Proximity Level Model (PLM). Time and space in edgeless organizational communication

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This short paper is a theoretical contribution that aims to propose and discuss what the author refers to as the Proximity Level Model (PLM) of organizational communication. The aim of this paper is to introduce the model, previously exposed (Castelló 2019), and explore its suitable applications and limitations. The model was devised to overcome the dichotomic and long-standing separation between Internal and External Communications. The critique of the internal/external paradigm is not new and other authors have noted its limitations (e.g. G Cheney and Christensen 2001). Though recognizing the relevance of coherence, wholeness and alignment of action, PLM is based on the notion that hyperconnected organizations blur borders and distinctions between internal and external, as the limits of organizations nowadays are unclear.

Telework and on-line relationships have reinforced the notion that we are passing through an era of *edgeless communication* (Castelló 2020) in which there is no clear moment or place when communications are internal or external; rather they are a continuum of exchanges in space/time. These vectors imply not only that communication happens in a physical place during a specific period of time, but also that time and space are influenced by human perception of proximity and recurrence. This is even more evident in interconnected environments. Castells (2008, 33) referred to the emergence of *spaces of flows* and *timeless time* in a networked society, which means that organizations can interact by overcoming physical distance with asynchronous feedback. The issue of time adds complexity to the PLM model but integrates an element that has been neglected in organizational studies. Here, I am interested in the concept of social time, not clock time (Lee and Liebenau 1999), as time is considered to be a social construction. The PLM does not focus on the speed of a communicative event (fast/slow), but on how often it recurs. Here we follow Ballard's idea linking temporality to "inherent patterns" of organizational activity and events, and Cheney et al's (2010, 25) notion that every organization is "the product of many processes and interaction over time". Here, we add that these interactions over time within a given space, are physical or perceived by humans and it is this that constitutes organizations. Here PLM departs from an ontological consideration of communication as a constitutive force for organizations (Cooren et al. 2011).

PLM proposes using axes of time and place and defining four vectors (Fig 1), not explicit categories, to reveal the complexities of organizational communication. It identifies four levels of organizational communications.

Fig. 1. Proximity Level Model (PLM)
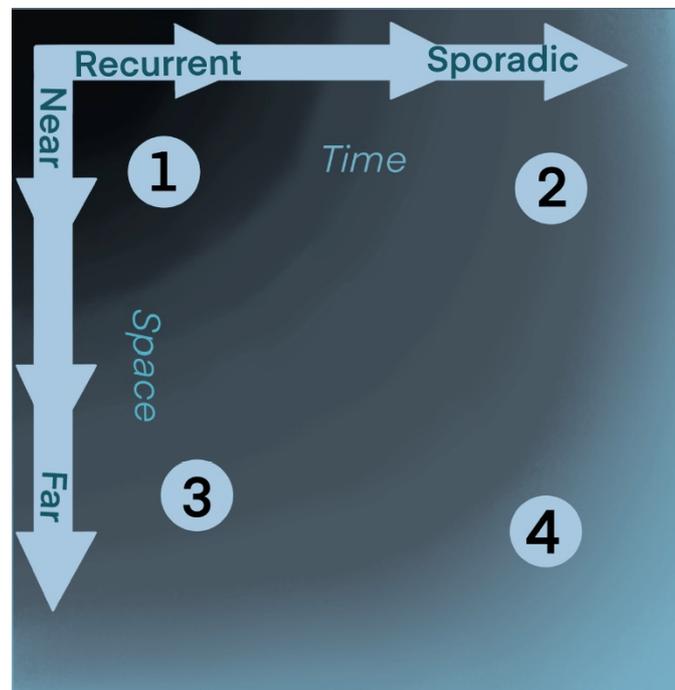
Source: The author[1]

(1) PL1, Recurrent/close: intensive exchange, repeated feedback in which the members of the organization and external publics are strongly involved.
(2) PL2, Sporadic/close: contacts with long intervals between them and occasional communication but with a sense of closeness. There is not necessarily a physical proximity, but the public, citizens or customers may perceive that there is.
(3) PL3, Recurrent/far: daily interactions with no perception of closeness. Day-to-day exchanges, sometimes automated transfers of information or data, which we do not interpret as close (either symbolically or physically).
(4) PL4, Sporadic/far: interactions that go unnoticed, and although they are usually irrelevant, they can potentially be important in an interconnected and global sphere.

The numbers 1 to 4 in the model indicate four positions of the communicative act that are not rigidly fixed. A communicative act at position 1 could switch to 3 if the relationship between the organization and the public is more distant in physical or symbolic terms.

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[1] Improved from Castelló, 2019. I want to thank Mariola Castelló and Mireia Gual for their assistance with the graphic.

Also, an event at 4 could move to 2 for the opposite reasons. To better illustrate how the model works we will provide examples of communicational practices within organizations and how they can fit to the PLM.

Recurrent/close (1) communication can be illustrated by day-to-day, routine exchanges between agents who are close to one another and involved in the organization, but who do not necessarily belong to it. Although this fits with the idea of 'internal communications' – for example, daily exchanges with employers, meetings, corporate weekly newsletters, etc. – it also includes close and repeated exchanges with agents who are not part of the collective. For example, daily contact with messengers who come into our premises, staff from other companies and organizations with whom we have repeated exchanges, hard users of our services and products, or even the people working in the café where we go with our work mates and talk informally about work issues. The notion that defines this modality of organizational communication is the *intensity of engagement*. This requires dedication, a demanding exchange, somehow costly. The constant use of social networks in our organization can activate PL1 during which you constantly exchange messages with workers, generate likes and comments, or display community engagement plans. The location in a modality can progress to a different, more distant or closer to the organizational core at the intersection of time and space. Obviously, in ontological terms, PL1 involves regular physical contact although networked members of organizations, providers or customers also operate at this level.

Sporadic/close (2) communications are very usual in this networked age. This modality plays a major role in a context of protocolized exchange in which we sign contracts, accept terms of use or sign documents just by marking a box on a website. This practice establishes close relationships among organizations, members and users. Once these close and binding documents have been accepted, with the consequent transfer of personal data – e-mail, telephone number, home address, etc. –, most organizations will have no further exchanges with us for months, even years. But then, one day, we receive a call on our personal phone to inform us that we have exceeded some quota of use, that we have to renew the terms of something or other, asking whether we are interested in a pension scheme, or reminding us that we have our annual medical check, etc. PL2 communications are serious because members and users of the organizations are addressed personally, they feel they have a bond with the organization, and the register and manners used to speak to their audience are critical. Some of the organizations that are hard users of this modality are banks and insurance companies. Some time ago, banks were closer or physical offices where small businesspeople, shop owners, or pensioners went in person, talked with staff, did operations, etc. Today, banks and insurance companies have reduced the cost of having recurring, physical contact with customers (and even with workers!); they have closed lots of physical branches and addressed their customers to machines or on-line services, and now you feel almost unwelcome at the

only office in town or in the neighbourhood. From time to time, you also receive a personal letter from the insurance company about your car, thanking you for your trust and telling you about the next charge. Sporadic close communication is used by some organizations that perceive recurrence as risky and costly. The term that could define this secondary level exchange would be *committed distance.* It is a type of communication that opts for minimalist communication, a 'less is more' strategy.

Recurrent far communications (3) are on the rise in an age of massive data processing and artificial intelligence. PL3 is daily non-visible exchange, in which organizations automate this *vivace* pace that constantly transfers information between members and customers, almost without noticing. The organization knows where their members are, send automated alerts to workers and customers, register data –sometimes personal, and even face recognition in public places–, keep their providers up-dated, etc. Information runs insensibly but imperceptibly. Recurrent far organizational communication is strategic but not always effective in the sense that some public bodies, corporations, associations, etc., do not have the resources to easily process and make sense of it. Data mining, robotic assistants, computational semantics, automated sensors, algorithms and other devices and techniques are used to manage this level. This sort of communication could be defined as *unnoticed routine*. Here, we could argue about the extent to which data transfer can be considered communication. Data is today an overrated term for managers, but from the perspective of organizational communication and particularly the PLN model that we are discussing, data does not give the perfect measure of things; it is the story that makes things clear to us. Therefore, it is when we make sense of data that we become aware of its importance as members or users of organizations, and it is the conversion of stats into stories that activates organizational communication. It is at this point that we can pass from level 3 to 2 or 1. PL3 is a normal part of our day-to-day routine: we make payments at toll booths, we use finger-activated sensors, we accept cookies, etc. In all these activities, we are subject to a particular communicative practice.

Finally, sporadic far levels of communication (4) are an unexplored field. This is where organization blurs; it could be said that it ceases to exist. In the networked age, however, it should not be neglected. PL4 communications do matter because they can easily escalate to inner levers in the space/time axes. You see that a far-away located student is inspecting your CV file at his very moment, glancing at your articles and perhaps your university profile. He will never return, but he may like your latest post on a social network. He will never contact you or your organization, your on-line shop, your service. PL4 exchanges could be defined by the term *disposable potentiality*. We can manage this level by including PL3 strategies. For example, I saw that someone in India visited my football association blog today, and I can guess who and why but the exchange will probably be discarded (it can be recorded or not in a data log).

Public relations and organizational communications have debated about 'integrated communications' (Christensen, Morsing, and Cheney 2008), to express the idea of coherence and unity of communicative action within the organizations. The Proximity Level Model (PLM) could help to overcome the epistemological paradox of integrated communication (Christensen, Firat, and Cornelissen 2009), by thinking new ways of communication systems and planning. PLM could be interpreted as an intellectual, speculative exercise. The model has some potentialities but also considerable limitations. The aim of this paper was to describe its main characteristics and initiate an academic discussion and perhaps better parametrize its components. I wonder whether it could be a research tool for scholarly purposes or could even be transformed into a professional tool with specific applications.

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