What IOs Talk About When They Talk about Themselves, and How They Do It

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This interlude, the title of which is a *clin d'oeil* to a famous book by Haruki Murakami (2008), reflects on the ways international organizations (IOs) talk about and to themselves and to us (i.e., lay persons, students, scholars). What do they tell us? How and why? What do they communicate and what do they choose not to communicate? How do technologies favor and hamper, free and constrain the ways in which IOs talk? This set of questions is an invitation to think about these strange creatures.

In their contributions, the authors reflect on the methods to study a variety of products, outputs and outlets imagined, set up and used by IOs. Their analyses are of critical importance because they draw our attention to the ways IOs talk to us, *we the people*, we the recipients of their talk and of their actions. From my perspective, namely the perspective of a scholar of international history and politics, the communication of IOs is more than just a simple activity, rather it is an existential one that—among others—proves their vitality both to these organizations internally as well as to the outside world. The act of communicating is for them, as for other institutions or living species, a sign of life. Put differently, for IOs *Communico ergo sum*. In this short interlude I deliberately and alternatively use the verbs *to talk* and *to communicate* referring on the one hand to *speak* in order to give information, such as expressing ideas including feelings, and on the other hand to *communicate* by spoken as well as unspoken words such as images, photographs, artifacts, and data. I include architecture or logos (see box n—*Branding Analysis*) into the concept of communication (Bak McKenna

2021). *To talk* might also be extended to negotiations (as in peace talks) and refer to informal and formal discussions in so far as they indicate a specific way in which a given organization expresses itself in a specific way to take action.

Different Talks—Origins, Legal Documents, Situated Knowledge

To begin with, it is important to bear in mind that IOs might display several concomitant talks using slightly or significantly different ways of expressing themselves. Therefore the multiplicity of talks on the same issue is something that must be considered when researching these creatures. I refer to a given IO talking about the same issue in various ways as well as different IOs talking about a given issue in very different ways. As an example of the former case, we can think about the International Committee of the Red Cross talking (negotiating) very discretely for access to victims referring to international humanitarian law and—at the same time—firmly, vigorously talking (advocating) with the warring parties in that same conflict on the interest they have in knowing and applying international humanitarian law. As an example of the second case, we can think about the African Union and the United Nations and the ways in which they talked about events in Darfur throughout the 2000s (Mandani 2009). They used (or not) the term genocide and kept proposing different talks. The multiplicity of talks should not be hastily dismissed as evidence of inconsistency, incoherence of duplicitous behavior because it informs the remarkable ability of these organizations to adapt, which we—scholars—should not downplay or, worse, ignore. From a methodological point of view, it is also worth encompassing the analysis of a given organization's perceptions (and misperceptions) of the recipients of their talk and how they imagine their audiences.

When examining the ways in which IOs communicate, scholarly analyses should pay attention to the fact that each communication is the result of several layers of mediation. Each is filtered and often the result of compromises. Mediations are determined by the object of the communication, by its inherent and perceived stakes, and the institutional culture(s). They are mediated by the individuals involved with it and the specific historical context as well as by the format of the talk. Some of these ideas might entail a normative intention, while other ideas might have a prescriptive, descriptive, or informative nature (see box r—*Studying Ideas*). Normative ideas might be translated into international law, the language the international community decides to share (see chapter 7—*Legal Research*).

Among other things, IOs are social spaces and loci where knowledge is created or at least places where knowledge is shared, used, and communicated (Kott 2017). IOs might have an interest in preserving, guarding, and if possible expanding their role as knowledge-keepers, knowledge-makers, and knowledge-spreaders. Before being communicated externally, this knowledge is discussed internally. Knowledge creation and its circulation are processes of cocreation. These processes are not necessarily or systematically democratic. Cocreation does not presuppose equity or equality; and we know that power relations are omnipresent in influencing and shaping knowledge. For instance, the League of Nations was designed by imperial powers for imperial powers and their own interests and knowledge (Müller 2020). The discrepancy observed within the organization between self-determination talks and the reality of the organization's support for oppressive rule must be acknowledged. The ways in which a student imagines the mandate system through which the League of Nations was, for the first time, formally involved in the ruling of human societies might be a good example of a (dead) IO's talk. A student might assume that the talk as progressive and emancipatory, geared toward the independence of all mandated territories, since this was the official discourse and the rhetoric the League of Nations put forward. On the contrary, they might examine the mandate system as entailing a talk that was progressive and a reality, which remained oppressive. Methodologically, the consequences are significant. One may either posit that the Permanent Mandate Commission of the League of Nations was the expression of a revolutionary entity working for the emancipation of colonized populations while another may claim that colonial—hence oppressive—mandates were supposed to have an emancipatory and civilizational role with mandatory powers using their authority and right to rule on the basis of an allegedly superior civilization. In other words, despite the scientific value of analyzing IO official talks, we should acknowledge that these do not necessarily reflect IO action.

Another methodological concern relates to the importance of situating knowledge and the subsequent talk of IOs. For instance, after 1945 and for several decades, the United Nations development projects were based upon assumptions and knowledge that came from ex-colonial administrators who started new careers as international civil servants. These visions combined with a situated, specific kind of knowledge and were circulated and communicated within the organizations. These development programs were thus enforced by the United Nations and—some—of its agencies based on a certain kind of knowledge with certain ideological visions. The technical nature, the alleged benevolent nature of the action, the seemingly apoliti-

cal talk (Louis and Maertens 2021) concealed a different reality, one that perpetuated colonial policies in a postcolonial world. The methodological take away point is identical: no matter how theoretical the study of IOs is, a precise and granular knowledge of the context, of the history and politics is indispensable when we examine how and why IOs talk to us.

IOs are loci, physical, and virtual; but they are much more than merely places. They are agents in that they have agency. What complicates research is understanding the specific contribution, the inputs that IOs give in a given context, before they talk, when they talk, and after the talk has happened. For instance, Heymann (2020) showed that perceptions of climate challenges have changed significantly: regional climate issues and problems of arid regions have received less attention than global climate changes. Persistent misconceptions and a lack of understanding of arid zones are rooted in misguided colonial ideologies and expertise, propagated by United Nations initiatives such as the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization Arid Zone Programme. This is a typical and certainly not exceptional example of the—biased—input an IO can give on a specific issue on which it claims to have the authority and the legitimacy to talk and to produce knowledge from.

We know that the official talk of IOs goes public after several filters and multiple compromises among stakeholders—whomever they might be— have taken place. This in turn explains the jargon of some IOs. An official written or oral communication or the utilization of a single photograph might follow lengthy and thorough reflections and negotiations. This may also explain the overabundance of statistical data (and data in general) in IOs' official communications. Data represents an attempt of objectivity through the allegedly impartial and universal language of science and numbers (see chapter 12—*Statistics and Quantification*). Data and figures have also a symbolic potential, are given an untold symbolic and in some cases religious dimension that help IOs depoliticize and neutralize some issues or on the contrary politically overcharge IO communications (see chapter 11—*Discourse Analysis*, box m—*Analyzing Maps*, box n—*Branding Analysis*, box s—*Analyzing Charts, Infographics, and Dataviz*). For instance, data takes the center stage of annual reports. The introduction of these documents often starts with an avalanche of data that overwhelms readers. They are there to legitimate and prove the authority of the talk. At the same time— and this has been the case for more than one hundred years—IO reports contain images, photographs, and videos (or animations for Internet outputs) injecting emotions and a further—different and complementary— register, which often ambitions to humanize the talk (see chapter 9—*Visual*

Methods, chapter 10—*Document Analysis: A Praxiographic Approach*, and chapter 11—*Discourse Analysis*, box l—*Visual Archives*, box o—*Artifact Analysis*, box p—*Semiology of Websites*, and box q—*Analyzing Tweets*). If for some organizations the use of images was (and to some extent still is) a simple afterthought or a decoration, other organizations have reflected on the role of images as a powerful way to communicate or convey their political and/or ideological stances. Images serve specific and multiple purposes and are part of sophisticated strategies, an integral part of the ways in which IOs express themselves.

Taking Context into Account When Researching Documents

Practices of production and circulation of knowledge and its communication are specific to each IO but they are always determined by historical, political, and cultural contexts. For instance, the influence of Protestant Christian charity notions and Calvinist heritage shaped the way the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) was designed, operated, and talked (or not), and even the way it stored its archives. Like many other organizations, the ICRC has a hard time admitting its mistakes and its archives are full of meaningful silences that scholars must interrogate and investigate. IOs' silences, especially for institutions for whom communication is an existential need, deserve more scholarly attention. Moreover, the ways in which IOs were founded seventy or one hundred years ago are interesting insofar as there are plenty of analyses scholars can offer as to their enthusiasm or reluctance to embrace new media over time from photography to radio, from cinema to television and the Internet. For instance, an archeology of a given IO website since its inception might invite original reflections on the changes that IO underwent over the last thirty years (see box o—*Artifact Analysis*).

Scholars contributing to this part of the handbook draw our attention to three issues when it comes to the need of careful contextualization. First, whether we are researchers or informed readers we should not assume that international law and international organizations are inherently good. As Hurd puts it, this premise is pervasive in global governance scholarship despite its obvious empirical and political pathologies. It impedes empirical research, but luckily it is easy to avoid. An effective way to do so is to investigate the mediated, filtered nature of IO communication. Second, the connection between communication and a given IO's agency and intentionality should be kept in mind by scholars at all times. Hence identifying the individual (or unit, department) that communicates is important and chal-

lenging because of the collective authorship as well as exogenous and endogenous factors, including self-censorship. I warmly invite researchers to adopt a multimethod research design that might help understanding how the talk is imagined before being talked. Distances and discrepancies between the imagined talk at its inception and its actual delivery are as relevant as the measurement of the impact of the talk. Third, our (i.e., scholars) own positionality should be openly and fully disclosed from the outset.

I would like to conclude this appeal for further attention to the history and politics of IOs drawing the attention to artifacts (see box o—*Artifact Analysis*) and architecture as insightful ways to study how IOs talk. Research conducted solely online might miss the material dimensions inherent to any individual IO. Last but not least, even when archives exist and are available, and even when the scholar can afford traveling to these archives it is worth insisting on the importance of cross-referencing them. None of these archives can be enough to understand what, how, and why IOs operate. They must be combined with other primary and secondary sources (see part 5—*Combining*).

Scholars have already noted the neglect of the cultural dimension of IO public communication (Ecker-Ehrhardt 2018). I would add the historical dimension to the cultural one as an area where further research is needed. When it comes to IO communication, a final conclusive invitation I have is to study more carefully and thoroughly the distance that exists between how IOs have imagined and currently imagine their audiences and how the recipients receive, interpret, and critique that information. New research on IOs' Instagram and Twitter accounts (see box p—*Semiology of Websites*) and the specific talk of these organizations on these and other platforms might reveal interesting aspects of the abilities and skills these organizations have to adapt to new technologies and to reach out to us, *the people* (Corneliu and Zaiotti 2021).

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