' refers to a 'string of language' (p. 37), that is, a discourse that materializes human sensemaking. However, this does not imply that texts are necessarily in a written form, given that any discursive resource that enters sensemaking can be considered a text. In turn, conversation refers to the situated activity of interaction in which text is reflexively and retrospectively created (Taylor and Robichaud, 2004). For Taylor and Van Every (2000), organization emerges in communication as *described* in text and *realized* in

conversation. When described, organization becomes an object toward which organizational actors will co-orient their actions. When realized, organization is enacted through interaction and is related to processes of meaning negotiation.

To study communication in these terms, we focus on *communication events* as the main building blocks of organizational reality (Blaschke et al., 2012; Cooren et al., 2011; Jian et al., 2008). We define a communication event as a sequence of instances of communication (i.e. texts and conversations) that are performed in a distinct space-time. Adopting this notion of communication events has three main implications for our inquiry. First, it leads us to dismiss a representational understanding of communication as no more than the expression of social reality and instead to highlight its performative character (Searle, 1995). Second, it allows us to emphasize the contingent nature of communication, which implies that meaning is always situated in specific circumstances characterized by the ongoing oscillation between conversations and texts (Taylor and Van Every, 2000; Taylor et al., 1996). In that respect, people in interaction make sense of a particular utterance by relating it to the situation of language use (Bateson, 1972; Cooren et al., 2011: 1152). Third, it places the communication event in a larger space-time framework, thus accentuating the continuous necessity of meaning negotiation and transformation when actors engage in organizing (Ashcraft et al., 2009: 22).

In line with these considerations (and as mentioned in our introduction), we define (dis)ordering as communication-based organizing processes through which meaning is simultaneously closed (i.e. ordering) and opened (i.e. disordering). More specifically, ordering can be understood as the delineation and demarcation of meaning through language use (e.g. through the definition of specific terms). In contrast, disordering can be understood as the possibility of multiple interpretations and ways of contextualization, which arises from the fact that language is, by definition, open-ended (Kuhn, 2012; Porter, 2013). Importantly, this fundamental indeterminacy of meaning lies in the communication event itself. As soon as actors make use of language and/or texts, meanings tend to multiply and exceed the authors' full control, owing to the inherent (dis)ordering properties of communication-in-use (see also Kuhn, 2012).

Extant works that follow the CCO perspective have primarily examined how communication creates social order (see also Bisel, 2009, 2010, who criticizes the 'organizing bias' of the organizational communication literature, including CCO thinking). For instance, Cooren (2000) has extensively studied the 'organizing properties of communication', essentially arguing that many features of language, such as grammar, institutionalized turn-taking, recurrent narratives and storytelling, bring forth orders of meaning (see also Putnam and Nicotera, 2010). Taylor and Robichaud (2004) lifted this observation to the ontological level. They argue that each instance of language use carries the seed for the potential emergence of organizations as social entities and collective 'macro-actors'. Here the emphasis lies primarily on how communication creates consensus on *who* or *what* is authorized to speak 'on behalf of' the organization, thus creating organizational coherence and identity (Taylor and Cooren, 1997; Taylor and Van Every, 2014).

However, a number of empirical studies have also shed light on the disorderly dimension of communication. For instance, Weick (1993) explored the vulnerabilities of collective sensemaking, showing that they lead to chaos and eventually even to the

destruction of organizations. Yet, this disorderly dimension has only recently become a topic of discussion among proponents of the CCO perspective (e.g. Bisel, 2008; Kuhn, 2012; Porter, 2013). For example, Cooren et al. (2011: 1160) point out that 'communication is as much about the destruction and transformation of meanings as it is about their construction'. While our article shares with these works the emphasis on the disorderly side of communication, we contest its association with the 'destruction' of meaning. On the contrary, we argue that any effort to delineate meaning and reduce the number of possible interpretations through communication simultaneously opens new potential interpretations. In that sense, meaning is never destroyed, but can always be transformed and renegotiated (see also Denegri-Knot and Parsons, 2014). Our notion of (dis)ordering also aims to avoid negative connotations regarding disorder, as it includes the continuous source of improvisation and innovation through language use (see Pina e Cunha and Gomes, 2003).

In light of the above, we further explore the (dis)ordering properties of communication by focusing on organizational texts.[3] This idea may seem counter-intuitive at first. Texts, as documents, templates or other written artifacts (Fayard and Metiu, 2012), are often described and used as devices that help create order by materializing, inscribing and thus fixing meaning (e.g. Chia and King, 2001). Moreover, in the literature, organizational texts are considered to possess ordering capacities (e.g. see the notion of 'ordering device' by Bossen and Markussen, 2010) and persisting properties (e.g. Latour, 1986; Smith, 2001). These studies highlighted the structuring and stabilizing effects of texts (e.g. Anderson, 2004) and showed that they support planning, organizing and coordinating (e.g. Callon, 2002) and also prescribe action (e.g. Berg, 1997; Bloomfield and Vurdubakis, 1994).

However, as Kuhn (2008) argued, as soon as texts are 'put in use' (what we call 'texts-in-use'), there is always at least some degree of interpretation, translation and negotiation at work, given that (material) texts cannot be fully separated from their social context and use (as also emphasized by the literature on 'sociomateriality'; e.g. Leonardi, 2013 or Orlikowski, 2007). This can be explained by the difference – what Derrida (1968, 1978) named différ*a*nce – that is actively at play between the sign inscribed in the text and the system of signs to which it refers. This process of differentiation results from the structure of language, which always implies a binary opposition between a present sign and its correlated absent (Derrida, 1994: 61). Especially in written language, the meaning associated with the term inscribed in a text always implies other absent meanings – those that 'haunt' the text (see also Cooren, 2009). For Derrida, texts (and written language in general) are the privileged site of this process of differentiation.

Moreover, texts have the inherent capacity to extend beyond their initial temporal and spatial context of creation – what Ricœur (1981) refers to as decontextualization or distantiation, and Cooren and Fairhust (2009) name dislocation. Hence, the 'accidental' features of a text can appear to betray or subvert its substantial meaning (Rorty, 1995). In a similar vein, we argue that, far from fixing meaning, texts always open an array of possible understandings, thus functioning not only as ordering devices, but also – and simultaneously – as disordering devices. Recognizing the capacity of texts to both fix and open meaning also foregrounds the question of their agency. Without entering into this debate at length, here we follow Cooren's (2004, 2006) relational ontology to recognize

that organization is a hybrid phenomenon made possible by the action of heterogeneous and multiple agents, including texts.

To summarize, the communication-centered perspective developed in this section makes the following main arguments for understanding the simultaneity of order and disorder. First, we argue that communication constitutes organizations. Second, communication has inherent (dis)ordering properties, owing to the fundamental indeterminacy of meaning in language use. Hence, because organizations are accomplished in communication, any action aimed at organizing entails both processes of ordering (i.e. fixing meaning) and disordering (i.e. opening meaning), *at the same time.* These arguments allow us to give a conceptual answer to the *why* of the simultaneity of order and disorder in organizing. In what follows, we further explore these arguments by focusing on *how* (dis)ordering is at work in a specific context: project organizing. From this exploration, we propose an analytical framework for studying the role of organizational texts as (dis)ordering devices.

Empirical setting and method

Our empirical inquiry into the (dis)ordering properties of communication was defined during a series of conversations between the authors (following an approach similar to the one described by Zorn et al., 2000). All three of us had independently conducted extensive qualitative case studies on project organizing, two of which were based on the ethnographic tradition (e.g. Czarniawska-Joerges, 1992; Schwartzmann, 1993). Our first conversations drew on a communication-centered perspective to discuss our empirical data and oscillated between informal comparisons and conceptual questioning of our cases. This research logic is grounded in what Peirce calls *abduction*, a mode of reasoning that involves 'examining a mass of facts and in allowing these facts to suggest a theory. In this way we gain new ideas; but there is no force in the reasoning' (Peirce, 1905, CP 8.209). Abduction is based on back-and-forth movements between a body of knowledge and an observed phenomenon. Following this reasoning, we realized that all three of us had observed a recurrent pattern in our respective cases: actors in these organizations were constantly striving to create order and yet, at the same time, their efforts created disorder.

We thus opted for a cross-case analysis based on empirical material from our three case studies (Creswell, 1998). Cross-case analysis is increasingly applied in organization studies because it combines the richness of qualitative studies with the analytical advantages of comparisons across various cases (e.g. Abdallah et al., 2011; Bechky and Okhuysen, 2011). As mentioned previously, we argue that project organizing lends itself to exploring the (dis)ordering nature of organization, because questions of order and disorder are recurrent and prevalent in this empirical context. We conducted cross-case comparisons along a number of dimensions, such as the phase in the projects' life cycle, the primary types of texts used or the organizational context in which the projects took place.

During our data reduction and refinement process, we focused on the texts (e.g. plans, requirement lists, charts and various reports) that explicitly materialized various actions associated with project organizing. In the context of our inquiry, these texts were usually

standardized templates (i.e. formal tools designed to create order). When we revisited our empirical material, we focused our attention on the purpose for which these texts had been used in specific communication events – for example, to guide a meeting, summarize a past project and so on. We refined our search by selecting for further analysis those texts that appeared to be most frequently used by actors throughout or beyond projects. Following that step, we discussed and cross-compared the different communication events that each of us identified and we selected from each project the one event that best illustrated the *aspectualities* (i.e. the different ways of studying or experiencing a phenomenon; Searle, 1995) of (dis)ordering in project organizing. Each of these three chosen events was located at a different point in the life cycle of its respective project. The first one occurred at the very beginning of the project in question, and the text involved was a proposal form used to launch a coordination meeting and, more broadly, the project itself. The second event was situated around its project's mid-point; the text in question was a functional analysis written to solve an unexpected technical problem. The third event occurred after the projects were completed. Here, most of the relevant texts were PowerPoint presentations made available to other consultants through a cross-project learning database.

We then each developed a short narrative summarizing the selected communication events. The first round of data analysis gave us the opportunity to explore the intricacies of the process through which order and disorder were mutually constituted. During that round, we mainly examined how meaning was opened and closed through the texts-in-use that were associated with each communication event. The second round of analysis led us to refine our inquiry by focusing on three textual dimensions, which form our analytical framework, to define how each of them contributed to the opening and closure of meaning: (1) *genre of the text-in-use*: this refers to the form of a particular genre (i.e. its structural features and communication medium), the recurrent pattern inscribed in using a text (Yates and Orlikowski, 1992); (2) *language of the text-in-use*: this refers to the salient linguistic features of each text (e.g. space, closure statements or rhetorical tropes); and (3) *context of the text-in-use*: this refers to the broader spatio-temporal context in which the communication event was embedded.

Before we present our findings, we briefly introduce the three studies in question and the research contexts in which they were conducted (all details relating to the identities of each case's organizations and organizational actors have been altered in order to preserve their anonymity). Table 1 provides a general overview of our three case studies.

Case 1: ConCiencia

The first case focuses on the discursive and material practices through which ConCiencia, a non-formal education program run by the Chilean government, expanded itself in the country. This program develops and sets forth diverse initiatives aimed at creating a national scientific culture. Its major annual event, and the object of the study, is the 'Science Week', which includes a range of activities, such as science exhibitions and conferences. Our data collection, following the ethnographic tradition, mainly involved shadowing (McDonald, 2005) the different activities (i.e. meetings, phone calls, hallway conversations, 'silent' work) and attending various events related to organizing this

Table 1. Overview of the three case studies.

	Case 1	Case 2	Case 3
Organization	ConCiencia: a governmental science-outreach program	FluxSoft: a software development company	BlueChip Consulting: a multinational business consulting firm
Project(s)	The Science Week project: ConCiencia's main national outreach event	The Curvus project: rewriting an application that creates graphics	IT-based consulting projects for firms in various industries
Moment in the life of the project	Project planning	Project execution	Project closure
Text	Proposal form	Technical template for project execution	Executive summary slide
Data collection	Ethnographic case study (mainly) based on video-shadowing the project	Ethnographic case study (mainly) based on observation	Qualitative case study (mainly) based on document analyses and interviews
Empirical material	170 hours of video recordings, 12 interviews, 25 documents	22 meetings, 25 interviews, 800 pages of documents	565 documents, 14 interviews

project in one of ConCiencia's regional branches. The data, collected over a period of three months, cover 170 hours of audiovisual recordings, 12 semi-structured interviews, one focus group and 25 documents (see also, Vásquez, 2013).

Case 2: FluxSoft

The second case study focuses on the social practices and on the contribution of materiality in a software development project. The study was conducted at FluxSoft, a North American software development company, and is based on one of the company's main projects, the Curvus project. This project consisted in overhauling an application used to produce graphics in one of the modules of FluxSoft's flagship software. During the ethnographic study, 22 meetings were observed, 25 interviews were conducted, and more than 800 pages of documents (such as plans, technical documents, emails and drafts of the program written in code) were collected and analyzed (see also, Sergi, 2012). Most of the meetings were dedicated to discussing these documents, whose production, use and circulation are mandatory in the company.

Case 3: BlueChip Consulting

The third case study was conducted at the European office of a multinational business consulting firm that focuses on developing IT-based solutions for its clients. One of the authors worked for three months in the firm's knowledge management department and had access to two company-wide electronic databases where consultants shared documents in order to facilitate cross-project learning (Ayas and Zeniuk, 2001). This

qualitative case study included the collection and analysis of 565 documents drawn from the databases, plus 14 qualitative interviews with employees involved in practices of project documentation (i.e. consultants and employees from the firm's knowledge management division; see also Schoeneborn, 2013).

Findings

In this section, we present our findings in the form of three vignettes, one associated with each case. Each vignette corresponds to one of the communication events selected, focusing more specifically on the role of texts as (dis)ordering devices and pointing out (1) their genre, (2) the salient linguistic features of each text, and (3) the broader context of the respective project in which each text was embedded.

Case 1: ConCiencia

Our first case deals with the Science Week project, which, as noted earlier, is ConCiencia's major annual event. We focused particularly on the project's initial meeting at one of ConCiencia's regional branches for two main reasons. First, compared with the next two cases, this meeting allowed us to observe (dis)ordering at play at the beginning of a project; that is, at a moment in a project's lifetime that many works in the traditional literature associate with the projection of order (e.g. Lewis, 2002). Second, the analysis of this meeting was particularly fruitful because the participants expressly referred to, and oriented their actions toward, the document they were using, making the role of this text discursively and materially visible. During this meeting, the project manager and head of the regional branch, Alejandra, explained the main orientation and purpose of the Science Week to the newly appointed communications manager, Carla. More precisely, Alejandra described the tasks associated with completing a proposal form required by ConCiencia's central committee. Completing this form is the first important step in starting the Science Week project, because each regional branch must submit it to the central committee in order to receive funding.

The proposal form is a 15-page Word document. It is composed of four sections: (1) identification; (2) program of activities; (3) calendar of activities; and (4) budget. As we can see in Figure 1, to complete each section, one must fill in the blank boxes corresponding to specific items.

This excerpt illustrates the (dis)ordering dynamics at work when this form is used in the interaction between Alejandra and Carla. The excerpt shows that this text-in-use orders the communicational dynamics of the meeting (e.g. turn-taking, effects of alignment, content of the conversation) and, as the larger ethnographic study revealed, the series of actions involved in coordinating the Science Week regional project (see also Vásquez and Cooren, 2013). It becomes obvious that the participants in the meeting seem to expect that this form, as an ordering device, will achieve its purpose; namely, to substantiate order through the inscription of tasks, responsibilities, goals and deadlines. They rely on it to accomplish their tasks, and to some extent, one might say, to bring them into order. However, a small disruption of this communicational dynamic in the interaction reveals that the form can also create disorder. If its structure is meant to fix meaning by requiring that the blank boxes be filled in, the same structure also opens

II. PROGRAM OF ACTIVITIES

1. SPECIFIC ACTIVITIES REQUIRED BY THE PROGRAM CONCIENCIA

1.1

Name of the outreach activity	**One Thousand Scientists, One thousand Classrooms**
Date of realization	Tuesday 3rd October 2006
Participants (People and institutions)	

1.2

Name of the difusion activity	**Science Day at my school**
Date of realization	
Participants (People and institutions)	

Figure 1. Example of the proposal form (our own translation from Spanish; same template layout as in the original).

multiple possibilities for different meanings that 'haunt' the interaction. (The following excerpt was translated into English from Spanish by the authors. The passages in bold are considered key for the analysis.)

Alejandra: OK, then. [Let's start with] the subject of the National Science and Technology Week. Besides, after this we will look at the subject of the schedule for this week, won't we?

Carla: Yes.

Alejandra: Here is a copy of the form . . . OK [she gives a copy of the form to Carla and then she starts turning the pages of her own copy].

Carla: Yes, I'd like you to explain this to me, because this is new for me, Alejandra.

Alejandra: Yes [she is still going through her own copy]. Yes, but the form looks difficult; it's 15 pages but it repeats over and over. **The only important thing** is – [she looks at the first page of the form]. What we need is to put here the information of every – **It had a blank page?** [While asking the question, she glances at Carla's copy of the form and then at her own copy, to see if it also has a blank page].

Carla: Yes.

Alejandra: Oh! It must have slipped in there. Take it out.

Carla: OK, I'll just take it out; that's it [she removes the blank page].

Alejandra: Hmm . . . here we need to put the information of every member of the Network.
Carla: The Institutional Network?
Alejandra: Exactly. OK, so, **the first thing we need to know is when we are going to schedule the meeting for this Network** [she checks the calendar on her desk].
Carla: Yes.
Alejandra: That should be – we decided that Mondays =
Carla: = Monday afternoon.
Alejandra: So, next Monday.
Carla: So, next Monday.
Alejandra: Yes; is that OK? So, **I'd like you to do** a formal invitation [she gives more instructions to Carla].

The text we have here belongs to a particular 'genre' of organizational communication: the project proposal form. The structure of the template on which this text is based is typical of this genre: it comprises tables and blank spaces that, one might say, are 'asking to be filled'. In a proposal form (and in written documents in general), a blank space has a specific meaning and function, both of which correspond to complex sets of rules and writing conventions. In printing, for example, spaces are used to create order by establishing regular patterns. Thus, inserting spaces between words, letters, numbers or tables materially inscribes some form of order in the text. In the context of our inquiry, however, the main point of interest is what happens when this text is brought into the interaction (i.e. the text-in-use).

As the excerpt shows, the meeting starts with Alejandra handing the form to Carla and proceeds as a conversation between the two while they study the form page by page so as to orient the meeting and the subsequent tasks that must be performed for the Science Week project to advance. While the form provides some guidance and order in this interaction, it does not determine order in itself. Ordering is a joint communicative effort in which Alejandra and Carla are also the protagonists. They explicitly invest effort in making sense of this document (e.g. Carla asks for explanations, Alejandra translates the text), fixing its meaning as they do so, to identify the details and actions they must take in order to complete it. Interestingly, this effort simultaneously opens the form's role and function, and the Science Week project as a whole, to multiple (absent) meanings. In this case, one of the meanings that 'haunt' this interaction is associated with an 'absent/present' actor that the form, as its 'spokesobject' (Quattrone, 2004; see also Cooren, 2012), brings into the interaction: ConCiencia's central committee. Let us recall that the form was created by this committee and sent to each regional branch whose mandatory task was to complete it within a set deadline. In that respect, the form can be said to act as a contract that 'dictates' to Alejandra and Carla what to do (Cooren, 2004). To support this argument, let us add that in a subsequent meeting Carla explicitly asked Alejandra, 'Who wrote the form, you or Santiago?', referring to Chile's capital city where ConCiencia's central committee is located. Alejandra's response was 'Santiago' and was followed by a list of tasks that she had to perform. This response reveals the contractual relation

between the regional branch and the central committee, as well as Alejandra's formal responsibilities.

The (absent) meanings that 'haunt' such interactions become particularly evident during the disruption created by a blank page. The blank page in the form appears unexpectedly, as the actors' reactions indicate. Because of what it means in this particular situation, it alarms the actors involved and calls for quick action: Alejandra's question ('It had a blank page?'), which betrays surprise, is followed by a plausible explanation ('It must have slipped in there'), and a strict command ('Take it out'). Carla does not question this command (nor the explanation) but complies and removes the blank page. It is worth noting that the presence of this blank page is interpreted as 'illogical' by both Alejandra and Carla, even though the entire form consists of blank spaces. Why, then, does this blank page seem out of place? The answer lies in the différ*a*nce (Derrida, 1968, 1978) between the absence of the sign (here, a blank page) and the system of signs to which it refers – in other words, the conventions and rules of spacing in writing, and more particularly those related to the 'proposal form' genre. In a context where a form is expected to guide and discipline actors to fix and order meaning, a completely blank page can be perceived as threatening because it opens almost infinite possibilities of meaning, and therefore contingencies. One could argue that absent meaning (embodied by the blank page in this case) is associated with an excess of meaning (see also Cooper, 1986), because of the multiple possibilities that a blank space offers. At this point in a project's life, possibilities must be pinned down in order to launch the courses of action that will lead to accomplishing the projected goals. However, the complete opening that the blank page creates is a potential (yet very material) threat to the projected track. Alejandra knows, as she shared with us in an interview, that to attain their goals and respect their deadlines, such openings cannot be permitted. This is especially important because, as she mentioned: 'ConCiencia wants things to be very ordered and formalized. This is why we need to be very careful from the beginning of [the project]'.

On a final note, and in order to expand the discussion from this vignette to the larger context of the ethnographic study from which it was taken, we should add that the proposal form went through several other meetings before it was completed and sent back to ConCiencia's central committee. Interestingly, the blank page also reappeared in another meeting, where, once again, it was torn out of the form (even though the form was never meant to be completed on paper but only electronically, as a Word file). As for the proposal that the completed form represented, it was approved by the central committee and it became a script that guided – and misguided (Cooren, 2009) – the whole project's trajectory. In this process, the form, as a (dis)ordering device, carried the multiple meanings resulting from its traveling from one space-time to another.

Case 2: FluxSoft

With the second case, we shift our focus to ongoing work in the middle of a project. This case study, conducted at the software development company FluxSoft, followed the progress of the Curvus project, which involved updating a graphics application. The project team included a number of people specializing in software development (mainly developers) as well as the clients' representatives, who have the responsibility of

representing the clients' needs and of validating the developers' choices. In this project, as in all projects carried out at FluxSoft, the production, circulation, and discussion of documents were at the center of the collective work; these texts also guided the planning and the organization of the work. The specific event on which we focus happened right after the developers had assembled all the sections of code that they had written or modified separately – a key moment in this project's trajectory. Indeed, this operation revealed that one of the new application's functions was not working as expected: the colors displayed in a particular window were off. This unexpected technical issue was more than a simple bug: it affected a central function of the application, disrupted the flow of the work and, more importantly, called into question decisions on development issues made earlier in the project. Nevertheless, working under tight time constraints, the team had to quickly devise a solution in order to continue the project. This solution was proposed in the form of a document: a functional analysis named 'Document 52'.

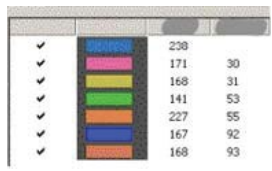
The six-page Document 52 consists of a number of paragraphs that explain the problem at hand and the proposed solution, as well as screenshots from the new Curvus application illustrating this solution (see Figure 2). As a functional analysis, this text has a specific role in software development projects: it establishes and specifies the application's functions on the basis of the clients' needs. Because this document states what will be developed, it is normally written after its content has been negotiated among all project participants (i.e. the developers and the clients' representatives) and right before the development work starts. In this specific situation, the gravity of the problem that the developers encountered required them to reconsider what had already been negotiated. In turn, this required them to rewrite part of the functional analysis previously agreed upon by the team, in an attempt to fix (in the sense of 'repair' and 'stop') both meaning (here, the technical issue) and the disrupted course of action. This text was then sent by email to the rest of the Curvus team and discussed during their next meeting.

While the document reordered the project 'on paper', the new proposition had to be negotiated and accepted. Because Document 52 is a functional analysis, its language is factual; its tone is assertive,[4] neutral and closed, as in this example (see Figure 2): 'Since we use two series of colors, we will see the series created for the graphics with the white background. If we are in the other graphic windows, we will see the series chosen for the black background'. This language implies inevitability: given the nature of the problem, it seems to indicate that there is no other choice. Yet, because this specific text was produced and sent *before* the actual negotiation took place, the assertive and 'closed' language in which it was written had an unintended effect: the text was perceived as highly problematic by the clients' representatives.

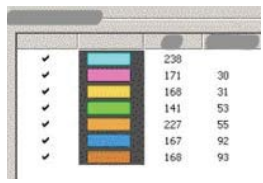
The meeting that followed the circulation of Document 52 reveals that the text violated the expectation of openness, at least from the viewpoint of the team members who were not initially involved in the text's elaboration. As a strong indication of this expectation, the meeting started quite abruptly with one clients' representative making a blunt statement regarding the proposed solution: 'This is unacceptable!' This statement revealed that the solution offered in Document 52 did not correspond to what the representative had been expecting from the redeveloped Curvus application. We can see that, at that specific moment, the ordering that Document 52 represented made the proposed solution overly present and failed to include other possible solutions. Despite its assertive

Colors in the subsets

Since we use two series of colors, we will see the series created for the graphics with the white background:



If we are in the other graphic windows, we will see the series chosen for the black background.



There is nothing that can be done on this issue. Please note that this window is not modal, so if this window is already open and we change to graphic mode, the colors for the background do not change.

We cannot either modify the background color in these windows, as colors are always displayed on a black background.

Figure 2. Example from 'Document 52', showing how things will appear in the new Curvus window (our own translation from French; same template layout as in the original).
Note: a colour version of this figure can be found online at hum.sagepub.com

language, Document 52 alluded to further (absent) meanings and interpretations that could not be fully controlled by the text's authors. The discussions that ensued were animated, indicating that what had been produced as an ordering device had quickly become a *dis*ordering device. After the first negative reaction, many clarifications on technical aspects and on issues of usage that concerned the clients were brought back to the table. The developers replied that they had to proceed this way and that, given the various constraints they were facing, no other solution was viable. Nevertheless, they agreed with the clients' representatives that their solution was not optimal; in fact, the developers were facing what appeared to them as a 'mystery' that could hardly be solved in the context of the project. In light of this constraint, the clients' representatives had to accept that it would be impossible to materialize their preferred solution.

Although the discussion about possible solutions continued for a while and the participants reached a partial agreement, one senior member of the Curvus project summarized the technical problems with another telling comment consisting of a single word: 'Disturbing'. The choice of word is interesting in itself, referring directly to perturbation

and disorder. At the same time, even though questions remained unanswered, the interactions led the project members to realign by agreeing on an acceptable solution, one that emerged from the negotiation of meaning in the meeting about Document 52. After this meeting, the developers amended their solution to include the comments that the clients' representatives made; they were able to pursue the project and complete the development of the new Curvus application.

As this vignette highlights, the developers attempted to use the assertive language contained in Document 52 to quickly close an issue that should not have been opened at that point in the project. However, the language in the text-in-use and the exclusion of other solutions to solve the bug backfired on the authors of the text. In other words, because Document 52 presented only one solution, other courses of action haunted the meeting (see Derrida, 1968, 1978). To some extent, Document 52 fulfilled its expected purpose as a functional analysis, which fixed meaning and created order. Yet, simultaneously, the same document opened multiple new meanings, causing a rift between the developers and the clients' representatives. The developers' attempt to secure conversational 'closure' (Ford and Ford, 1995) *before* the project participants had reached some sort of agreement meant that there were few chances of achieving that closure.

As Ford and Ford (1995: 551) underline, closure can only be achieved once the participants collectively acknowledge what does and does not 'work'. In this case, because Document 52 was released before this shared acknowledgement had been reached, it could hardly have succeeded in bringing about closure. Therefore, the team meeting counteracted both the disorder resulting from the first assembled version of the new Curvus application (which revealed the problem requiring a solution) and the disorder arising from the language used in the document itself. It also restored alignment among the various team members.

Case 3: BlueChip Consulting

Our third vignette covers the final stages of a project's life cycle and the use of texts after a project's completion for purposes of cross-project learning (Ayas and Zeniuk, 2001). In this regard, the third case study differs from the previous two in that its emphasis lies on the texts-in-use as products of the project in process, rather than on the conversations that contributed to the creation of these texts. Specifically, our third case study illuminates the role of texts drawn from two cross-project learning databases at a multinational business-consulting firm, BlueChip Consulting (see also Schoeneborn, 2013). Consultants at BlueChip were required to submit documents to the databases in order to facilitate cross-project learning among their colleagues. In nearly all cases, these documents were digital copies of PowerPoint presentations (see also Yates and Orlikowski, 2007). Again, this case illustrates the extent to which written texts were employed as ordering devices (in the sense that they presented projects in a well-structured and orderly way), but, at the same time, had the potential to bring about disorder by opening multiple meanings.

When we looked at the recurrent patterns of text usage within our data, we noticed that 'executive summaries' were the most frequent genre of PowerPoint documents (see also Schoeneborn, 2013). Executive summaries condensed the achievements of a past project, usually by following a standardized template. In our data, executive summaries

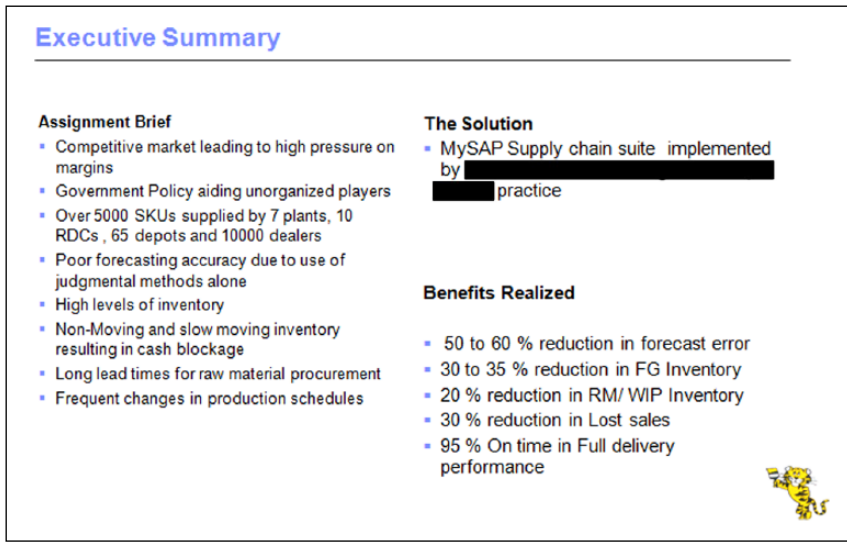


Figure 3. Example of a 'polished' PowerPoint slide, exemplifying ellipsis as a rhetorical strategy.

could be found either as part of slides decks that were compiled for client presentations (i.e. as the final deliverable of a project) or as stand-alone documents. In the latter case, these stand-alone summaries were primarily used to obtain new (or follow-up) projects, as our interviews with employees of BlueChip Consulting revealed. In that respect, these documents served as a means of impressing potential clients by presenting evidence of the company's previous consulting experience in a particular business area or industry. Figure 3 shows a typical example of an executive summary slide from our data.

While examining how language was used in these presentation documents and how they were formatted, we noticed that they tended to provide a neat, consistent, and orderly, but highly condensed, presentation of what had happened in a past project. In the sample slide (Figure 3), this becomes evident, for instance, in the use of bullet-point lists, the extensive use of abbreviations and jargon (e.g. 'SKUs', 'RDCs'), and the lack of full sentences and verb forms. In that regard, the PowerPoint documents of the executive summary genre showcase the rhetorical form known as *ellipsis*. In linguistics, ellipsis refers to the practice of omitting one or more words in a sentence or phrase and thus calling on the reader or audience to complete it (McQuarrie and Mick, 1996: 431). Following our theoretical framework, we postulate that what is made absent through the elliptic use of language (for instance, the project's processuality, its inherent contingencies and the context in which it was embedded) tends to 'haunt' what is made present and thus functions as a continuous source of disorder.

To better understand the 'haunting' quality of the PowerPoint texts, it is necessary to consider the context of their creation and usage. As the interviewees confirmed, the condensed format of the slides and the frequent use of ellipsis were accomplished through repeated revisions of the presentations by members of the consulting team, who polished

each slide and reduced its content so that only its 'core message' remained (a strategy that can be described as 'omissive'). For instance, an experienced consultant would ask a junior consultant in his or her project team to produce PowerPoint-based presentations with bullet-point lists and as few words as possible in order to carve out the slides' 'essence' (see also Tufte, 2003). For example, consultants followed internal guidelines such as 'Don't use more than three lines of words and seven words per line'. Figure 3 illustrates the 'end product' of this practice of 'polishing' the presentation documents.

The PowerPoint documents of case no. 3 demonstrate the simultaneity of the ordering and disordering effects of these texts. On one hand, the practice of capturing knowledge in these documents can be seen as an effort to fix meaning and to pin down the results of a project in written, material form – which reflects the orderly side of communication. On the other hand, especially through their reductive format (e.g. the use of bullet points and ellipses), these documents opened ample spaces for multiple meanings and interpretations, which reflect the disorderly side of communication. As our interviews revealed, whenever consultants lacked the contextual cues that direct involvement in a project would have afforded them, the attempt to order the information presented in individual documents resulted in a rather disorderly situation. In such cases, because there is less information and more blanks to fill in (akin to case no.1), meaning is less clearly defined and can thus be interpreted in a number of ways. For that reason, the heavily reduced slides effectively decontextualized what had happened in the project (Ricœur, 1981; see also Spee and Jarzabkowski, 2011). The disordering properties of the slides were also reconfirmed through our interviews. The established practices of post-project documentation tended to frustrate employees, as soon as these documents became used in the cross-project learning databases (i.e. outside of the project's initial context):

> What constrains the reusability [of PowerPoint documents] is . . . that [they] are often not self-explanatory. (Interview statement by a consultant)

> So far, we have been creating a pile of documents in the [cross-project learning] databases, but these are not . . . put into context at all. (Interview statement by a consultant)

To conclude, as we have shown in this case, creating order with the help of texts (PowerPoint presentations) and of the established ordering practice of polishing and reducing the texts' content (i.e. through the omissive rhetorical strategy of the ellipsis) turned out to be useful in face-to-face meetings. In such meetings, the slides simply supported the live presentation of the consultants' work and project participants were able to activate their contextual knowledge and fill in the blanks. However, the same PowerPoint-based texts worked as *dis*ordering devices, as well. The established practice of intentionally leaving many contextual cues out of slides and presentations for the sake of brevity ultimately decontextualized information and opened the possibility of multiple meanings. As our interviews highlighted, this effect became especially strong as soon as the slides became used outside of the initial project context (e.g. when they were submitted to the cross-project learning databases) and thus their meaning escaped the authors' control (see also Kuhn, 2008; Taylor and Van Every, 2011).

Discussion and conclusion

The three vignettes illuminate the empirical phenomenon that intrigued us in the first place. Each one showed that, when organizing, actors invest significant effort into creating order in the process of fulfilling their tasks, and that this often involves relying on formal documents. However, as we also saw, the effort to create order (i.e. to fix meaning) simultaneously created disorder (i.e. opened meaning). This prompted the members of the project teams to contest or renegotiate a given meaning. It often became evident in expressions of surprise or frustration. These cases of project organizing are exemplary demonstrations of the fragile, ongoing and often illusionary nature of order (Law, 1992, 1994). Taken together, the three cases allow us to explain *why* order and disorder occur simultaneously in the process of organizing, and *how* this mutual constitution is at play in communication events, especially in relation to organizational texts.

Cross-case analysis

Our cross-case analysis is structured around three textual dimensions: (1) the genre inscribed in the text-in-use, (2) the salient linguistic feature of the text-in-use, and (3) the broader organizational context of the text-in-use. Each dimension relates to a particular (dis)ordering dynamic that characterizes the role of texts in both opening and closing meaning: (1) formalization/re-formalization, (2) presence/absence, and (3) decontextualization/recontextualization, respectively. While we discuss these dimensions separately for the purposes of our analysis, they are intrinsically interrelated. Table 2 exhibits our analytical framework and summarizes our cross-case analysis.

The first dimension refers to the *genre* of the text-in-use. Texts tend to become institutionalized in a specific 'genre' of organizational communication, understood as recurrent patterns of their usage (Yates and Orlikowski, 1992). In all three cases, we came across highly formalized documents that represent distinct genres (e.g. project proposal forms, functional analyses and PowerPoint executive summaries). These documents were used for the purpose of inscribing order and thus as ways of fixing meaning. However, while each genre formalized (i.e. gave form to) the text-in-use by physically and symbolically associating it with recurrent institutionalized practices, these practices also created possibilities for their contestation, re-interpretation and transformation, thus creating disorder. Let us recall that the form of a 'genre' refers to the structural features (e.g. text-formatting devices such as lists and fields) and the communication medium (e.g. paper or face-to-face communication) of the text (Yates and Orlikowski, 1992). Our findings suggest that these features (structural and medial) played an important role in giving form to the text, yet when these texts were put in use in particular contexts and appropriated to respond to specific purposes, the genre exhibited some variation contributing to re-formalizing (i.e. changing the form of) both the text and its practices.

The dynamic of formalization/re-formalization characterizes all three cases. However, the first case is particularly illustrative, because the document on which we focused was clearly related to an imperative of conformity to the 'proposal form', which in this case was mandatory for ConCiencia's regional branch in order to receive the funding request for the Science Week project. This implied a series of (writing) practices that had to

Table 2. Cross-case analysis.

Dimension of text-in-use	(Dis)ordering dynamics	Case 1: ConCiencia	Case 2: FluxSoft	Case 3: BlueChip
Genre	Formalization/re-formalization	• Ordering efforts through highly formalized genres of organizational communication – templates and forms that shape the institutionalized practices of ordering • Simultaneous disordering because of the re-formalization of genres in the appropriation of texts that open up possibilities of interrogation, appropriation and transformation		
Language	Presence/absence	• Ordering efforts through *interrogative* language • Simultaneous disordering through appearance of a blank page that paralyzes actors with multiple possibilities	• Ordering efforts through *assertive* language • Simultaneous disordering, as the absence of actual negotiation tends to 'haunt' present decisions	• Ordering efforts through *omissive* language • Simultaneous disordering, as hidden contingencies and contextuality hamper the consultants' ability to make sense of documents
Context	Decontextualization/ recontextualization	• Ordering efforts by contextualizing meaning in the actual communication event • Simultaneous disordering through the capacity of texts to travel across space-time, thus becoming decontextualized and recontextualized		

comply with the structural (i.e. tables and blank spaces) and medial (i.e. paper) features of this genre. As noted in the first vignette, the document shaped the way in which the organizational actors related to and engaged with it. Let us recall that the proposal form guided the conversation we analyzed and also served as a script for planning and we could say 'formalizing' the entire project. These same features contributed to the actors' reaction vis-a-vis the blank page and their definition of the situation as nonsensical (i.e. not conformed to the form). However, the vignette also shows how the actors adapted the form to their particular context, selecting the 'important' information, translating it in their own terms and deciding the consequent actions. Relying on the ethnographic study from which the vignette is taken, we note that in the same meeting, the project manager 'ordered' the communications manager to 'change the form, add a line here' to adapt the document to a specific requirement of the regional branch. This adaptation implied also the development of new practices related both to completing the document and planning the Science Week, thus 're-formalizing' the project and the form itself.

The second dimension relates to the particularities of the *language* employed in the text-in-use. Each vignette focused on specific linguistic features of its respective text that revealed a particular form of language used for ordering (i.e. fixing and closing meaning). In the first case study, the convention of leaving spaces between lines, words and letters as one way of ordering the text (i.e. the proposal form) represents *interrogative* language: the spaces in the tables demanded to be completed and therefore dictated how they should be filled in, thus ordering their content. In the second case, the statements of closure that characterize the functional analysis are indicative of *assertive* language: facts were presented as the single available solution to the particular problem and as attempts to close the debate (without even opening it in the first place). Finally, the third case exhibits *omissive* language, which is exemplified by the elliptically written 'executive summaries' in PowerPoint. As the three vignettes collectively demonstrated, it was these specific linguistic features, and the respective forms of language use (interrogative, assertive or omissive), that opened meaning to a plethora of interpretations. The blank spaces (e.g. the blank page) became an open site for absent (and potentially threatening) meanings, while the statements of closure (e.g. the statements made by the developers in the functional analysis of 'Document 52') triggered the contestation and negotiation of meaning. Finally, the ellipsis (a rhetorical practice commonly used to 'polish' PowerPoint documents) showcased the decontextualization of meaning in this genre of organizational texts.

In all instances, we observed the presence/absence dynamics that characterize (written) language. While each linguistic feature made some meanings present, at the same time it made (many) other meanings absent – and the latter tended to 'haunt' the communication event (Cooren, 2009). ConCiencia's central committee, alternative solutions to the problem in Curvus, and the processuality and intricacies that characterized BlueChip's projects were like 'ghosts' that 'haunted' the communication events we studied. In that sense, the attempts to create order via interrogative, assertive or omissive language can also be said to bring about (dis)ordering, at the same time, precisely because they harbor the possibility of being inhabited and 'haunted' by other meanings.

The third analytical dimension relates to the spatio-temporal *context* in which a text is embedded. As such, it links the *here* and *now* of a specific communication event to the

there and *then* of future, past and simultaneous events (Vásquez, 2013). As we argued, texts have the capacity to travel away from the context in which they were created and toward other contexts. This capacity of texts to dislocate and relocate themselves, as Cooren and Fairhurst (2009) showed, is what makes them open to multiple meanings, because they tend to take on a life of their own and can be appropriated by others in different spaces and times (see also Cooren, 2006, 2012). The three cases we studied present distinct modes of such traveling. In the first case, the key text traveled geographically between the head committee, located in Chile's capital city, and the regional branches around the country. In the second case, the key text traveled internally between the members of the project team; more specifically, between the developers and the clients' representatives. The third case exemplifies the most distant and multidirectional traveling of multiple texts, considering that the PowerPoint presentations moved from one project to another within a globally operating firm and were used by different consultants in different contexts involving different clients. In all three cases, when the respective texts 'traveled', they were both decontextualized and recontextualized. Particularly in the third case, the decontextualization of the PowerPoint texts played a significant role in opening the possibility of multiple and distinct meanings that could not be interpreted by solely relying on the content of the texts. This correlated with renewed efforts by the consultants for recontextualizing the PowerPoint documents' meaning and opened them to new contingencies (as emphasized throughout the interviews). At the same time, the dynamics of decontextualization/recontextualization at play in the relocation of texts was also key to what Taylor and Van Every (2011) call the 'de-authorization' of the text; that is, the disappearance of the authors of a text, which also contributes to its ambiguity.

Contributions

We started this inquiry with an empirical observation: why does disorder tend to simultaneously accompany efforts to create order when organizing? To answer this question, we applied a communication-centered approach, which allowed us to investigate the (dis)ordering properties of communication by focusing on the role of organizational texts in project organizing. On the whole, our study makes two main contributions that we outline below.

First, on the basis of the empirical dimension of our inquiry, we contribute to answering *why* and *how* order and disorder occur simultaneously in organizing. The answer to the *why* question is: because actors organize through communication, and communication has (dis)ordering properties. The answer to the *how* question is: by opening and closing meaning – a process that takes place in every communication event. In this regard, our study follows earlier works that have critically examined the orderly character of daily work practices in organizational contexts (e.g. Levina and Orlikowski, 2009; Manning, 2008). However, we go beyond these works by emphasizing the simultaneity of (dis)ordering in communication for the purpose of organizing. While efforts of ordering via communication (and especially in its textual forms) are needed for coordination among actors, the continuous reconfiguration of contexts and meanings makes communication events and texts precarious and vulnerable in the light of future contingencies and potential renegotiations of meaning. Accordingly, our study also supports research

that aimed to counterbalance the 'organizing bias' for perceiving order as an imperative of success, which characterizes much of the research in organization studies, including extant works following the CCO perspective (as remarked by Bisel, 2009: 632). Our study shows that disordering is an integral part of efforts of ordering and thus can also be extended to explore the (dis)ordering properties of communication in the context of technical standardization (e.g. Van den Ende et al., 2012) or CSR standardization processes (e.g. Haack and Scherer, 2014), for instance.

In line with these considerations, our empirical study demonstrated that texts-in-use may serve not only as 'ordering devices' but also as 'disordering devices'. We thus furthermore contribute to organization studies by developing an analytical framework for studying the (dis)ordering properties of communication focusing on texts (see Table 2). In that sense, not only do we add to prior research that criticizes the traditional concept of organization as a rational and orderly phenomenon (e.g. Cooper, 1986; Hassard et al., 2008), but we also offer a lens and an analytical tool for studying it empirically. We believe that this analytical framework will enable researchers to examine the dynamics of (dis)ordering in organizational contexts different from the one we chose for our inquiry (i.e. project organizing) and beyond the three particular linguistic modes of (dis)ordering that we have identified (i.e. interrogative, assertive or omissive).

Moreover, the Derridaean conceptual background that inspires this analytical framework offers promising avenues to study the role of communication in (dis)organizing processes. The work of Derrida has rarely been mobilized in the organizational and management literatures (for exceptions, see Brummans, 2007; Cooren, 2009; Griffin et al., 2015). Yet, as we showed in this article, his work can strongly contribute to a subtle understanding of the dynamics of (written) language (i.e. presence/absence) and, more specifically, account for the role of texts in organizations, from a non-dualistic and processual perspective (see also Cooren, 2004).

Second, we believe that our study has fundamental implications for the ontological question of how organizations exist and persist over time (Taylor and Van Every, 2000), which is intimately related to the ontological debate concerning the orderly or disorderly nature of organization (Tsoukas and Chia, 2002). If we adopt the assumption that communication constitutes organization (Ashcraft et al., 2009), it follows that organizations are precarious social phenomena (Cooren et al., 2011) that continuously need to ensure their perpetuation from one moment to the next (Schoeneborn, 2011). Our study allows us to respond to this ontological question on the basis of our conceptualization of (dis)ordering: communication brings forth both order and disorder because of its inherent properties and the fundamental indeterminacy of meaning (Derrida, 1968). This indicates that it is the mutual constitution of order and disorder that sets organizations in motion as 'processual entities' – an observation in line with the argumentation of Kuhn (2012). Thus, in our view, (dis)ordering, as communication-based processes of opening and closing meaning, is not just a characteristic or 'side effect' of organizational life. It is, on the contrary, woven into the very fabric of organizing.

On a final note, we would like to return to the tale that opened this article and inspired one of our main arguments, Goethe's *The Sorcerer's Apprentice*. Like the apprentice in the tale, actors in organizational settings can never completely master (written) language and the multiplicity of meaning, because meaning tends to overflow and escape the

actors' control. Let us recall how the (multiplied) brooms fetched endless buckets of water, nearly drowning the sorcerer's apprentice in a torrential flood. As Wittgenstein (1969: 57–57e) aptly argued (something members of the project teams we studied had to learn the hard way): 'One is often bewitched by a [text]'. Indeed, (written) language has enchanting properties that can both entrap and release us through the institutionalized nature of everyday speech. We thus conclude: beware of the spirits you summoned!

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Notes

1 Without entering the larger ontological debate around the definition of meaning (and its relation to communication), we must note that our definition of (dis)ordering implies, as Grossberg's (1982: 216) suggests, 'to free meaning from the subject in some way by allowing meanings to be "shared"'. We engage with the idea of 'shared' meaning by moving away from a cognitivist and informational view of communication (e.g. Axley, 1984) towards an 'interactional' view of meaning (Grossberg, 1982: 223–224). This approach, as we will further develop, implies that intersubjective meanings do not pre-exist but instead emerge from concrete and situated interactions (what we refer to as 'communication events'). It follows that meanings have no fixed or objective existence but can always become subject to recurrent (re)negotiations in follow-up interactions (see also Ashcraft et al., 2009).

2 We have chosen the term '(dis)ordering' to distinguish it from the broader notions of organization and organizing (and their counterparts, disorganization and disorganizing). In our view, (dis)ordering is one key aspect of organizing. Moreover, this terminology echoes Law's (1992, 1994) notion of 'modes of ordering', allowing us to highlight the sociomaterial and processual dimensions of (dis)ordering. Finally, the term (dis)ordering implies that we recognize both the processual and the entity-like nature of organization without privileging one or the other (see Cooren et al., 2011). In this sense, we argue that it is the mutual constitution of order and disorder that sets organizations in motion.

3 For the purpose of our analysis, we limit the notion of 'texts' to those that are written. As mentioned previously, works following the CCO perspective, and more specifically the stream of research relying on Taylor and Van Every's (2000) framework, tend to define texts in broader terms by going beyond the actual written or inscribed documents. In this article, we instead chose an artifactual focus on texts, which implies an object-based version of materiality. Consequently, our approach does not attend to other perspectives on materiality that, for example, associate texts with their historical and social context of production, putting forward their key role in instantiating relationships of power (e.g. Westwood and Linstead, 2001).

4 While our choice to use the adjective 'assertive' echoes Searle's meaning with regards to speech act theory – where it designates a category of illocutionary acts that 'commit the speaker . . . to something's being the case, to the truth of the expressed proposition' (1979: 12) – we instead use this adjective here in a more general sense, to highlight that the language used in Document 52 tends to be imperative in character.

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