

## Introduction: Organizational Innovation

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### Abstract

This paper introduces a FOCUS Section on *Organizational Innovation*, including eight papers presented at COI@25, a conference celebrating the 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Center on Organizational Innovation at Columbia University in New York City on November 8–9, 2024.

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For this FOCUS Section we have selected a set of research papers, essays, and short provocations presented at a two-day conference celebrating the 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Center on Organizational Innovation (COI) at Columbia University.

Since its founding in 1999 the COI has been active in promoting research and training young scholars. It has intellectually supported 64 PhD students, many of whom are now leading figures in their fields, chairing departments and directing centers and institutes. In that same time, it hosted 49 visiting scholars (with stays of two months or more), many of whom were, at the time, postdoctoral fellows funded by the Center's grants from the National Science Foundation or PhD students and young assistant professors elsewhere who brought their own funding to visit the COI for a semester or more.

More than 50 of these alumni and former visiting scholars (from as far away as Japan, Chile, and Sweden) returned to New York City on November 8–9, 2024, to address the ongoing challenges of studying organizational innovation. The contributions selected here reflect the intellectual experimentation (in theoretical hybridity as well as in styles of argumentation and presentation) characteristic of the Center and passionately in evidence at the gathering in New York.

## 1 Intellectual Agenda

The intellectual agenda of the COI<sup>1</sup> builds on a model from the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century at Columbia University where Robert Merton and Paul Lazarsfeld launched *two* ambitious research programs. On one track, Merton and his graduate students examined the origins and functioning of bureaucratic organization using various research methods. On a second, parallel track, Lazarsfeld studied the counterpart of bureaucratic mass production — mass communication — pioneering in the use of focus groups and other methods to study patterns of audience reception. Theoretically rich and methodologically innovative, the twinned studies — analyzing mass communication in the era of mass production — took place on decidedly parallel tracks.

The key idea borrowed from the Merton–Lazarsfeld project was to study an organizational form *and* a form of communication in a period where each was being reconfigured. But whereas they studied the consolidation of *bureaucratic* organization, researchers at the COI study the emergence of new, *non-bureaucratic forms*: first, collaborative management in the project model that emerged at the turn of our century; and later, algorithmic management in the platform organizational form of our current era. Most importantly, whereas Merton and Lazarsfeld studied mass communication as the related, *yet separate*, field corresponding to bureaucratic organization, in studying the new information and interactive technologies of collaborative communication, COI researchers realized that, since our century's turn, *organizational form and communication field are conjoined*. The two tracks of research (organizational forms on one side, communication technologies on the other) can no longer be conducted along parallel lines. When studying the organizational factors that promote innovation, information and interactive technologies should not be viewed as exogenous to organization. In our era, organizational design is inseparable from design of the digital interface.

In pursuing this research agenda, COI researchers drew especially on the theoretical insights of John Dewey and others in the American pragmatist tradition. That interest sparked a lively

1. For an account of the early years of the COI, see Stark (2008).

and extended interchange with French sociologists who were developing their own elaboration of pragmatist thinking (Stark, 2017), leading to repeated visits to the COI by Parisian sociologists such as Luc Boltanski, founder of the Groupe de sociologie politique et morale at the École des hautes études en sciences sociales, and STS researchers Bruno Latour and Antoine Hennion, founders of the Centre de sociologie de l'innovation (CSI) at the École des Mines. The COI also hosted visits by researchers who were (at the time) PhD students at the CSI: Vincent Lepinay, Verena Paravel, and Fabian Muniesa, whose provocative essay is included in this collection. In this way the COI became an important meeting ground where French ideas in the Economics of Convention could encounter American economic sociology, and Actor Network Theory would tangle with American network analysis.

## 2 Soundings

These themes and theories are prevalent in the papers collected here. Our FOCUS Section opens with an article by COI alumnus Balazs Vedres (Vedres, 2025). We had originally asked Vedres to write about the development of network analysis at the COI. But he wisely expanded the scope to embrace networks, knowledge, and communications. The resulting, masterful essay serves as an introduction to the theoretical core of the Center where the indissoluble unit of action is not the individual but the relation. Vedres's forceful articulation of the COI's relational approach is composed in an engaging style capturing the spirit of the place where the graphs of network analysts were adjacent to the field notes of ethnographers.<sup>2</sup>

Institutionally housed in Columbia's Institute for Social and Economic Research and Policy (ISERP), the COI has always had a multidisciplinary character, with affiliates not only in the Department of Sociology but also in Anthropology, the School of Architecture, the Business School, and the School of Journalism. Reflecting that multidisciplinaryity, the second article in this section is by an economic geographer. Gernot Grabher is among the most frequent visitors to the COI, and he has also been a frequent contributor to *Sociologica* (Grabher, 2020; Grabher & Köning, 2020). Continuing the Center's longstanding interest in new organizational forms, he contributes an important paper about platform organization, arguing against a one-size-fits-all conceptualization of the platform model (Grabher, 2025). Drawing on his research on the platforms of large agricultural machinery firms such as John Deere, Grabher points to the very different dynamics that sets *industrial* platformization apart from *consumer* platforms. For example, whereas conventional accounts of platforms stress disruption, network effects, frictionless scalability, and asset light companies, Grabher shows how, in the case of industrial platforms, the entanglement of hardware and software into cyber-physical systems involves "high incremental costs for setting up physical infrastructures of manufacturing equipment, smart devices as well as data centers" (p. 136). Consequently, incumbent firms (like John Deere) command a privileged position in setting up digital platforms in the agricultural sector, and their operations differ significantly from the more frequently studied consumer platforms.

In the early 2000s, among other topics, researchers at the COI studied new organizational forms and digital communications in post-socialist Eastern Europe as well as new forms of democratic participation in the rebuilding of lower Manhattan after September 11, 2001. Today, attention turns to how new technologies and new organizational forms figure in threats to democracy. By design, the 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary conference took place only days after the 2024 Pres-

2. Vedres's bibliography is a useful selection of publications by COI members. For a visual presentation of a broader selection of books and articles by COI affiliates, see Center on Organizational Innovation (2025).

idential election. With some prescience, the opening session of the conference on November 8<sup>th</sup> was titled “Problems of Democracy” and featured presentations by COI affiliates: “Changing Perspectives on the Problems of Democracy, 1970 to 2020” by Laszlo Bruszt (2024); “Can Democracy Survive AI?” by Gina Neff (2024); and “The Representation of Poverty and the Poverty of Representation,” by Pablo Boczkowski (2024). The three papers were published in *Sociologica* vol. 18, no. 3 (2024) with an insightful introduction, “Democracy Disorganized?,” by Jonathan Bach (2024).

Two of the papers presented in the conference session “Observing Technologies of Observation” innovatively revisit the COI’s earlier attention to issues of democratic governance. Noting that some of the greatest challenges to democracy arise from the political system itself, Chilean sociologist Magdalena Gil takes analysis in another direction with a provocative opening: “Extreme natural hazards are one of the greatest threats to democratic states today” (Gil, 2025, p. 156). Interpreting the core concept of Weber’s notion of the monopoly of violence as a mandate of protecting the population from physical harm, she extends the notion: “What happens, then, when hurricanes and earthquakes challenge this promise of protection? What if the state not only fails to prevent damage but also responds late and ineffectively?” (p. 156). Building on her observations of case materials from Chile and Spain, Gil argues that the focus of disaster management<sup>3</sup> should “shift from the enhancement of technological precision to empowering decision-makers and communities to act effectively under conditions of uncertainty” (p. 155).

“What does it mean to observe an election?” This is the question posed by Zsuzsanna Vargha and Mariann Györke in their fascinating account of Hungarian elections in 2022 (Vargha & Györke, 2025, p. 167). Vargha and Györke draw on their research on Hungarian citizens who volunteered to observe at the ballot box. The sites they report on were in the countryside (the electoral base of Viktor Orban’s “illiberal democracy”) and the election observers were typically volunteers from the city who favored the democratic opposition and were “driven by the desire to witness fraud and stop it” (p. 168). As they move from the auditing tasks (“rituals of verifications”) in the voting settings to analyze the reports subsequently written by these electoral observers, Vargha and Györke notice a shift in democratic accountability:

Originally, they engaged in this civil society effort in order to hold their *government* accountable. But in the end, as they had not been able to witness the fraud they expected, they held *society* accountable [...] In holding society accountable, these participant observers mobilized tacit theories explaining this unexpected result, of an illiberal, undemocratic regime winning reelection without voting fraud (p. 170).

As “participant observers”, the volunteers came to reflect on the performative effects of their own actions.

For many, if not most, their accountability work only helped legitimate an autocratic regime. More precisely, their conclusions suggest that beyond election day

3. *Sociologica* has devoted two Special Features to the topics of disaster and preparedness. See vol. 15, no. 1, “Against ‘Disaster’: Critical Reflections on the Concept”, edited by Ryan Hagen and Rebecca Elliott (2021); and vol. 15, no. 3, “Preparedness in an Uncertain and Risky World”, edited by Lavinia Bifulco, Laura Centemeri, and Carlotta Mozzana (2021).

procedures, the notion of fair elections must imperatively include a scrutiny of the campaign phase and of access to media (p. 171).

Presented only four days after the election of Donald Trump, Vargha and Györke's account "helps us gain insight into the issues destabilizing even the largest democracies today" (p. 166). As their paper goes into production some three months after Donald Trump's inauguration, we see that comparison to Hungary's illiberal democracy is not mere metaphor. The Trump regime is following, like a playbook, Viktor Orban's program for returning to office after an electoral defeat and then systematically undermining democracy upon taking power: leveraging control of Parliament (Congress) to circumvent checks and balances; weakening or abolishing oversight of executive authority; scornful disregard of the courts; curtailment of freedom of expression endorsed by the owners of major (social) media outlets; shameful fueling of anti-immigrant sentiment; harassment of those who express opposition to the government (in Trump's case, the illegal detention and deportation of those who lawfully protested Israeli atrocities in Gaza); and coordinated attacks on cultural institutions including the suppression of freedom of expression on campuses and the subversion of university self-governance.

### 3 Provocations

Our FOCUS Section concludes with four provocations, three of which are riffs on the notion of observing technologies of observation. First, Joan Robinson (2025) draws lessons from her prior research on one of the most prevalent technologies of observation — the home pregnancy test — to warn about creeping authoritarianism in the United States (see Robinson, 2020). The next two provocations explicitly address questions of cybernetics. Applying the COI theoretical position that refuses to observe organizations and technologies through separate theoretical lenses, Laura Forlano ponders "how to create new organizational norms/forms to support the[se] diverse ways of living/being with a focus on disability and human difference" (Forlano, 2025, p. 181). Advocating a psychoanalytically informed sociology, STS researcher Fabian Muniesa takes a darker view of cybernetics to reflect on what happens when the analytic tools of social network models (think of concepts like "structural holes") become actual social technologies, and a perversion of "second-order cybernetics" becomes the "default theory of society for the likes of Peter Thiel, Elon Musk, Mark Zuckerberg, or Sam Altman" (Muniesa, 2025, p. 186).

Finally, Lucas Graves presents a critique of the dominant perspective in media studies: a consensus "grounded in a behaviorist/psychological paradigm that conceives of 'media effects' mainly in terms of individual exposure and response to specific messages" (Graves, 2025, p. 197), typically with the methods of tracking studies and online experiments. Graves playfully asks the reader to imagine trying to understand the role of the Gutenberg bible in the Protestant Reformation mainly through the lens of message effects. While presenting alternatives to understand online misinformation, Graves ends up turning the tables on the consensus model:



It's hard not to wonder whether this narrowness of vision results, ironically, from another sort of media effect: What scholars have called the "datafication" of social life yields up an abundance of data about online behavior, data that exerts an irresistible pull on the social sciences (p. 197).

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