

NEW TRENDS AND CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES IN ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION

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Interview with Dennis Mumby

Dennis K. Mumby is the Cary C. Boshamer Distinguished Professor of Communication Emeritus at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill, USA. His research focuses on the communicative dynamics of control and resistance within organizations under neoliberalism. He is the author or editor of eight books and has authored more than 60 articles in the field of critical organization studies. His work has been published in journals such as the Academy of Management Review, Management Communication Quarterly, Organization Studies, Organization, and Human Relations. He served as the President of the Organizational Communication Division of the International Communication Association and received the Fredric M. Jablin Award from the division for his contributions to the field of organizational communication.

Abstract

In an interview with Dispositiva, Professor Dennis Mumby discusses the trends and most relevant themes in the last decade regarding the critical perspective in the field of organizational communication. Additionally, the researcher provides more details about the concepts that underpin his work, such as the relationship between neoliberalism and communication, communicative capitalism, and the notion of Organizing beyond organization.

Keywords

organizational communication; critical social research; communicative capitalism.

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Resumen

En una entrevista concedida a **Dispositiva**, el profesor Dennis Mumby aborda las tendencias y temas más relevantes de la última década en relación con la perspectiva crítica en el campo de la comunicación organizacional. Además, el investigador profundiza en los conceptos que sustentan su trabajo, como la relación entre neoliberalismo y comunicación, el capitalismo comunicativo y la idea de organización más allá de la organización.

Palabras clave: comunicación organizativa; perspectiva crítica; capitalismo comunicativo

Guilherme Pedrosa (GP) – We're very pleased to have this time to speak with you and discuss organizational communication. We also want to delve into the events that have taken place since your last interview for **Dispositiva** 10 years ago. I would like to start by exploring the emerging trends in research and discussions from a critical perspective over the last decade. Have these trends evolved or remained the same? Have new trends emerged?

Dennis Mumby (DM) – Yes, I think it is quite different. There is still a lot of focus on the intersection of power and resistance processes. I mean, it is still very important and how we can analyze them through communication. But I believe some significant trends have emerged.

The first one is a much greater focus on examining the power-resistance dialectic around issues of difference. So, for example, we have seen the emergence of post-colonial and queer perspectives. There has always been a lot of research on gender and difference, but I think now there is a more focused critique of Western-centric approaches to the study of organization. So, I believe these perspectives go beyond this more Eurocentric and Western approach and start to examine the experiences, for example, of people from the diaspora or different types of organizational contexts. Therefore, the attempt to develop methodologies that explore these issues of difference has emerged and has been a developing trend.

Another point is the idea that organizations, and work in particular, are becoming increasingly precarious and insecure. Therefore, analyzing things like the gig economy, the precarization of work, and this logic of being one's own entrepreneur, these kinds of things, are a significant movement and are obviously linked to the ongoing nature of neoliberal capitalism and how insecurity and precarity are increasingly embedded in work today. There is much less focus on the organization itself and on the analysis of specific work-

places, and there is a tendency to examine organizational processes more broadly. Therefore, observing how workers deal with on-demand work and how they engage, make sense of their work, and create a stable sense of self in a context where they don't have a predictable career, don't have a single job, and don't stay with a single organization. So, I think much of this has been happening in recent years. Certainly, what interests me most from a critical perspective is how this process is linked to the changing nature of capital accumulation processes. How, in the last 30-40 years, there has been a shift from the capital-labor relationship as the primary means of capital accumulation to the capital-life relationship, and how capital accumulation is now, in many ways, the appropriation of everyday life and the monetization of everyday life in different ways.

GP – And how do you see these tensions in academia as well?

DM – Academia is not immune to the impact of neoliberalism and has developed very narrow models of productivity. There is a continuous expectation to do more with less, and productivity is measured very narrowly in terms of the number of published articles. Nowadays, universities are managed as businesses. Often, universities here have presidents who lack an academic background; they are CEOs brought in from the corporate world to run the university like a business. And this is certainly not unique to the United States. I mean, when I talk to my British and European colleagues, in a way, they are even more subjected to this than the American system. When speaking with British academics at conferences, all they seem to talk about is how many articles they have published, how many manuscripts are under review at different journals. They talk less about their ideas and more about how productive they are and how they need to publish in this or that journal. In the UK, there is a national model. Every university needs to meet the criteria set by the national system to secure its funding. Hence, there is an overemphasis on publications. There is an excessive focus on writing as much as possible and building one's career on high productivity, with little attention paid to the quality and time spent on research. That is why books tend to be less valued, and articles are emphasized. Even critical theorists should be critiquing this system, but we're trapped in it because we are supposed to follow a specific career path. There is a structure that requires us to work this way.

GP – One of the key concepts you have introduced in recent years is the idea of *Organizing beyond organization*. More specifically, how does it differ from a traditional view of organizational communication, for example?

DM – So, yes, that is a good question. It really goes to the distinction between the capital-labor relationship on the one hand, and the capital-life relationship on the other. In our field, traditionally, when we study organizational communication or organizations,

we evaluate a specific context, a particular organizational or work situation, and we are interested in how the members of that organization go about their workday, engage in communication processes, examining the dialectic of control and resistance that occurs in that context. And from a Marxist perspective, the capital-labor relationship is central to productivity. Therefore, surplus value is produced by intensifying the work process at the point of production where it actually occurs, and workers are paid for their time worked, not for the amount of work they perform.

The idea of "Organizing beyond organization" is that the production of value, the process of capital accumulation, has moved beyond the factory or workplace environment. It no longer occurs at the point of production but in everyday life. The argument is that there is a new form of corporate control that is not just about bringing workers to the factory. It means capturing everyday social processes and monetizing them. Every social interaction can be something that generates surplus value. People's everyday social skills can generate surplus value. In the old model, for example, in developing an organization's culture, employees were trained to internalize the culture and express it through their work. In this new model, the idea is that people have skills and capabilities that are not necessarily captured by the existing corporate culture. Therefore, the idea is to allow employees to be themselves and to retain the social surplus they produce.

You can see this with digital influencers. They are a perfect example of how everyday life can be monetized. Someone decides they have a specific hobby or passion and can create anything... *YouTube* or *Instagram* videos and build an audience. This is an example of how daily routines, everyday life, create value. If this person can gain 100,000 followers, they can monetize these followers, attract sponsorship from various companies, brands, and so on. So, the idea is that any aspect of everyday life can potentially be monetized, can be integrated into the value accumulation process. Part of my argument is that in this journey, in this capital-life relationship, *branding* becomes crucial. It becomes the primary mediation mechanism through which value can be created, through what I call the politics of indeterminacy – the idea that meaning is always indeterminate. Meaning can be framed and reinterpreted, reframed in various ways. Therefore, part of what the brand tries to do is fix meaning in specific ways and get people to identify with that specific meaning and then monetize that meaning. In this sense, *branding* is about creating and selling an experience.

Nike, for example, is one of the early pioneers of this. They do not sell workout clothes. They do not sell sneakers. They don't sell T-shirts. They sell an experience: Just do it. *Nike*, as an organization, does not actually produce anything. Nobody who actually works for *Nike*, who is employed by the company, produces anything. No *Nike* em-

employee manufactures actual products. None of them. All these things are outsourced to factories in China, Southeast Asia, or elsewhere. The only thing *Nike* employees do is create ideas, meanings. They create brand experiences that appeal to a particular demographic. So, there is nothing actually being done by *Nike*, except a specific kind of experience or lifestyle. Therefore, this is a quite different model, and this is what I mean when I say that organizations don't create brands; instead, brands create organizations.

You structure the organization around the brand and get rid of everything that is irrelevant to the actual process of design and *branding*. This is what I mean when I talk about the *Organizing beyond organization*. It is no longer about a real, stable physical organizational context. It refers to how the process of capital accumulation has escaped from the organization and become part of everyday life. An example I use in one of my articles is a case that happened in the United States, "Alex from Target". This is a perfect example of it. This boy was just a high school student from Texas who was packing items at the checkout. One Sunday morning, someone took a picture of him, posted it on *Twitter*, and then several girls started showing up at the checkout. His manager had to take him off work because things were getting too crazy. He went from having 150 followers on *Twitter* to 700,000 in just a few days. He did not have any special skills. He was just a regular 16-year-old boy. But suddenly, he gained "fame," and became a brand – "Alex from Target" – that is marketable and monetizable.

GP – And since we're talking about capitalism, two other concepts or ideas are communicative capitalism and communicative labor. We would like you to elaborate more on these concepts because they are all interconnected.

DM – The concept of communicative capitalism posits that communication has become the means through which value is created. A brand is fundamentally communicative. You no longer require a factory; you no longer necessarily need physical products. Some of today's largest companies can be described as communicative capitalists, for instance, organizations like *Airbnb*, *Uber*, and *Lyft*. They do not produce anything. They lack factories. They are platform companies. Their online platform serves as a mechanism through which individuals with space, such as apartments or other resources, connect with those in need of accommodation or services.

In the past, we used to say, "I'll be in London next week. Do you know anyone who can host me for a week? Oh, yes, I know someone." That was the old model where informal social connection and capital accumulation were separate activities. Now, this informal social connection has been monetized. Of course, *Airbnb* has employees, but their number is very small compared to the millions of people who create value for *Airbnb* –

people with space to rent, who have no connection to the company except through its platform. Most of what is done occurs between people who have something to rent and people who want to rent something. This is just a kind of social interaction that has been transformed into a platform and formalized, creating economic value. Social connection and capital accumulation are integrated.

Communicative capitalism is not just about connecting people but also about creating systems of meaning through which people buy and are willing to pay, whether it is the experience of purchasing a brand, a specific piece of clothing, a particular pair of shoes, renting an apartment, or anything else.

It is about making sense of the world through communicative connections and monetizing those connections. I mean, digital influencers have become extremely popular; people connect with digital influencers. Part of the issue here is that - as institutions and as a class - family and work have become less stabilizing factors in terms of our sense of identity and connection with the world and each other, brands (and social influencers are included here) have filled this vacuum. Brands have become part of what allows people to articulate a coherent sense of *self*. There is a writer called Jia Tolentino, who talks about how the *self* is capitalism's last natural resource. How does capitalism intervene in the self? How can it manage the *self* profitably? It does this by carefully curating the communication processes with which the self can engage (for a fee!) in managing its identity.

There is communicative capitalism and communicative labor. Workers used to manufacture tangible, physical goods under Fordist capitalism. They made cars, shoes, and so on. Now, communicative labor is more related to how people work in a service and brand-based economy. Work is primarily done through communicative processes to produce value. Emotional labor is a good model of this. It's a prime example of the type of communicative work that has become central to the process of capital accumulation. We can think of flight attendants, who are probably the most studied examples of communicative work. In a service sector like airlines, the flight attendant is, in a way, at the center of production. This is where you provide customers with a service that will bring them back. In many cases, it is the only point of contact customers have with the airlines. Companies understand that it is emotional labor, it's the various forms of communicative work that employees engage in. That is what will create value for the company.

GP - How do you think the relationship between capitalism, communication, and organization will be in the future? Do you believe there will be another type of change, or will this idea of communicative labor and communicative capitalism persist for a long time?

DM – I could make a lot of money if I knew what the next move would be. It is difficult to predict. I think, in terms of the neoliberal economic model, it's here to stay for a long time. Much of this needs to be looked at in the context of a broader economic and political framework. So, the global trend towards nationalism and populism, the rise of figures like Bolsonaro, Donald Trump, or Erdogan (in Turkey), Putin (in Russia), means that the institutional and governmental mechanisms that could keep neoliberalism in check are being eroded. Populist leaders do not want government institutions in their way; they want to speak directly to "the people." They want to do away with the "government elites," the "deep state." However, it is the so-called "government elites" that provide a counterbalance to the neoliberal economic model and the social Darwinism it produces.

So, the idea of a social democratic model - of offering a welfare system that provides a safety net for all - has been eroded. Here in the UK, we are celebrating the 75th anniversary of our National Health Service. It was a big achievement when it was introduced in 1948, and the British are very proud of it. But there is a lot of pressure from certain political perspectives to privatize medicine again in order to put profit-driven models into practice. The neoliberal model is one that shifts the focus away from this kind of welfare system towards more insecurity, more precariousness and towards the idea of the company of oneself, in which the individual is sovereign. In this system, people are seen as units of capital that can accumulate value, rather than as workers. This model of precariousness is being incorporated into the system, and I am not sure it will change any time soon.

And certainly, this model of communicative capitalism has been around for some time, although there has been some resistance to it. After Covid, for example, we had the "great resignation," where people rejected the idea that work is the most important thing in defining who we are and started reevaluating the role of work in their lives. However, I recently came across an article in *The New York Times* that claimed the great resignation had already ended as people are now returning to work. But there has also been a notable increase in unionization and labor activity, countering the neoliberal model. Organizing efforts have been on the rise in recent years, which is a positive sign. These efforts are crucial in combating the promotion of individualism by neoliberalism, isolating individuals, and limiting the potential for collective organization.

So, I believe a necessary step for the future is a shift back towards more collective forms of organization to counteract the efforts of individualization that neoliberalism is based on.

GP – How do you think about significant events of the last decade, such as the rise of

populist, authoritarian, and far-right governments in countries like the United States, Brazil, and Europe? And, for example, the spread of misinformation during the pandemic, Brexit, and the Cambridge Analytica scandal, can we say that they all intersect with the idea and concept of communicative capitalism?

DM – There is a sense that the notion of consensus around knowledge, especially when it comes to factual information, has been eroded by the impact of social media. This shift has brought a stronger emphasis on people's emotions and feelings, significantly influencing politics and decision-making processes. People think something is true because it seems true. For example, the ability of figures like Trump or other populists to spread misinformation, despite the availability of concrete evidence that contradicts these claims, highlights a complex phenomenon. People seem indifferent to verified truths, often bonding with charismatic figures like Trump because of his projected strength and promise to restore national greatness. Notably, this trend is associated with the rise of strongman leadership - characterized by a specific type of hypermasculinity.

This notion of masculinity is seen as under threat, especially in the face of social advances such as women's rights, gay rights, etc., and the emergence in the public consciousness of queer theory and critical race theory, which challenge traditional norms. These movements have been labeled by right-wing national populists as a weakening of national greatness and a destabilization of traditional institutions, such as the nuclear family. At the heart of this narrative is the vision of a threatened traditional masculinity, a sentiment that connects with a range of issues, including mass violence, usually perpetrated by men. This is no coincidence; it stems from the fear that traditional masculinity is being dismantled, thus destabilizing society.

The populist right has skillfully exploited the power of the brand, creating a narrative that resonates with a significant portion of the population looking for a sense of security and belonging. This contrasts with the left's struggle to articulate a convincing and unified vision.

In essence, the battleground of contemporary politics revolves around telling stories and constructing narratives. The populist right has effectively woven the concepts of individual rights and freedom into the fabric of traditional social structures. This narrative has resonated strongly, overshadowing the left's efforts to present an alternative perspective. The left still has the challenge of creating a narrative that emotionally engages individuals and competes with the fascination of the populist right's vision.

GP – Do you think that in communicative capitalism, individuals or groups' capability to

disseminate information is more significant than the quality of information?

DM – ‘It is a lot about dissemination. We are all guilty of living in particular social media bubbles where we only access information that supports our own particular viewpoint. I mostly read progressive or mainstream news outlets--The Guardian, The Washington Post, New York Times, stuff like that. There are tens of millions of people who are doing the same thing, but imbibing extreme right wing conspiracy theories. And those things go viral very quickly. And so communication is certainly about the easy, uninhibited, flow of information that can be consumed very quickly. I mean, people literally will create videos with the idea of getting lots of likes, not about their truth. How can I create something that is gonna go viral very quickly? That's the benchmark for how information gets spread rather than the facts. Not: is this true?; does this reflect actual data?; is there empirical evidence for this claim? Yeah, it's kind of scary.’

Therefore, communication is linked to the easy and uninhibited flow of information that can be consumed quickly. People create videos to get many likes, often without basing them on truth. It's the idea of "how can I create something that goes viral quickly?" that guides information dissemination, not facts. People do not question whether something is true. Is this grounded in empirical evidence? Is there tangible proof for this claim? We have examples from fact-checking agencies. Nowadays, the main challenge is not verifying complex data, but rather dealing with basic issues like whether the Earth is flat or not, or if global warming is real. Frankly, it can be a little alarming.

In this regard, I am deeply concerned about the 2024 elections in the United States. I had concerns about the 2022 midterm elections, and the outcome was slightly better than expected, but I am genuinely alarmed at the level of disinformation that could occur. If Trump secures the nomination of the Republican Party, that is one thing. However, from the perspective of tens of millions of people, the only legitimate outcome is a victory for Trump in the presidential election. If Biden or anyone else from the Democratic Party wins again, I have a feeling it will be chaos because tens of millions of people will not see the election as legitimate. Trump has undermined the possibility of any election being viewed as legitimate unless he is the winner, regardless of how scrupulously fair it may have been. This is similar to what Bolsonaro did in Brazil.

Politics is still different here in the UK. There is still a consensus between the different parties on a number of things. Elections are seen as legitimate; if the Labour Party wins the election in 2024, everyone will accept that result. There will be no widespread complaints of stolen elections. All the main parties in the UK believe that climate change is real. In the US, the Republican Party adopts the policy that man-made climate change

is a hoax. The UK's political parties may have different policy proposals on how to deal with climate change, but there is consensus on its existence.

It is impossible to have a functional democratic society unless there is broad consensus on certain truths. Ideological arguments on how to deal with these facts are possible, and this is traditionally where politics happens. That is why I believe that communicative capitalism can be so dangerous, as it operates on the principle that the only information that matters is that which spreads quickly, attracts the public, and creates economic value, regardless of its truth or falsity. I know I'm being quite apocalyptic!

Samuel Noi (SN) – With your emphasis on *branding* and its importance for organizations, in your opinion, to what extent has *branding* helped organizations share information effectively? Has their *branding* influenced the way countries and citizens accept their information, for example in the context of Covid-19?

DM – That's a thought-provoking question. I cannot provide specific details about specific cases or countries, but I want to emphasize that brands themselves or *branding* are not necessarily good or bad. With regard to the politics of uncertainty, it focuses on how various groups effectively shape narratives and gain support. Here in the UK, the NHS is widely valued, and British citizens are very proud of it. Consequently, when the NHS endorsed and facilitated the roll-out of the vaccine, there was enthusiastic acceptance, as the anti-vaccine movement had limited influence. This is in stark contrast to the United States, where decisions about vaccines are generally aligned with one's political affiliation. Or even in the case of Brazil, where health policy has always been very consistent, but has recently become contaminated by political discussion. It is quite disconcerting when you think about it. In the British case, this contrast can largely be attributed to the robust and reliable brand of the NHS, which reinforces public faith. This robust brand has contributed significantly to the high vaccine uptake rates in the UK. In Africa, while factors such as the availability of resources and access to vaccine have played an important role, the level of public trust in the national government and health systems has probably influenced vaccination rates.

Once again, we live in a world defined by *branding*. Again, this is not inherently good or bad; its importance varies depending on whether you are a corporation or a small NGO. The ability to create a robust brand and narrative that resonates with people is the cornerstone of success. However, it is essential to recognize that brands are incredibly powerful and incredibly vulnerable. They revolve around maintaining specific systems of meaning and processes of interpretation, which are never completely fixed and are open to reinterpretation in ways that may not be consistent with the brand image. As a

result, brands are susceptible to erosion and resistance. In this sense, the struggle for meaning and for which meanings count is just as important as other forms of struggle.

SN - Changing the subject, what is your opinion on artificial intelligence and organizations? I am referring to both the present and future.

DM - I must admit my limited knowledge of artificial intelligence (AI). My conjecture is that its assimilation will likely follow the trajectory of any other emerging technology. Technologies, by nature, are not neutral; they have specific social impacts. It is predictable that AI will produce both favorable and potentially adverse outcomes. In fields such as medicine, AI has the potential to surpass human capabilities, potentially providing greater effectiveness. However, its likelihood of contributing to the existing set of misinformation is equally significant. This risk is exacerbated by its ability to produce highly deceptive videos and images, which have the potential to cause significant harm in the wrong hands, while also being capable of generating significant benefits in the right hands.

We are in the early stages of AI development, so making predictions about its trajectory, which can span a wide spectrum, is risky. They range from the belief that AI will catalyze global transformation and enhance our world to the apprehension that it may inevitably lead to human extinction – a major dichotomy.

The actual outcome is likely to fall somewhere between these extreme viewpoints. Nevertheless, the impact of AI does not perfectly align with either of these dichotomous scenarios. However, once again, I am speaking from a state of profound ignorance on the subject.

GP - What is your perspective on how we should critically navigate AI, especially considering its early stage and uncertainty surrounding its future trajectory? Do you have any insights or strategies that you would like to propose for our approach in this evolving scenario?

DM - Adopting a critical perspective is crucial when considering AI. Instead of accepting it passively, it is essential to develop a multifaceted analytical approach. One exploration path could involve examining the intricate political dynamics at play - whether the trajectory of AI is determined by corporations and influential figures like CEOs Jeff Bezos, Mark Zuckerberg, and Elon Musk, or if it leans toward public investment involving NGOs and government agencies. Identifying stakeholders is crucial as it provides a broader perspective on how the impacts of AI may vary across distinct social groups, along with an analysis of the power dynamics that underlie these negotiations.

In this consideration, the political context is implied, with a special emphasis on its impact on marginalized groups in society. Will AI exacerbate existing social gaps? If so, which groups will benefit or suffer and who holds the reins of this process? Who has access to these technologies and who is left without? What factors govern this process and in which spheres of society does it develop - whether it be in economics, education, politics, technology, culture, or housing?

The critical perspective aims to minimize the impacts of multiple dimensions. Prioritizing questions surrounding potential social disparities amplification, critical social research goes beyond technological domains and concerns itself with broader social implications. The essence of critical perspective lies in scrutinizing the intricate dynamics of political power, control mechanisms, and the fundamental role AI plays in shaping an individual's position within the social structure.

GP - Is there anything else you would like to add or any general comments on the topics we have discussed?

DM - It is important to recognize that we're currently going through a period of significant change in the political, economic, and cultural realms. A critical perspective strives to consistently shed light on and analyze the complexities of this change. By providing a broader understanding that encompasses political, economic, and cultural dimensions, it helps us avoid getting lost in the details and focus on the bigger picture. Critical approach remains fundamental, especially for understanding how the nuances of organizational processes unfold in the context of the broader political and economic landscape. This approach has always been essential, and I am certain it will continue to be a guiding principle in the future.