Secrecy and Communication: Towards a research agenda

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*Introduction*

“The secret, so to say, offers a second world in addition to the revealed one” (Georg Simmel, 1906: 272).

Secrecy and communication at first sight appear to be antonyms. After all, as one of the leading philosophers of secrecy suggests, “to keep a secret is to block information about it or evidence of it from reaching that person, and to do so intentionally: to prevent him from learning it, and thus from possessing it, making use of it, or revealing it” (Bok, 1982: 5-6). Bok points to the etymology of secrecy and secrets as deriving from *secretum* and ultimately *secernere* meaning to separate or keep apart, and for this reason regards “concealment, or hiding, to be the defining trait of secrecy” (1982: 6).

However, secrecy is always a double-faceted process. For whilst it always entails concealment or hiding from some it also entails a sharing of information with others. From this derive many of the most important sociological and social psychological features of secrecy, such as its capacity to construct in and out groups and group identities, organized according to who is included in and who is excluded from secrets (Simmel, 1906). From this perspective, then, secrecy emerges not as the opposite of communication but as a particular *type* of communication, subject to particular kinds of rules and practices, and liable to have particular – and arguably particularly important – effects.

That the effects might be particularly important results from what Horn (2011: 108-109) calls the three “logics of secrecy” of which the first is indeed that of *secretum* or segregation, the second is *arcanum*, also meaning locking away but denoting the hiding of something special, and the third is *mysterium*, an almost supernatural sense of what is hidden such that has the capacity to “elicit awe” (Luhrmann, 1989: 138). Thus secrecy as a type of communication *itself* communicates something over and above whatever information may be shared as the secret: the very fact of it being secret communicates that this is some special sort of information. By extension, it suggests to those who are (and who or not) included in the secret that they are (or are not) special sorts of people.

There might therefore be some fruitful research possibilities in considering parallels and overlaps between secrecy and communication. Here, we identify two lines of potential inquiry. First, we consider secrecy as the communication of rules about communication. Second, we consider secrecy in the context of the communicative constitution of organization.

*Secrecy as the communication of rules about communication*

Recent scholarship on secrecy (Costas & Grey 2014, 2016) identifies a broad distinction between formal and informal secrecy, which itself reflects a longstanding distinction within both organization theory in general and communication theory in particular (Barnard, 1938; Stohl & Redding, 1987). Formal secrecy occurs when secrets are protected by laws and regulations, such as state or trade secrets, whilst informal secrecy occurs when secrets are protected by norms and trust. In both cases, secrecy is dependent upon a communicative act or acts. That is to say it is marked by some particular words. For example, a formal secret may entail an organization designating information as ‘top secret’, ‘confidential’ or ‘privileged’ and may also require recipients of the information to communicate their acceptance of secrecy for example by signing a contract or a non-disclosure agreement. Informal secrecy may entail information being communicated with some instruction such as ‘keep this to yourself’ or ‘X does not know this, so do not tell her’.

Whatever the precise mechanism, in all cases communication is being used to mark a boundary around what is to be kept secret and what is not. But at the same time, within that boundary communication is being enabled. Those who are inside the secret – whether formal or informal – are now able to communicate with each other in ways that they cannot with those outside the secret, and which those outside the secret by definition cannot participate in. Moreover, secrecy entails sanctions against those who break the boundary. These sanctions will also vary according to whether the secret is formal or informal. For example, violating a formal secret might lead to legal action or dismissal from employment whereas violating an informal secret might lead to ostracism or social disapproval.

In these ways, secrecy can be seen to consist of the communication (and enforcement) of rules about communication. They clearly vary considerably both in terms of their degree of clarity and overtness and even in their communicative form – for example, formal secrets will almost certainly be marked with written words whereas informal secrets are more likely to be marked verbally. And no doubt they also vary in terms of the kinds of individual and group identities that they are bound up with. For example, in some cases secrecy may communicate very little sense of importance whilst in other cases it will be a treasured symbol of acceptance and trust.

However the boundary may be communicated, once communicated it enables new forms of communication. So, for example, government intelligence analysts may now discuss with each other how to interpret reports from field agents; or organizational members can pass on to each other confidential information to socialise each other into organizational norms. Thus secrecy both marks a boundary and also, in so doing, creates a particular space for interactions which could not otherwise occur or which, if they did, would not occur in the same way.

All of these manifestations of formal and informal secrecy therefore offer interesting possibilities for communication research. However, Costas & Grey (2014, 2016) identify another form of secrecy which is even more intriguing in terms of communication. Drawing on the work of Michel Taussig (1999) they develop the concept of ‘public secrecy’ defined “as that which is generally known but cannot be articulated” (Taussig, 1999: 4). Such public or ‘open’ secrets can be commonplace in families, organizations or even whole polities and are often referred to as ‘the elephant in the room’ (Zerubavel, 2006), something obvious to all and yet mentioned by no one. They will occur primarily where the secret is something which is too dangerous or shameful to be overtly acknowledged.

Public secrecy is especially interesting from the point of view of communication since the very notion of something ‘known but unknown’ or ‘said but unsaid’ is challenging both conceptually and methodologically. It seems likely that what is at stake here is not a complete absence of communication but rather very subtle and highly coded communications, embedded very deep within social life. So it will be a matter of hints, glances and half-revelations which, in the case of organizations, may well occur out of work time and away from work premises.

*Secrecy and the communicative constitution of organizations (CCO)*

The idea that communication is constitutive of organizations is now well-established within communications research (e.g. Ashcraft et al., 2009; Cooren et al., 2011; Brummans et al, 2014) but if it is accepted that secrecy is itself a particular form – or, rather, a set of forms – of communication then it opens up the possibility of seeing secrecy as playing a particular role in the constitution of organizations.

Communication can generate meanings, representations, expressions, or symbolization above and beyond its particular content. Therefore, “the realities...are not fully formed outside of communication and simply awaiting expression” (Ashcraft, et al., 2009: 4), and individuals’ organizational realities are constructed, shaped, and reconstructed to a certain extent during communication processes. Organizing and organizations are not only expressed via communication, but also created and continually negotiated during communication (e.g. Taylor & Van Every, 2000). Continuous flows of communication, especially informal communication, can form interpersonal relationships, generate streams of social interaction, and trigger processes which interpret and reinterpret individuals’ understandings of organizational reality. If organizations are a “negotiated social order” (Strauss, 1978) then communication is the process of negotiation.

In parallel, a landmark ethnographic study of a nuclear weapons laboratory, Gusterson (1998: 80) argues that:

“At the most obvious, functional level, the laboratory’s colored badges, locked trash cans, exclusion areas, and conversational restrictions are part of a system that, however erratic, exists to ensure that foreign governments do not gain access to American military secrets. Looking at the laboratory’s system of secrecy with a less literal eye, however, I argue that these regulations also have a role to play in the construction of a particular social order within the laboratory and a particular relationship between laboratory scientists and the outside world”.

This insight informs Costas and Grey’s (2016) analysis of secrecy as a “hidden architecture” of organizations. The discussion above of how secrecy marks out boundaries and therefore new spaces for particular sorts of communication to occur is indicative of how secrecy could be incorporated into and alongside existing understandings of the communicative constitution of organizations. Indeed, if we follow Herbert Simon’s definition of organizations as “patterns of communications and relations among a group of human beings” (1997: 18), then secrecy is clearly constitutive of organizations; the boundaries it brings about shape those patterns of communication and social relations.

However, secrecy offers more than just ‘another aspect’ of this constitution. The crucial thing about secrecy is that its mysterious quality means that secret knowledge takes on a special character. It carries the suggestion that this knowledge is in some way ‘more real’ or ‘more true’ than non-secret knowledge. In this way, secrets are experienced as ontologically different to other forms of knowledge. If we are told something as a secret then we are inclined to think that it must also be true, not least because to do so feeds in to the identity effect of being party to a secret. After all, if we did not believe that the secret was true we would hardly feel special to be told it. Similarly, we are inclined to think that if something is kept secret then it must mean that it especially valuable. Of course, we may be quite wrong in this. Secret knowledge may be of no value and it may not even be true, let alone especially true. But that is beside the point in terms of the social psychology of secrecy.

Thus if as CCO scholars argue communication can form the reality of organizational life – for example in terms of organizational socialization – then this becomes more potently the case when the communication in question is of a secret sort. For example, a new joiner might regard what s/he is told in a formal induction session about the organization as disclosing less of the ‘real truth’ than what s/he is told, under the promise of confidentiality, by colleagues. Marking information as confidential makes it seem more valuable and more true and, therefore, to have a greater effect on the constitution of organizational reality. We might speculate that this is especially true of public secrecy, where the secret is held to be of such importance that it cannot even be spoken about.

*Conclusion*

For all that secrecy and communication are not antonyms, they are not synonyms either. Not all communication is secret, clearly, and there is much more to secrecy than communication. Secrecy is in part a mode of communication, but it is communication of a particular sort with its own specificities. It is these specificities which give rise to an agenda for interesting research. On the one hand, secrecy can be studied in terms of the various ways that it is communicated to people in organizations that secrets are to be kept. So the whole range of formal and informal markers which are themselves communicative acts can be studied. On the other hand, the ways in which once these boundaries have been established people who are ‘in the secret’ then communicate with each can be studied (assuming that research access can be gained) and, for that matter, the ways that people who are outside the secret talk about, or imagine, the communicative space from which they are excluded could also, and more easily, be researched.

Beyond that, the particular role that secrecy can have in the constitution of organizations could be a valuable extension of existing communications theory. Here attention would be paid to the special power of secrecy to imply veracity. One important implication of secrecy research is that secrecy is not some an unusual feature of organizations, perhaps only relevant to certain organizations or at certain times. Rather, it is ubiquitous and mundane, woven almost unnoticed into the fabric of organizations. Thus multiple secrecies both formal (client confidentiality protocols, for example) and informal (confidential gossip, for example) are everyday ways in which organization is produced and reproduced – which is to say, constituted.

As the quote from Simmel with which we began suggests, secrecy is a ‘second world’ – alongside that of overt communication – which lies all around us and may with profit be studied by those who wish to understand communication and organizations.

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