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Abstract

Culture, business, and communication are overlapping human phenomena. However, corporate communication methods have yet to embrace the complexity of organizational culture. Since the study of culture is anthropological in nature, we propose foregrounding autoethnography/autobiographical approaches and method to analyze corporate organizational culture. We argue that studying corporate communication, public relations, and society via the lenses of organizational culture and subsidiary organizational memory can provide unique insights into practice of corporate communication and the theorizing of organizational memory research. In this case example, we answer this question: In what ways can autobiographical/autoethnographic narratives of organizational members inform the theory, research, and practice in corporate communication?

Keywords

Autobiography, Autoethnography, Organizational Culture, Organizational Memory, Corporate Communications, Public Relations

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Extending Organizational Memory and Corporate Communications Research via Autoethnography/Autobiography

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Culture, business, and communication are overlapping human phenomena. However, corporate communication methods have yet to embrace the complexity of organizational culture. Since the study of culture is anthropological in nature, we propose foregrounding autoethnography/autobiographical approaches and method to analyze corporate organizational culture. We argue that studying corporate communication, public relations, and society via the lenses of organizational culture and subsidiary organizational memory can provide unique insights into practice of corporate communication and the theorizing of organizational memory research. In this case example, we answer this question: In what ways can autobiographical/autoethnographic narratives of organizational members inform the theory, research, and practice in corporate communication? Keywords: Autobiography, Autoethnography, Organizational Culture, Organizational Memory, Corporate Communications, Public Relations

Corporate communications research is similar to other management and management communication disciplines insofar as the discipline “trails other fields that have long since questioned objectivity in quantum and postquantum science and have learned from feminism in making the personal a valid part of scholarship” (Xifra & McKie, 2011, p. 399). In fact, corporate communications scholarly research often views subjectivity as an impure element that has no place in the realm of scholarly research endeavors. In this case example, we directly challenge this prevailing notion. One way to advance our understanding of the discipline and push the boundaries of corporate communication research is to explore under-used methods and under-championed paradigms. Existing corporate communication research relies heavily on prevailing functionalist paradigms and social scientific methods of scholarly inquiry, as evidenced by the articles predominantly cited in the academic journals dedicated to corporate communication and public relations (Chappell & Moon, 2005; Frederick, 1994; Griffin & Mahon, 1997; Suchman, 1995). Many of these articles are quantitative in nature and center on business effectiveness including Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) measurement and assessment.

The aforementioned is not a criticism of corporate communication research, but rather is an observation of the state of the field. Few can question the ways that CSR studies have contributed greatly to the advancement of corporate communication research. Scholars have argued that engaging in CSR activities can contribute to corporate reputation (Carroll, 1999), and strong reputations may provide firms the ability to charge premium prices, attract better applicants, retain employees, enhance their access to capital markets, and attract investors (Fombrun & Shanley, 1990). Due in part to this potential positive effect, researchers developed and further refined measures to evaluate how well organizations were meeting their corporate responsibilities (Albinger & Freeman, 2000; Luce, Barber, & Hillman, 2001; Mattingly & Berman, 2006; Turban & Greening, 1997) as well as determine relationships

between corporate social and financial performance (Roman, Hayibor, & Agle, 1999; Waddock & Graves, 1997; Wang & Choi, 2013). Even qualitative scholars (see Topic & Tench, 2016) have explored how multinational corporations use CSR communication differently depending on the socio-cultural contexts of the countries in which they operate. However, a focus on CSR advancement—driven by statistical evidence and experimental designs—might create theoretical blind spots for corporate communication researchers (as researchers might see studying such topics is a more likely pathway for publication). At the very least, such a focus obscures the fact that there might exist alternative methods and lines of inquiry that might help to further the development of—as well as add further nuance to—corporate communication scholarship. In sum, organizations are cultural spaces that are present across the globe. People who compose organizations bring to their workplaces different beliefs, values, attitudes, and assumptions—especially in the day and age of the multinational corporation. These varying perspectives shape or challenge dominant organization memories. Relying exclusively on experiments or survey data, for example, likely ignores the major reasons people find work enjoyable, the reasons they strongly identify with an organization, or the reasons they might feel isolated or discriminated against. More critical and qualitative investigations are warranted in corporate, management, and business communication contexts.

In this essay we demonstrate the value of using other methods of inquiry to advance disciplinary knowledge as well as advance understanding of business practice. We argue that autoethnography, as an autobiographical method of research inquiry, has the potential to shed unique insights into the lived work experiences of key organizational stakeholders unlike other methods of inquiry. We argue this is the case because autoethnography provides the constant dialectic between being simultaneously an organizational insider and an organizational outsider whom is studying organizational communicative phenomena. Due to these potential contributions—with a few noted exceptions (O'Connor, 2002; Suchan, 2004)—it is surprising that scholarship in management and corporate communication in large part has been slow to embrace anthropological and socio-cultural approaches and methods — for management is a profoundly cultural activity at a number of levels.

From a cultural anthropologic standpoint, it is clear the terms, “corporate communication” and “culture,” reference overlapping human phenomena:

To talk about communication as a cultural practice, or of culture as unintelligible without recourse to the manner in which it must get communicated, is to demand a substantive engagement with the inescapable associations between those two constructs: culture, what is learned as opposed to hardwired, shared through verbal and nonverbal interaction, and passed along from generation to generation; communication, variously understood as the transmission of information, as mediations at the kernel of subjectivity and sociality, or as the intersubjective grounding for any and all claims to psychological or social reality. (Jackson, 2008, p. 665)

Because culture and communication are indeed overlapping human phenomena, business and management communication scholars should further recognize the untapped and/or underused promise of applying anthropological approaches in business. In short, anthropological work has the potential of helping us add nuance and richness to our limited understanding of other areas of corporate communication. L'Etang (2010), in reference to public relations practitioners working for corporate entities, mentions that one direction of the anthropological approach to public relations could be to explore the “ethnography of public relations practitioners and their professional bodies” (p. 158). In this case example, we

champion this call by proposing and foregrounding autoethnography as approach and method in business and society inquiry.

Autoethnography is highlighted as opposed to broader ethnography in this particular case because autoethnographic studies of organizational culture can provide unique insights into organizational cultural phenomena via researchers' direct access to individual memories (since the researcher would be a part of the organization under investigation), collective (organizational) memories, and the way that collective memories influence individual memories.

First, via a literature review, we demonstrate the centrality of memory to organizational culture. Next we define autoethnography (as a form of autobiographical writing), present how it has been used in other strategic communication disciplines to-date, and then layout how autoethnography can be used, methodologically, in corporate communication research. Finally, we discuss pragmatic and theoretical implications for corporate communication practice and scholarship.

Before we move on we believe it is important that we provide context about who we are as authors. The first author is a leading scholar in the areas of organizational discourse, particularly regarding public relations, issues management, corporate social responsibility (CSR), branding and strategic communication, and public relations education. His research projects address fundamental concerns about issues of power, race, class, and gender, specifically, and how these social constructions shape and influence the ways that various stakeholders receive, react, and respond to certain messages. As such, he was one of the first to publish an autoethnographic scholarly article (Waymer & Dyson, 2011) in the discipline of public relations with his exploration of issues of race and how they are (or are not taught) in the public relations curriculum. The second author is a former corporate communication manager with more than a decade of industry experience, recently turned academic. As a scholar, she publishes in the areas of public relations, corporate discourse, rhetorical studies, and diversity. There is a very strong relationship between industry and pedagogy insomuch as the undergraduate curriculum is often viewed by many as a pre-professional track. Although this relationship is positive and has clear benefits for students, faculty, and industry alike, we see that some of the challenges presented in industry can be traced back to some of the more narrow ways the curriculum is designed for and taught to undergraduates. As such, our connection to and motivation for this work is the belief that if we can influence the ways that scholars study corporate communication, public relations and strategic communication by broadening their methodological approaches, we then can influence what is taught to students in the curriculum and what methods executives deem as appropriate to address issues in their workplaces. As a result, we hope to add more richness, nuance, and textuality to the study of corporate communication and public relations by highlighting the highly cultural, but often ignored, elements present in all organizations.

Communication Inquiry and Organizational Culture

If nothing else, extensive linkages between the concepts of "culture" and "communication" have always been predicated, at least in part, on an appreciation of the complex interchanges between communicative practices/processes writ large (or small) and our collective negotiations of diverse cultural landscapes. As two established academic domains with substantial epistemological overlap, anthropology and communication have pushed one another into new heuristic terrain... (Jackson, 2008, p. 664)

We take the position that scholarship must continue that push. Moreover, we argue that corporate communication research in general and further theoretical development in CSR hinges upon a greater commitment to socio-cultural anthropological approaches, methods, and inquiry—namely autoethnographic approaches. The central and guiding assumption to such reasoning is that “any human group of people interacting together for a period of time will evolve a culture” (Patton, 2002, p. 81). Workplaces will constitute a culture. Organizations will constitute a culture. Organized stakeholders, invariably, will constitute a culture. From taking the time to analyze popular vocabulary and jargon, key rituals, to interrogating the values of an organization including treasured accomplishments and awards, important stories, heroes and heroines, and organizational performances, scholars can develop useful frameworks for understanding, participating in, and possibly transforming organizational culture by studying organizational culture (Eisenberg, Goodall, & Trethewey, 2010).

Interpreting and making sense of culture is paramount to social science inquiry in general (Morgan, 1997) because culture is an important part of any organization—including the organizations we study (Schein, 2010). Both management and communication literatures have devoted a fair amount of attention to culture—especially in the realm of critical management studies (Alvesson & Deetz, 2000; Mumby, 2005; Mumby & Putnam, 1992). However, neither communication nor critical management scholars have devoted much attention to the nexus of critical management and organizational memory, which is surprising given that memory, especially in the context of dominant organizational narratives, is central to the sustenance and perpetuation of culture (Connerton, 1989; Eyerman, 2004; Misztal, 2003). Thus while critical management research highlights the power of organizational and societal narratives (Mumby, 1987), a direct link to organizational memory is not made. To make the point more lucid regarding the need to make the aforementioned nexus of critical management and organizational memory clear, consider Tompkins (1987):

Take away symbolism and how much do we know about an organization’s past? And as for the present, each member or an organization has directly only a tiny “sliver” of the nonsymbolic; each member’s overall picture is but a construct provided by the symbol systems of words, numbers, and nomenclatures. (p. 85)

Thus, memory works in tandem with symbolism to help tell and preserve organizational stories and histories, as well as help shape our understanding of our organizational lives.

Organizational Memory

Most organizational memory studies (OMS) are limited by their managerialist, “preoccupation with the utility of memory for knowledge management” (Rowlinson, Booth, Clark, Delahaye, & Procter, 2010, p. 69). In these studies, the notion of organizational memory as storage bins/knowledge repositories for information acquisition, retention, and retrieval (as made popular by Walsh & Ungson, 1991) is prevalent. For example, scholars from this tradition use empirical methods to assess the role organizational memory plays in the psychological empowerment in the workplace (meaning, competence, self-determination, and impact), and organization-based self-esteem (Dunham & Burt, 2011). Additionally, they assess how various organizational factors influence knowledge retention and storage within companies, including but not limited to: (a) structural organizational factors such as specialization and standardization as well as (b) organizational processes such as codification and personalization of information and electronic communication (Fieldler & Welpel, 2010).

However, far fewer studies (e.g., Stohl, 1986) are embracing critical or social constructivist paradigms to organizational memory studies. This paradigm champions a “collectivist approach to social remembering in organizations” (Rowlinson, Booth, Clark, Delahaye, & Procter, 2010, p. 69) that enables disciplinary connections to be made between memory and other research programs, such as organizational culture studies. We are firmly situating the argument presented in this manuscript in this particular vein of scholarly inquiry. As such, we provide a review of the work on collective memory of noted cultural sociologist, Ron Eyerman.

Collective Memory

Ron Eyerman (2004) highlighted how scholars representing the Durkheimian tradition in social thought see collective memory as central to the production and reproduction of society. In short, the Durkheimian tradition focuses on the role that collective events, rituals, and ceremonies play in maintaining social solidarity. Eyerman argued that collective memory, within this tradition, is defined as “recollections of a shared past which are passed on through ongoing processes of commemoration, officially sanctioned rituals which remember a group through calling upon a common heritage, with a shared past as a central component” (p. 161). Moreover, Eyerman noted that even a more nuanced definition of collective memory allows for further delineation between individual and collective memory inasmuch as “collective memory is embodied in texts and practices which have a supra-individual character” (p. 168).

We summarize in the following three points. First, Durkheim argued that collective consciousness is paramount to society because it produces the society, it holds society together, and without collective consciousness society cannot survive (Allan, 2005). Moreover, Durkheim argued that individuals produce collective consciousness through their interactions. Thus, if organizations are composed of individuals and both organizations and individuals compose society, then studying the intersection of individual and collective memory via autoethnographic investigation of corporate culture should provide insights that better inform our understanding of corporate life and its contributions to society. Second, we argue that having a better understanding of collective organizational memories could provide an insider’s lens into the management practices that are taking place within an organization as well as how those practices can be used to shape and influence organizational culture and the messages organizations disseminate externally and internally (that is their production of cultural artifacts). Third, we argue that because organizational cultures emerge from members of an organization’s individual and collective memories, their narratives, (including how they choose to remember, forget, and/or retell events), as well as their symbol using practices, studying and understanding culture and its subsidiary organizational memory can provide valuable insight into ways business is practiced. Additionally, studying an organization’s individual and collective memories can provide insight into how corporate communication opportunities and challenges, especially those communication efforts targeted to stakeholders, emerge, and how those opportunities or challenges can be capitalized upon or addressed.

Using an autoethnographic approach to analyzing management and corporate communication practices in society allows researchers to draw upon both individual memories (since the researcher would be a part of the organization under study) and collective memories shaped by the organization, in order to provide thick, rich, description, analysis, and discussion of organizations, their practices, their cultures, and the messages they produce in attempts to inform and influence stakeholder perceptions and behaviors (including brand loyalty, organizational support).

Autoethnography as Method

Autoethnography, an autobiographical genre of research, showcases various layers of consciousness by connecting the personal lived experience to the cultural (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). Moreover autoethnographers gaze back and forth first via an ethnographic wide-angle lens in which they interrogate outward, social and cultural aspects of their lived experience, then they focus inwardly “exposing a vulnerable self that is moved by and may move through, refract, and resist cultural interpretations” (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 739). As this process continues, autoethnographers oscillate, constantly moving inward and outward going backward and forward between the inward, the personal, the vulnerable self and outward to the social and cultural aspects of their lived experience (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). Due to the constant vacillation, oftentimes distinctions between the personal and the cultural become blurred—sometimes beyond distinct recognition (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). Moreover, autoethnographies are usually written in first-person voice, and these texts appear in various forms including but not limited to “short stories, poetry, fiction, novels, photographic essays, personal essays, journals, fragmented and layered writing, and social science prose” (p. 739). Yet what make autoethnographic texts viable research tools are that they feature “concrete action, dialogue, emotion, embodiment, spirituality, and self-consciousness. . . appearing as relational and institutional stories affected by history, social structure, and culture, which themselves are dialectically revealed through action, feeling, thought, and language” (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 739).

Simply put, autoethnography, as a choice of research method, retains the characteristics of ethnographic research yet its distinction is that it not only retains emotion, but it privileges emotion and subsequently uses strong emotion as a mode of establishing credibility and authority (Denzin, 1997). The issues of privileged credibility of lived experiences associated with this method cannot be understated (Waymer, 2008, 2009). In short, the representation of feeling and thought is what make an autoethnographic project both credible and believable (Foltz & Griffin, 1996). Although autoethnographic projects rely heavily on emotion, they still maintain methodological rigor. With regard to how an autoethnographer uses “sociological introspection and emotional recall” (p. 737), Ellis and Bochner (2000) explained that researchers must be concerned both with “portraying the facts” and “conveying the meanings” of their experiences (p. 751, emphasis in original). This requires both using fieldnotes to record the activities and interactions during or shortly after they happen, and trying to recall and express the emotional reaction the researcher had to the experience. Finally, since ethnography is the telling of a story, autoethnographers (as well as other narrative ethnographers) must adeptly use “narrative strategies to transport readers into experiences and make them feel as well as think” (Ellis & Bochner, 1996, p. 18).

This particular case example will demonstrate the power of autobiography (see Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001; Tenni, Smyth, & Boucher, 2003; Waymer, 2012). In this exemplar, the autobiographical method is used to tell a compelling story of exploring the lived experiences of one corporate communication practitioner/academic and her understanding and sensemaking processes of her role as an organizational organ/mouthpiece and the lessons that can be gleaned from those experiences—for both practice and the pedagogy of corporate communication and public relations. To make this method more lucid, we will highlight several of the guidelines that Bullough and Pinnegar (2001) set forth for those interested in conducting quality autobiographical forms of self-study. The guidelines most relevant (8 of 14) to this case example are presented below. Explanation is provided for some of these guidelines that warrant it.

- *Selected Guideline 1: Autobiographical self-studies should ring true and enable connection*—meaning that “Part of what makes education-related biographical writing attractive to readers is the promise of recognition and connection” (p. 16).
- *Selected Guideline 2: Self-studies should promote insight and interpretation*—meaning that for autobiography to be powerful it must contain and articulate “nodal moment(s).” Thus, autobiography, like fiction, reveals to the reader a “pattern in experience” and allows a reinterpretation of the lives and experience of both the writer and the reader (p. 16).
- *Selected Guideline 3: Autobiographical self-study research must engage history forthrightly and the author must take an honest stand.*
- *Selected Guideline 4: Powerful autobiographical self-studies portray character development and include dramatic action: Something genuine is at stake in the story.*
- *Selected Guideline 5: Quality autobiographical self-studies offer fresh perspectives on established truths.*
- *Selected Guideline 6: Self-studies that rely on correspondence bring with them the necessity to select, frame, arrange, and footnote the correspondence in ways that demonstrate wholeness.*
- *Selected Guideline 7: Quality autobiographical self-studies attend carefully to persons in context or setting.*
- *Selected Guideline 8: Effective correspondence self-studies contain complication or tension*—meaning that, “when something of genuine importance is at issue, it is likely there is intellectual sustenance to be had.” Thus, powerful and engaging exchanges can provide the reader with “an intellectual home” in the writing of one of the correspondents or in the “space between where the ideas are interrogated and the balance created between biography and history” (p. 20).

We have used the eight aforementioned guidelines to interrogate the second author’s corporate communication employment experiences. We have contextualized and critically analyzed those experiences, and we have accurately portrayed their meaning therein. What results is a compelling autobiography that explores the lived experiences of a corporate communication professional and the interesting dialectic between individual and collective organizational memory. The research question posed was, “In what ways can autobiographical/autoethnographic narratives of organizational members inform the theory, research, and practice in corporate communication?”

The Relationship between Lived Experiences in Corporate Communications and Organizational Memory

We have thousands of experiences in life, and we never know which ones will create lasting memories, leave an imprint on our soul, and become ingrained into the fiber of our very being. Professional experiences play an especially important role in the lives of corporate communications and public relations professionals because they shape the way these professionals perceive the organizations they work for as well as the role and function of communication within organizations. Professional experiences shape how communicators make sense of organizational actions and interpret those actions for publics and stakeholders. These experiences influence if and how corporate communication practitioners listen to organizational constituents and participate, with them, in the meaning-making process that

constitutes the existential essence of the organization. One of my most profound experiences as a corporate communications professional occurred in 2005 with the events surrounding Hurricane Katrina—the costliest, as well as one of the most destructive and most deadly natural disasters in United States history.

Before I decided to pursue an academic career, I was a new member of the corporate communications team of a multibillion-dollar, privately held corporation and serving in my first real corporate communications position as editor of the company magazine. It was a quarterly publication distributed to approximately 80,000 employees and key stakeholders. This corporation is the parent company of several well-known media and automotive brands including several top newspapers, television stations, and radio stations across the US. Hurricane Katrina affected more than 1,200 employees with some people losing everything they owned. The head of the corporate security team, described the scene after Katrina as a “complete breakdown of civil order,” and this was a man who spent more than 20 years with the State Department battling crime and terrorism all over the world. The vice president of corporate communications who oversaw both internal and external communications was involved in Katrina discussions at the highest levels of the company. He told his team, of which I was a member, “The company’s priority is the safety and wellbeing of its employees not the status of the facilities or the amount of money we’ve lost.” At the time, his words struck me as counter-intuitive, given the profit-focused nature of capitalism and the popular perceptions of US corporations. I was however new to the company. Unbeknownst to me, Katrina was about to serve a pedagogical function in my life, teaching me many lessons about the nexus of organizational culture and corporate communications. With those counter-intuitive words from our department’s leader serving as the moral compass, our team’s mission was to use our communication skills to help employees and help the company recover from this disaster—plain and simple.

Some corporate communications team members worked on the Employee Disaster Relief Fund campaign communications, leading to \$1 million in employee contributions; with the company match and vendor contributions, a total of \$2.7 million was raised for employees affected by the hurricane. Other corporate communicators focused on community relations, working with organizations like the Red Cross and other non-profits. Some team members were focused on crisis communications while others focused on media relations. My job was to tell the story of Katrina through the pages of the company magazine.

When I recall those early days of Katrina, I remember feeling a tremendous sense of fear for the people on the Gulf Coast living through such a devastating ordeal, and I also felt an overwhelming sense of fear for myself because I was new to the company, new to the business of corporation communications and unsure of how to go about the task of telling what could likely be one of the most important stories in the company’s history. When I look through the pages of the magazine now and see the stories of the employees, my sense of optimism is renewed and I’m reminded that in times of great trouble, ordinary people can and do accomplish extraordinary things. When I look back through my old notebooks, as I did to write this piece, I can literally see the stress in my handwriting as I struggled to write as fast as leaders and employees could talk—in formal meetings, during interviews, in impromptu hallway conversations—and I’m keenly reminded of the frenzied nature of the whole experience.

Finding the Fragments

At first detailed information, especially first person accounts from New Orleans and the Gulf Coast, were difficult to come by because most communication systems were down, and the communication technology of 2005 was very different from what we have today. Plus

for those affected by the storm—because they lost their belongings or because of diminished business operations—talking to the company magazine was understandably not a top priority. Eventually fragments of information trickled in. My colleagues who had been with the company longer than I had and knew more people than I did helped by giving me leads. “Email this person.” “Call that person.” I contacted people, conducted interviews myself, assigned stories to other writers and collected as much information as fast as I could. Soon the fragments of information started to take the shape of stories of employees doing amazing things! Initially, I was only supposed to do a couple of feature stories on Hurricane Katrina, but quickly it became clear to me that the company’s response to this devastating event could not be told with just a couple feature stories. Instead, Katrina warranted its own special issue of the magazine.

From Fragments to Stories

One day, I went to interview a senior vice president of operations for one of the subsidiary companies. The décor of this company’s corporate headquarters building reminded me of something out of a 1980s business movie. Very formal. Very mahogany. So I expected to meet a very buttoned-up executive. But what I saw was a man who looked worn from his work. Shirtsleeves rolled up...Hair not perfectly coifed, but determination was in his eyes. He told me Katrina was the biggest disaster to hit the company and he was still a little shaken up about it.

During the interview, I asked him to tell me about some of the things he found most moving about the whole ordeal. He told me about an email he received from the chairman and chief executive officer of the company. “It was just one line long, but I will never forget what it said: ‘Take care of our people, and take care of our customers.’ And that was it.” The stark simplicity of the message from the top leader set the tone for how everyone else in the company should respond.

Katrina was not the time for micro-management and bureaucratic red tape. This was a time for a laser beam-like focus on doing the right thing for employees, customers, and the community. These sentiments were salient throughout the organization such that it made sense to me when I heard about a fleet supervisor from a company location in California who was so moved by what was happening in New Orleans that he drove a company tow truck by himself from San Diego to help his Gulf Coast coworkers. He kept a diary of his experiences and we published his account in the magazine as a feature story.

This theme of empowerment and self-directed action echoed in so many of my interviews, including one with the top executive from the automotive division. He explained that while the company had crisis management plans in place, “You can’t just go by the book and what the plan says. You have to go by what happened here.” In other words, he recognized that each situation was unique and therefore required a unique response. He told me how his company took an RV full of food, clothes, and supplies to employees and created its own “Wal-Mart”-like facility where employees were free to take anything they needed. His comments about straying from the plan also struck me as counter-intuitive because so often executives fear any deviation from the official plan and even more so may fear publicizing the deviation as an exemplar of how things should be done.

I received stories about employees who set up and manned special telephone help lines to help find missing employees and supply affected employees with information to get the resources they needed. Employees in Atlanta helped displaced New Orleans residents who were relocated to Atlanta start life anew by donating their time, clothes, food, and supplies. All of these stories went into the magazine, and the more people heard about the special issue of the magazine, the more stories and pictures poured into my email inbox and

voicemail. I was receiving so many stories of employees' good works that it was almost overwhelming. But I could not turn them away. These stories shaped the publication because I felt compelled to include everything. If someone risked his or her life to help an employee or did something else amazing, surely I could find a way to include it in the magazine. I decided my goal would be to include as many employee stories as possible. However, as I reflect on this experience, I can't help but wonder if talk of the magazine capturing and celebrating the efforts of our employees, itself, played a role in inspiring other employees to give selflessly for the cause. I'd like to believe it was the altruistic human spirit that inspired others to give and propelled me to capture their narratives.

The Power of Pictures

A picture is worth a thousand words is a popular English idiom that denotes that complex ideas can be conveyed with a simple image. Image can serve as powerful discursive visual communication and visual rhetorical devices (Foss, 1994; Riley, 2015). Demonstrating the theoretical and methodological power of visual communication, Griffin (2008) claimed:

A great, but still largely unmet challenge for visual communication scholars is to scan, chart, and interrogate the various levels at which images seem to operate: as evidence in visual rhetoric, as simulated reality bolstering and legitimizing the presence and status of media operations themselves, as abstract symbols and textual indices...--the self-conscious performance of style. (p. 5313)

Below, we further explore and interrogate the power of visual communication and the role it can play in preserving and contributing to organizational culture and memory.

The company owned several award-winning newspapers with award-winning photojournalists, and a few of them traveled to New Orleans and the Gulf Coast to cover the Katrina story. It only seemed logical to fill the magazine with their pictures (and pictures from other employees) and avoid stock images wherever possible. Using our own employees' pictures, we reasoned, would make the magazine an even more authentic expression of our culture. I was in awe of the sheer horror and the undaunted hope depicted in the pictures from the photographers. The inspiration and desperation of the scenes captured with their lenses was astonishing. Even though a picture is worth a thousand words, and is therefore theoretically able to speak itself, there had to be great stories behind the photos. So I interviewed several photographers for the magazine. I asked one photographer what he remembered most. He said he could not forget how people would stop him and ask if he had been in a particular area that day. "And I'd say, yeah we were. And they'd say, 'I live right down that road. Did you see any houses?' And...you would have to tell them no, we didn't see any houses there. Nothing survived on that road." That stung me when he said it and it still stings today. Another photographer wanted everyone to remember that during times of catastrophe, news media were also first responders. There were so many incredible stories, and with the great pictures from our photographers the magazine grew from 24 to 72 pages. Fortunately for me, the company's leadership saw the value in the expanded special issue and the subsequent budget increase it necessitated.

One Big Problem

All of the content was coming together nicely. I had dozens of stories with fantastic pictures and had divided the magazine into two aptly titled sections—Disaster and Response.

The only problem was we lacked a cover shot. Anyone who has ever worked in publications knows that if you have great magazine content inside with an okay front cover on the outside, you basically have nothing. There were so many wonderful images, but none of them said to me, “Cover.” My boss, the director of internal communications, suggested we use an image of a weeping African American mother with her child. The mother’s eyes were void of all emotion save despair and a single tear slid down her cheek as she gently held her baby, too young to realize the magnitude of the devastation. It was a beautiful and compelling image, but I was unsure of using it. To me, it did not say, “Hurricane Katrina,” or “New Orleans,” or “Gulf Coast.” The mother and baby could have been anywhere in the world. I knew the magazine’s cover lines could clarify their location and the situation, but I really wanted an image that spoke for itself and said, “Hurricane Katrina.”

I also was unsure about using the mother and child on the cover, because I was concerned about reproducing the kind of racialization of Katrina that I saw in the mainstream news media where a national disaster had become a racialized and racially polarizing subject. The word “Katrina” and the image of “poor Black people” had become an ideograph—fused together as one unpleasant subject. In my view, Katrina was not a Black or a White issue. It was an American issue. It was a human issue that affected all kinds of people, and that is how I thought the company should depict it. But I just could not seem to find the right image and time was running out because the magazine had to get to the printer. While my boss would allow me to select the cover image, she would not allow me to miss publication deadlines.

Then one day I saw it. It was an iconic image of Canal Street. The photograph took my breath away. It would take your breath away. The street was completely flooded and people were wading through waist-high water to escape. They looked as if they were almost swallowed up by the water. Their tiny figures were dwarfed by its volume, but they walked on anyway. That was the cover! To my boss’s credit, she accepted my cover selection. That was indicative of the company’s culture: trust your employees to make good decisions. To be on the safe side, I also tested my cover image choice with other potential cover options in a very informal employee survey, and it ranked highest. My boss and I both felt validated. I felt good that I made an appropriate cover selection, and she felt good about empowering her employee to make the selection.

Crossing the Finish Line with the Formal Review and Approval Process

Once we had a cover, the magazine was complete, and we could now embark upon the review and approval process. All persons covered in the magazine had to review the article in which they were featured, and they were given the opportunity to make any edits they wanted. Once they were satisfied with the article, they emailed me their approval and the article was considered finalized at that point. The review and approval process was incredibly tedious to manage, but it was a necessary evil to ensure the content’s accuracy and stakeholder satisfaction.

Once all stories were approved, a color proof of the magazine was sent to the top executives, including legal, for review and approval. Once those edits were implemented, the magazine was proofread before it was sent to the printer.

Reflections

So often scholarship on corporate communication and public relations focuses on what organizations do wrong, so it is important to sometimes recognize what they do right. We argue that autoethnographic/autobiographic studies may be able to play a meaningful role in this effort. In the end, the Hurricane Katrina special issue of the magazine was an

important piece of company history, a physical manifestation of the very best of its culture, and an award-winning publication. The employee stories and photographs within its pages formed an embodied text that enabled everyone who picked up the magazine to share in those experiences. Even though the magazine was primarily an internal communication piece, it served public relations functions because employees are an important public/stakeholder for any corporation, and the magazine was also used by the communication departments in the subsidiary companies and shared with other key external stakeholders.

The experience of being a member of the corporate communications team and producing the magazine showed me what good corporate communications looks like. It looks like solid leadership guiding an empowered team that is able to make independent decisions while working together to support organizational objectives with communication strategies, plans, and tactics. The products of our communicative efforts—in my case the magazine—served as a vehicle to transform individual employee experiences into collective organizational memories through the publication, which amplified the organization's sense of shared experiences within its action-oriented culture. Hurricane Katrina taught me that corporate communication and public relations can make an important difference—not only to the corporation as an entity, but to the human beings who give that organization life and meaning. This is a helpful lesson to learn through experience early in one's career.

And sure corporate stories are still told orally but in our communication technology centered, networked society, the artifacts of corporate communications will always retain certain relevance. Thus, my Hurricane Katrina experience also taught me that in many ways, corporate communicators, in part, now serve the function of contemporary griots, (the famous West African historians, storytellers, praise singers, poets and/or musicians who were the repository of oral tradition, and are often seen societal leaders due to their positions as advisers to royal personages). Relatedly, these experiences taught me that corporate communication professionals are the primary producers and curators of organizational knowledge and memory. Without our magazines, news releases, online posts, and other communicative efforts, how would the organization know itself? How would others know it? These documents enable persons who are both internal and external to the organization to have “documentary evidence in discussions of memory, which helps to distinguish collective memory from myth” (Eyerman, 2004, p. 168)—thus playing a very important organizational cultural role.

Conclusion and Directions for Future Research

Corporate communication practitioners are best suited to inform corporate communication researchers about the intricacies related to the day-to-day public relations function. Crises do not occur every day. As Boyd (2000) highlights, although institutional legitimacy threats (often via crisis) are most often studied in public relations literature, in practice most of public relations practitioners' work will involve minor, ordinary, but important, corporate communication, public relations and issues management processes that help to ensure particular, day-to-day oriented, organizational policies, procedures, and practices are deemed legitimate. Surveys can be used to assess practitioners' attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions about specific aspects of their jobs. Interviews can be conducted to illuminate the various ways that practitioners make sense of various aspects of their work. Textual and rhetorical analysis of artifacts can only tell part of the story. But as this case example demonstrates, autoethnographies and autobiographies allow for detailed, personal, context-laden accounts that demonstrate how a business communicator not only makes sense of her work but also how personal value from the profession can be derived in the retelling of a personal organizational story.

Additionally, the exemplar highlights the business communicator's role in helping to create organizational memory via artifacts and subsequently conveying those artifacts. Questions that naturally arise follow.

- In what ways do the organizational memories that public relations practitioners help to create, shape, influence, or constrain practitioners' work and/or professional lives? Because the organization in this particular case was seen as caring for its people and their families, people went to great lengths to do what was good for family. This, we argue, was a good thing. We are not being critical of the efforts of the corporation in this particular case; however, we question how organizational memories in general can be abused to get organizational members to work longer, harder, and to transfer much of their agency over to the corporation.
- What are the tensions that arise in the dialectic between business communicators as producers and "managers" of memory and memory shaping artifacts and the "culture as emergent paradigm"—such that people in the organization (of which the practitioner is a member) are viewed as agents who collectively make sense of, adopt, adapt, reframe, refute, and/or reject narratives, artifacts, and texts as they collectively define what warrants being worthy of being a part of an organization's long-term memory?
- Are the ways in which practitioners contribute to organizational memory similar across industry types? These questions suggest that corporate communication—especially in the context of the lives of practitioners—can benefit from as well as further contribute to the study of culture in general and the study of organizational memory in specific.

Finally, we pause here to reflect on the feasibility and/or (im)practicality of what we are proposing. Some might consider this a (major) limitation to what we are proposing in general and to this case example in specific. The critical question is, "How many business communicators are academics and/or are truly interested in writing journal articles for an academic audience?" We believe this question is fair; however, we would argue that even if the numbers of practitioners-turned academics or practitioners who simply want to contribute to the body of knowledge via academic publication are few, which does not preclude us from arguing that more should do so. Still, having a pathway to make this manner of writing and engaging for an academic audience is an important consideration that must be addressed. One way in which this can be done is via a partnership with the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA)—the world's largest and foremost organization of public relations professionals with more than 22,000 public relations and communications professional. PRSA via the *Public Relations Journal* aims to have articles co-authored by practitioners and academics to better foster the relationship between the profession and the academy. We urge academics to reach out to corporate communication practitioners in this regard to ask them to consider writing about, journaling, and reflecting on their day-to-day lived experiences. Then these academics can partner with these practitioners to review those lived work experiences and systematically analyze them so that a practical and theoretical knowledge base about the life of the practitioner and/or organizational culture can be generated.

Another way to create a pathway to make this manner of writing and engaging for academic audience is that if practitioners are concerned with a qualified pipeline of students coming into industry, they should be more than willing to share what industry life is like via their lived experiences. There are several organizations—such as the Commission on Public Relations Education (CPRE), which is composed of public relations educators and practitioners representing 15 professional societies in PR and related fields of

communications—that state that a major component of their mission is to prepare students for careers in practice. Thus, capturing their narratives and perspectives via these organizations is paramount. Their personal accounts of their lived experiences can serve an important transportation narrative function (Green & Brock, 2000) in which students can gain a realistic picture of what the profession is and what that work entails. Thus, the narratives can either enable students to envision themselves (or not) working in a particular corporate communication function.

In concert, this case example highlights a few ways that autoethnography and autobiography as method can be used in corporate communication inquiry. Although these methods have potential to contribute to corporate communication scholarship in innovative ways, they take skill and effort to master and are challenging to employ:

It's amazingly difficult. It's certainly not something that most people can do well. Most social scientists don't write well enough to carry it off. Or they're not sufficiently introspective about their feelings or motives, or the contradictions they experience...Believe me, honest autoethnography exploration generates a lot of fears and doubts—and emotional pain. Just when you think you can't stand the pain anymore, well, that's when the real work has only begun. Then there's the vulnerability of revealing yourself, not being able to take back what you've written or having any control over how readers interpret it. It's hard not to feel your life is being critiqued as well as your work. It can be humiliating. And the ethical issues. Just wait until you've written about family members and loved ones who are part of your story. (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 738)

Even with these challenges in mind, we offer these methods to the corporate communication research disciplines, because having more methods and opportunities to present corporate communications research is critically important.

To illustrate the power of this approach as we close, we suggest one area of entry for a cultured centered approach to corporate communication. Crisis management is a highly studied area in corporate communication research (Coombs, 2015; Lerbinger, 2011; Pearson & Mitroff, 1993; Waymer & Heath, 2007), yet few researchers are studying crises culturally—despite findings that demonstrate organizational crises and organizational culture are interrelated. Crises are costly; lives are often lost, and sometimes related effects are irreparable. Consider the BP Gulf Coast crises or the Pennsylvania State University/Jerry Sandusky sexual abuse crisis. What do these seemingly unrelated crises have in common? The organizational culture contributed in a major way to the crisis that manifested. In BP's case, management was cutting corners and ignoring employee warnings about failing piping technology. In the case of Pennsylvania State University, the close-knit culture actually shielded a sexual predator and enabled him to victimize children. Even though culture is found to be a major contributing factor to organizational crisis (Bechler, 1995), researchers have also found that established organizational cultures can lead to successful handling of crisis situations (Wise, 2003)—for example, the resiliency displayed by Virginia Tech following the shootings on April 16, 2007. Hence, studying crisis communication via the lens of organizational culture could be useful to business and management researchers interested in crisis communication, crisis mitigation, or pre-crisis management—especially when the crises themselves are the result of dysfunctional organizational culture (see Millar 2004's list of most crisis prone industries; e.g., crises result largely from business culture).

Lessons can and should be learned from these crises. Consider the richness that could be added to the study of crisis communication and management if persons directly involved

in these crises are able to conduct detailed autoethnographic investigations of their workplace culture and then delve deeper into how they as both a researcher and member of the culture experience, engage, interact with, and make sense of that culture. These researchers would have first-hand organizational experiences they could share via a compelling narrative that could be used as a means to both mitigate future crises as well as address various organizational culture issues that emerged and could contribute to future crises. Thus, there is both theoretical and practical relevance and advantage to expanding our methodological domain.

Organizational narratives are waiting to be told. Told narratives also are powerful in society (consider the Horatio Alger narrative). These narratives are a product of, contribute to, and influence our individual and collective memories. We as scholars should begin by exploring powerful organizational narratives and the roles they play in shaping society by tapping into the memories of organizational members that play a role in the construction and recounting of such narratives. What better way to do this than by writing our own stories as well.

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