

## COMMUNICATIONS OF ORGANIZATIONS AND DIGITAL INFLUENCERS

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### ABSTRACT

This article builds a theoretical reflection about the difficulties faced by communication being seen as a science. This is undoubtedly reflected in the communication process of organizations and the strategies used, such as digital influencers. The complexity of the subject is covered by invoking epistemological studies of communication, as well as those that stick to organizational communication and digital influencers. The discussion does not indicate a set and finished answer, as organizational communication is not limited to specific actions. On the contrary, it encompasses a much larger and more complex process that is not understood yet by those involved.

**Keywords:** Communication; Epistemology; Organizational communication; Digital Influencers; Internet

### INTRODUCTION

The field of communication promotes constant theoretical debates, as the concepts of communication are still being developed, which tends to reflect its theoretical fragility. However, this fragility does not impede the marketing exercise of communication. This exercise is manifested in the interactions and relations established between people, social groups, and organizations. In this field of study, market knowledge sometimes overlaps with academic/scientific knowledge, which is still being developed. This reality ends up extending into the very understanding of what communication is and how it manifests, establishes, and develops. Therefore, studying the communication present in organizations provides a systemic and mechanical view, due to the theoretical weakness within the field of study.

Communication actions can have as one of their purposes the promotion and sale of products or service goods, in addition to promoting a 'relationship' between organization and consumer. Thus, organizations - or companies<sup>1</sup> - make strategic use of communication actions to reach their target audience and, thus, consolidate their commercial purpose. Since the last century, several studies have been - and are being - constantly developed to verify which strategies are most appropriate for each market segment, considering the product offered and the potential consumer audience. Among the various alternatives proposed and carried out by organizations is the use of opinion leaders.<sup>2</sup> This group refers, in a simplified

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<sup>1</sup> In this work, we chose to use the term "companies" also referring to organizations, in order to facilitate the reader's understanding.

<sup>2</sup> "Opinion leaders can be scientists, famous people who have the recognition of society, well-informed, well-known people, or media celebrities. These people have won the sympathy of the public from their appearances in the mass media and become models for what the masses must be, think, or consume"(Tuzzo, 2005: 62)

way, to those individuals who exert influence within certain social groups, which is recognized within the current Digital Influencers<sup>3</sup> (DIs). Therefore, we believe that their application as a communication strategy should be structured according to communication planning<sup>4</sup>, so their 'use' should be measured and studied previously.

With this perspective, this article briefly discusses the presence of these Digital Influencers as a communication strategy within organizations. Our discussion was initially intended to reflect - in light of the theory – on what communication has become in these organizations, its origin and applications, to become better understand the subject. Then we initiate a discussion about Digital Influencers. We first contextualize them within the network society (Castells, 2003), digital media, and online social networks. Next is a theoretical discussion about this group of people who 'achieved fame' from content published on the internet. Finally, we present theoretical reflections - using practical examples - of the presence and use of these DIs within organizations as a communication strategy.

## ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION

This paper intends to examine digital influencers as communication strategies for organizations. However, before entering this theme, as mentioned above, a theoretical discussion is very interesting about what is communication, especially the communication that starts from organizations. Therefore, our discussion will briefly take on an epistemological character in order to reflect on organizational communication and only then to better understand what these DIs could become as communication strategies.

First, discussion of communication within academia, as scientific knowledge, faces some theoretical difficulties<sup>5</sup>. One of them, of great relevance and that tends to be determinant, is the purpose of studying communication. Defining the purpose of the study does not only guarantee that communication obtain the status of a science<sup>6</sup>, but also guides the studies of

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<sup>3</sup> The term 'Digital Influencers' is not a defined concept yet. Thus using available theory, we view this category as opinion leaders, who may or may not be - or become - celebrities. During the article we will discuss these concepts in order to clarify our thinking about DIs.

<sup>4</sup> "Communication planning, in addition to predicting certain situations that could create crises, and already scheduled actions and goals about them, can also generate a crisis management plan in case it happens. In observing the reality of institutions, a still critical aspect is the interaction with its internal public, which highlights even more the difficulties coming from those that are directly related to planning and management of the communicative processes. The organization of information, exchange, and integration of employees, which is communication itself, has as its primary objective to lead them to dialogue. Without it there is no communication." (Nogueira & Mendes, 2014, Y / N)

<sup>5</sup> "Theory is the systematized thought that arises from inquiries, which produces and conditions their pertinence. The explanations and the questions are not what are interesting in the theories" (Signates, 2012, 134).

<sup>6</sup> "Scientific classifications have useful purposes, which make them, if not indispensable, at least necessary. Rosely Souza synthesizes this character of utility in two characteristics, referring to the tables of knowledge areas, such as the one we have in Brazil. "Classification transforms isolated and inconsistent sensory impressions into recognizable objects and reproducible patterns" (Souza, 2004, p.2). Thus, according to the author, scientific classification operates as an identity reference to knowledge groups and researchers in

the area. We start from some observations about the Communication Theories, and much of related literature. What we find in this line of studies is the appropriation of theories that permeate the mass media, or communication, but which unfortunately do not come from a communicational viewpoint, as observed by Signates (2012).

The studies that depart from the North American, Canadian, Latin American, Critical, French, etc. schools are guided by scholars in the areas of sociology, psychology, anthropology, linguistics, and the like. For example the North American school, as treated by Wolf (2009), has as one of its flagships the Functionalist Theory, which emerged in the field of sociology with Parsons in 1967. However, its appropriation for communication only existed for the media impacts, or vehicles, of communication. This characteristic is typical of all other schools, as they used the knowledge from other areas. From this Sodr  (2013) developed the theories of communication consolidated today. It is worth asking if communication is a field of intelligibility or a science<sup>7</sup>, as the field of communication is transected by other human sciences. However, we do not aim to delve deeper into this. These same theories and Schools contribute and have contributed to communication, but these additions tend to treat it mechanically, systemically, and functionally. Thus, the epistemological debate is not established with much passion in the academic environment, nor in the marketing area. Thus, today the views in the field of communication is attached much more to the present communication in the mass media and vehicles of communication, as observed by Braga (2008), and for the activities carried out by the professionals in the area. Therefore, communication still seeks to understand itself, an understandable fact considering the joviality of this field of study. That is why we have certain difficulties in treating, within the scientific debates, what communication is dedicated to study.

The consequences of this theoretical fragility are seen in the concepts of communication and its derivatives. As this paper has priority for dealing with organizational communication, we will now focus on the discussion of this topic. To begin with, we must ask the question: what is organizational communication? For us, communication is first about “exchanges, acts and shared actions, assuming interaction, dialogue, and mutual respect of speaking and permitting speaking, hearing and listening, understanding and making oneself understood, and especially of the desire to understand” (Scroferneker, 2006, p.47). Therefore, we share Scroferneker's observation (2006, 48) when he states that “organizational communication encompasses all forms of communication used and developed by the organization to relate to and interact with its audiences.” Thus, we do not have a linear and unilateral view of organizational communication itself, but see it in the format of a web<sup>8</sup>. Therefore, we view organizational communication as that which comes from the organizations to establish contact with its target

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general and, in addition, it makes retrieval or thematic location possible, insofar as it serves the librarianship in its purpose of organizing scientific literature.” (Signates, 2017, p.4)

<sup>7</sup> Sodr  (2013) applies the term 'field of communication' as a space in which several sciences pass through, without, however, dominating one another. In this way, it would serve a common space of dialogue between the sciences, but not a science proper.

<sup>8</sup> Sousa (2002, 32) wrote “[...] note that a property of any network is its non-linearity. “Thus, relations in a network pattern are non-linear relations. In particular, an influence, or message, can travel along a cyclical path, which can become a loop of feedback’ (CAPRA, 1996, p.78). Thus, it can be said that, because communication networks generate feedback loops, they can acquire the capacity to regulate themselves.”

audience<sup>9</sup>. We emphasize that the very understanding of organizational communication is still recent in academia, which for a long time, mainly due to the functionalist influence itself, did not stick to the unique nuances of this 'type of communication'. This, as stated earlier, culminated in a unique vision that communicational processes experienced and applied to organizations<sup>10</sup>. This, in practice, does not prove to be so effective, since communication comes from people who are unstable and unpredictable.

Within this vision of organizational communication - correlated with what was discussed above - it is fundamental to deal with an aspect of the creation and maintenance of communication: culture<sup>11</sup>. Culture fits into this debate because it is the viewpoint in which communication is established. Thus, we no longer refer only to organizational communication, but to all types of communication - as we do not yet know what communication is in its entirety and complexity<sup>12</sup>. Through the culture within the organizations and the individuals that compose it, we can understand - to some extent - the dynamics present in these spaces. We perceive who organizations are through beliefs, values, and habits.

All activities in a company, regardless of their nature or purpose, consume resources and generate products and services. The way each activity is performed is directly influenced by the beliefs and values implicit in the rules, attitudes, behaviors, habits, and customs that characterize the human relations in the organization. (Crozzati, 1998, s/n)

Thus, culture is the manifestation of the organization's identity, as well as its way of relating with interest groups. In this perspective, communication "is not a simplistic process where culture can be ignored" (Nogueira; Mendes, 2014, S / N). Thus, this discussion includes these considerations related to culture - a foundational part of the organizations and the individuals

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<sup>9</sup> In the concept of Fleta (1995, page 118), he refers to "any plurality of individuals or groups that consider themselves affected, directly or indirectly, by actual or presumed activity of a physical person or company, as well as those disconnected character groups that arise as a social response to an extraordinary or abnormal behavior of the same.

<sup>10</sup> [...] a dimension that makes it clear that the communication process can no longer be accepted, with its homogenized vertical models and with emphasis on the instrumentality of communication, according to the mathematical, cybernetic, and systemic foundations, is the most relevant way to respond to the challenges of strategic management of organizations in times of globalization (Cardoso, 2006: 1126).

<sup>11</sup> We appropriate the term culture applied to the scope of organizations, using the observations of Santos and Valentim (2013, S / N) when quoting Freitas (2005), who stating that "the organizational culture refers to the relations of power and imaginary socially constructed from the relationships built in the day to day organization, whose values direct the individual and the organizational collective propitiating the recognition of a collective identity."

<sup>12</sup> 15. "In a more complex degree, Organizational Communication can be spoken of at the level of organizational communicant. Beyond the scope of authoritative speech, any communicational process is updated when, in some way and at some level, any subject (person, public) establishes a relationship with the organization. In addition to the planned processes, the processes carried out in informality are also highlighted; including those that arise without the knowledge of the organization." (Baldissera, 2011, p 118).

that participate in it. When we examine the culture of an organization, we become more aware of its functioning, both administrative and 'personal', among employees<sup>13</sup>.

Therefore, the culture, as well as the philosophies and policies of organizations define their market and social position, providing their complex character, as observed by Nogueira and Mendes (2014).

In principle, every institution is complex in itself, because it gathers and performs all the administrative functions: of planning, organization, direction, coordination, and control. However, as a living system, they are always in recursive relation. (Nogueira & Mendes, 2014, Y / N)

In this way, culture permeates communication and vice versa. They intersect at the moment that communication is 'carried out' - in the instrumental sense so characteristic of the theoretical legacies spoken of earlier. That is, through communication strategies, along with fixed and punctual actions, that organizational communication is believed to occur. However, we must return to the discussion about the epistemological field of communication to explain the difficulty faced by organizational communication, because what organizations understand and apply as communication is the instrumentalized version of message transition.

[...] the primary objective of the company is to find the best message and the best way to establish contacts with target audiences, aiming to change ways of thinking, influence decisions, modify employees to achieve organizational goals, announce events, sell something, and eliminate conflicts. However, this view - which was not sustained in the past - is not efficiently sustained today by its reductionism and simplicity due to the complexity of the world of organizations. (Cardoso, 2006, 1127)

Such a view is, as we stated before, shallow and superficial when dealing with communication in organizations. Organizational communication is a "complex set of activities, actions, strategies, products, and processes developed to reinforce ideas and organizational image among target audiences, or even public opinion." (Vieira, 2004, p. 37). In this perspective, the view of organizations tends to be focused only on 'complying' with public relations manuals, which does not affect communication as a policy of the organization.

The 'organizational communication manuals' are those classic measures used by organizations to maintain contact with their target audiences, that is, communication strategies. First, what guides these strategies is part of the thought of communication flows, which according to Toquarto (1986, 54) "move simultaneously in three streams and two directions, and in its adjustment lies the equilibrium of the communication system. They are the descending, ascending, and lateral flows, in the vertical and horizontal directions." Therefore, starting from these flows of communication, which tend to follow the organization's management structure, the necessary actions and strategies are developed. However, flows of information represent a part of what becomes organizational

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<sup>13</sup> This work refers to organizations, or companies, as structures composed of several people. However, organizational communication, as stated by Nassar (2009), is not limited by this. That is, a 'one person organization' is as organizational as much as one composed of 500 employees. This perspective considers that communication exists in both cases, but each one has particularities and unique nuances, produced by its origin, culture, area of action, geographical location etc.



communication, as it is divided into informal or formal<sup>14</sup>. According to Baldissera (2011), these flows are divided into those that come from organizations, such as formal communication, and those that do not come from official channels of communication - informal communication. Organizations usually bother to 'control' channels and formal information, or official communications, while informal communication is sometimes diminished in importance. However, once again we see the reflection of the blurred vision of communication as a science reflected in how organizations 'produce' communication. That is, sometimes organizations do not consider that any comment tangential to them is of any great interest. In this sense, it is not only the official channels and the organization itself that issue communication, as this relationship is not limited to the emission of information, but to dialogues, dialogues determined by talk, regardless of the media.

In this sense, organizations use different strategies of relationship, sales, promotion, and dialogue about themselves, their products, and/or services. These strategies, which can also be called actions of communication, are understood as previously structured ways of establishing contact. That is, they are the ways and methods by which the organizations impose themselves and maintain contact with society. In this respect, according to Mello (2010), it is worth remembering that organizations are 'civilians' in such a way that when we refer to them, we sometimes treat them in a unique, almost human way, attributing to them a face, as if they were a single person, not a heterogeneous group composed of several voices. However, returning to the theme of communication strategies, there are several possibilities, from the distribution of newsletters, bulletins, newspapers, and printed murals, to the use of intranets, virtual portals, profiles in online social networks, etc. However, for this particular study, we decided to look at a specific strategy that reflects an old strategy, but uses a new category of actors: Digital Influencers (DIs).

## DIGITAL INFLUENCERS AND ORGANIZATION

At the beginning of this paper, we briefly introduce this new category of people, now we will delve more deeply into this subject. First, it is important to emphasize that our view of the DIs starts from a strategic vision of communication, perceiving them as ways of maintaining dialogue between business-consumer. Therefore, we will not delve into a discussion about what they are and how this new class of people is emerging.

However, focusing on this strategic bias of communication, some general considerations must be made about the society on the network. First, we present the thinking of Castells (2003) in dealing with network society, which is a society that lives connected 'informationally'. From this society, which emerged intensely after the commercial internet, in mid-1995, social groups transferred to digital platforms. People started to use the internet and its tools to establish contact with the world. Thus, the metaphor 'the world in the palm of your hand', which presupposes a world in which you have access to all the available digital facilities. However, this is different from what we expect, considering that less than half of the Brazilian population has access to the web<sup>15</sup>. Nevertheless, back to the theme of this

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<sup>14</sup> "Be it formal or informal, communication is inherent in the corporate process, as well as being an important forum for the diffusion and consolidation of culture in organizations" (Nogueira & Mendes, 2014, S/N).

<sup>15</sup> Research 'Internet and Television Access, and Possession of cellular mobile telephone for personal use' conducted by the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE). Available at: <<http://biblioteca.ibge.gov.br/visualizacao/livros/liv93373.pdf>>

network society, a new culture has been created, or a culture under the interference of digital media, called cyberculture, according to Levý (2003). One of the ‘new’ aspects of this cyberculture is the DIs themselves. To become famous within particular social groups, people needed to be present - or to appear - in mass media such as newspapers and television, according to Rojek (2008). However, the DIs are not just ‘famous’ people, they are opinion leaders. This leads to the discussion about what digital influencers are.

First, for this work, we chose to apply and discuss three concepts, which we believe conceptually influence the influencers, who are opinion leaders; celebrities; and renowned. The first came from the American School, within the Functionalist Theory in the early twentieth century. Based on the Two-Step-Flow theory developed by Lazarsfeld and Merton (1990), it comprises two-step “from the media to leaders and leaders to other people” (Araújo, 2007, 128). For Lazarsfeld and Merton (1990), opinion leaders are those who exert some influence on particular individuals or groups. From the marketing stand point, this condition of influence is connected to the consumption of products and services. In this way, the opinion leader, who is seen as a reference for certain subjects, manages to establish with the consumer a relationship of trust, translated into consumption. For this reason, the DIs can be considered opinion leaders, as they influence the group to which they belong, that is, their followers<sup>16</sup>. Companies - or organizations - use the DIs according to their target audience. For example, we have the film *É Fada*, by the writer Thalita Rebouças. The film is an adaptation of the book, which is aimed at the teenage audience. In a few lines, the film plays with fairy tales to introduce a girl to a fairy, who aims to make her life happier in order to earn the wings she had lost due to ‘poorly executed services’. For the role of the fairy, Geraldine cast youtuber Kéfera Buchmann, who had aspired to an acting career since the first videos on her YouTube channel. What made this situation extremely beneficial to the producers of the film is Kéfera's popularity with the adolescent public, especially the girls - the film's audience of interest. This specific case illustrates the appropriation of DIs as a communication strategy for organizations. The film had an absurd box office in the country, in addition to yielding several other consumer products.

Does the above example make us wonder if this YouTuber, who brought in crowds, is an opinion maker or a celebrity? At this point, let's look at the celebrity discussion, as explained earlier. First we appropriate the definition of Rojek (2008, p.11) who treats celebrity “as the attribution of glamorous or renowned status to an individual within the public sphere.” In his work, the author differentiates between notoriety and renown<sup>17</sup>.

A peculiar tension in celebrity culture is that arousal of strong emotion is achieved despite the absence of direct personal reciprocity. While the renown derives from personal contact with the individual who is differentiated as unusual or unique, celebrity and notoriety presuppose a relationship in which the individual differentiated as honorific is distanced from the viewer by a stage, screen, or some equivalent means of communication. (Rojek, 2008, p.14)

As long as the celebrity and that renowned individual distance themselves from the public, the reputed individual maintains contact with the latter. In this case, the influencers have this

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<sup>16</sup> ‘Follower’ is the term applied to those who follow a particular person on a digital media.

<sup>17</sup> “It refers to the informal allocation of distinction to an individual within a particular network of relationships. Therefore, in all social groups certain individuals stand out for their wit, beauty, courage, skills, achievements, or courage. These individuals have a kind of fame inside a particular social congregation that they are part of” (Rojek, 2008, p.14)

characteristic of the renown, since they arise from the digital media - in direct contact with the public - and by a certain attribute recognized within a certain social sphere. This theoretical condition, reflected in the perceived practice of DIs, directs our attention to the peculiarity of being a celebrity, as a subject that generates identification - by approaching or not the reality of the actual individual - and who is close to their audience, if and only if, we consider digital platforms as a mediator that brings closer, rather than separates, one from the other. In this sense, we highlight how easy it has become to relate to people geographically distant and socially different from the individual's social group.

Therefore, we see this peculiar use of the influencers as communication strategies. Although they are not closer to their target audience, that is, their followers, the DIs can bring this sense of trust as said in the popular saying 'the man-in-the-street'. They serve as mediators between the organization and the consumer, as a vehicle of communication and simultaneously as an institution, as well as being an audience of interest that permeates the internal and external audiences of the organizations. That is, they can be incorporated into organizational communication as an external public that, however, maintains direct contact with the organization - which is close to the view of the internal public.

So when in an advertisement spread on the internet by the mobile phone company, which brings as 'advertising boys' a famous YouTuber within a particular niche and a singer who has been nationally recognized for years, we see the dialogue between two people with different 'origins of fame', who can reach specific niches. Still using idea of Rojek (2008: 12) who stated: "celebrities are cultural fabrications," we can inquire if digital influencers are also cultural fabrications. However, for this work, we do not find it convenient to attach ourselves to this discussion as noted above.

## **CONSIDERATION**

As previously seen, communication is a science under construction, in which its epistemological point of view is still under construction. In this way, it crawled towards its own origin and definition. Even with this weakness, communication occurs in society, individually, or in groups. Thus, we can understand it to some extent as a developing science, which even without established theoretical bases exists and is developed as such. Therefore, when we look at the studies of communication, we are faced with occasional discussions of market character whose orbit depends on the professions in this area. In this way, instead of focusing on the communication itself, today communication plays a supporting role within its own space of study and action. This results the process of organizational communication having the understanding of communication as something still mechanical, systemic, and linear.

The fragility around the studies of communication as a science, in essence, is transferred to all its 'derivatives', scientific or practical. That is, as discussed in this article, organizational communication still has difficulties in being understood and developed due to its theoretical confusion arising from the status of communication within academia. Thus, the theoretical gaps in the area of communication are reflected in organizational communication studies when we observe the simplistic view applied and developed by professionals and scholars in the field.

Hence, organizational communication is still structured and thought of systemically, which follows a pre-established manual of norms and actions that guarantee organizations the



commercial success within their marked niche. However, we are not naïve enough to believe that organizations as companies do not seek such a purpose - and do not judge them 'demeritoriously' for that. On the contrary, our reflection sought to highlight some of the possible weaknesses which imply that this end is achieved. Therefore, we focus on communication strategies, especially DIs, who are being used more frequently and are appropriate as a means of promoting and selling products.

DIs have shown to some extent to be efficient communication strategies; however, following the theoretical discussion, we can reflect on if the communication of these DIs is 'communication appropriation'. In this article, we do not find a set and final answer, so we argue that organizational communication is not limited to punctual actions, but instead, it encompasses a much larger and more complex process that has not yet been understood by those who do it.

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