“Complex and perhaps unique communication dynamics take place within the civil society sector, and organization communication scholars have multiple rationales for deepening their interest in it.”
The civil society sector is a growing sector of societies across the globe. With 1.8 million registered nonprofits in the United States alone, it provides an exciting landscape for organizational communication scholars to explore. This article develops an argument and some starting points for organizational communication researchers to begin work in the area. The article reviews four potential starting points: social capital; mission; effectiveness; and accountability; governance and decision-making; and volunteer relationships. In each area, the article points to a set of important dynamics and constructs, references important works in the nonprofit organization literature, and suggests directions for future research for organizational communication scholarship.

**Keywords:** civil society; communication; nonprofit organizations; social capital; mission; nonprofit governance; volunteers

If representative government was the great social invention of the eighteenth century, and bureaucracy—both public and private—of the nineteenth, it is organized, private, voluntary activity, the proliferation of civil society organizations, that may turn out, despite earlier origins, to represent the greatest social innovation of the twentieth century.

--Salamon (1997, p. 60)

The civil society sector (otherwise known as the independent sector, the nonprofit sector, the third sector, and the nongovernmental sector) is a growing worldwide phenomenon. Organizations across the globe account for growing and impressive figures in employment, revenue, services provided, and sheer numbers. For example, Salamon (1997) reported that as of 1990 nonprofit organizations accounted for 4 of every 10 hospital patient days and virtually all sports facilities in Germany, one third of all child day care and 55% of all residential care in France, more than 75% of all universities in Japan, and more than 40% of all residential care facilities in Italy. O’Neill (2002) claimed that the U.S. nonprofit sector has more civilian employees than the federal government and the 50 state governments combined, generates revenue that exceeds the GDP of all but six foreign countries (Japan, Germany, the United Kingdom, France, Italy, and China), and employs more people than any of the following industries: agriculture, mining, construction, transportation, communication, and other public utilities. Furthermore, O’Neill (2002) stated that the U.S. nonprofit sector now comprises 1.8 million formally registered organizations and several million other associations, including support groups, book clubs, and neighborhood action committees. This is also a pronounced phenomenon in the Third World. Salamon (2001)
noted that more than 4,600 Western voluntary organizations are now actively providing support to more than 20,000 indigenous nongovernmental organizations (another term for nonprofit organizations commonly applied outside of the United States).

What exactly makes up the civil society sector? Key criteria for defining the sector are debated; however, generally accepted guidelines include that set of entities that are (a) organized, (b) private, (c) non-profit-distributing, (d) self-governing, (e) voluntary to some meaningful extent, and (f) of public benefit, "that is they serve some public purpose and contribute to the public good" (Salamon, 1999, pp. 10-11). Included in that definition are membership associations, local community groups, clubs, churches, health care providers, educational institutions, social service agencies, advocacy groups, and a myriad more. Lohmann (1992) proposed the notion of the "commons," which he defined as "an economic, political, and social space outside the market, households, and state in which associative communities create and reproduce social worlds" (p. 59). A more legalistic definition of nonprofits comes from the U.S. tax code that formally registers organizations in two broad and many specific categories. Public-serving organizations, classified as 501(c)3 of the IRS code,

operate in almost every imaginable field of human endeavor, and include, among countless others, social service agencies helping children, the elderly, and the poor; independent schools and private colleges; community clinics and hospitals; think tanks; environmental organizations; cultural groups such as museums, theatres, and historical societies; and a range of international assistance organizations. (Frumkin, 2002, p. 8)

The other large category of 501(c)3 organizations are "memberserving" or "mutual benefit" organizations that include credit unions, business leagues, professional and trade associations, clubs, and fraternal organizations (Frumkin, 2002). The vast array of churches, synagogues, and mosques also are included within the general umbrella of this sector although they are subject to different tax rules and policies than the two other large categories.

It is in this social world, or civil society sector, where, I argue organizations have gone largely unstudied in terms of important managerial and communicative issues. In this argument and
research agenda, I present a cursory review of the general approaches to theory and empirical examination of nonprofit organizations and suggest some important threads left unexamined. This article is offered as a stimulus for research and theoretical contributions in the civil society sector. It is also offered to make the case that complex and, perhaps, unique communication dynamics take place within this sector and organizational communication scholars have multiple rationales for deepening their interest in it.

I begin the general contribution of this article by forwarding the claim that organizational communication scholars have not paid significant theoretical attention to nonprofit organizations (NPOs). That is not to say we have not spent a fair share of time in NPOs because we certainly have. Many studies of organizational communication dynamics have taken place within NPOs. However, these studies have most often left unexamined and untested theories relating to the specific unique features of NPOs. We may have studied stress and burnout among social workers but not paid attention to the volunteer nature of many such staff. We may have studied the identification of nurses in a nonprofit hospital but not raised questions about the ways in which nonprofit mission might differently direct, guide, and inspire attachment. We may study change in a private university setting but not call attention to the web of complex stakeholder relationships that spawn unique dynamics for such organizations.

There certainly are exceptions to this general pattern. Ashcraft and Kedrowicz's (2002) study of social support and employment contracts within nonprofit settings developed a strong focus on specific NPO dynamics when considering staff relationships with volunteers. Trehewey's (1997) examination of the role of client identity within the human service context draws heavily from analysis of unique features of this type of NPO. Adams, Schlueuter, and Barge (1988) and Adams and Shepherd (1996) expressly tested the validity of many assumptions of superior-subordinate communication in the context of volunteer management. Two studies by Lewis and colleagues add to this literature in examining change processes in NPOs (Lewis, Hamel, & Richardson, 2001; Lewis, Richardson, & Hamel, 2003). Ganesh's (2003) examination of technology adoption in an Indian nongovernmental organization also belongs in this group of contributors.
These examples, which are sprinkled throughout our literature, in my view, do not represent a strong trend. I applaud these efforts and others like them and now embark on a mission to spark more of this sort of work. In an effort to do so, this article proceeds with an overview and analysis of central issues in four areas: social capital; mission, effectiveness, and accountability; governance and decision making; and volunteer relationships. These areas have been selected because they (a) represent critical areas of nonprofit management and organizational life, (b) represent areas of active research in the nonprofit literature, and (c) have high potential to enable management communication scholars to contribute to the nonprofit literature and to further refine communication theory through their investigations in those areas. In each area, I point to a set of important dynamics and constructs, reference important works in the NPO literature, and suggest directions for future research for organizational communication scholarship.

The rationale for this article and my call for increased research and theory building from those interested in management communication is an outgrowth of my observation that NPOs exist in great numbers, have tremendous impact in society, and deserve study in their own right regardless of how they may or may not be similar to other forms of organizing (i.e., for-profit organizations, government). Furthermore, as I hope to illustrate in this article, NPOs may be better organizational settings for study of some types of organizational communication phenomenon; and, thus, I worry that we have ignored a vastly rich context for testing and building management communication theory and bases for best practices in organizations. Finally, there is a strong and growing body of scholarship concerning nonprofits that runs across several disciplines from which communication scholarship can benefit. Learning the approaches that other disciplines are bringing to the study of nonprofit management, interorganizational communication, conflict, socialization of members, decision making, and governance, just to name a few, can only enrich the current scholarship of the communication discipline.

Although NPOs share many individual characteristics with other sorts of organizations, the various collections of characteristics that are observable in many NPOs create a package that is quite
different from most for-profit organizations (FPOs). As O’Neill and Young (1988) argued, legal constraints, revenue sources, types of personnel, and the nature of governance in NPOs make them unique. Fottler (1981) argued that there are significant differences across all the sectors that stem from varying types of external dependencies. Implications of those differences show up in management and employee values, incentives, and constraints, “thus creating differences in how the basic functions of management are carried out” (p. 4). Too, Kanter and Summers (1987) noted the impact of ambiguous performance criteria on NPOs in terms of issues of accountability, relationships with stakeholders, and establishing mission. Frumkin (2002) argued that the three distinguishing features of NPOs are that (a) they do not coerce participation (thus, relying on freely given labor, patronage, and participation), (b) they operate without distributing profits to stakeholders, and (c) they exist without simple and clear lines of ownership and accountability. That unique combination sets them aside from FPOs and governments.

There is a growing debate within the nonprofit management literature and the community of nonprofits about whether NPOs should become more “business like” (Bush, 1992; Dees & Anderson, 2003; Frumkin & Andre-Clark, 2000; James, 2003; Young, 2002). The debate rages with varying degrees of passion and stems largely, it seems, from two sources. First, the current state of the economy has created a real crisis for most nonprofits in securing resources. This crisis has led some—some board members, some funding agencies, some administrators, some management scholars—to call for increased attention to budget, efficiency, and utilization of tools and management styles that have been adopted in great numbers by FPOs. Second, there is an increasing trend (for some disturbing and problematic, and for some exciting and entrepreneurial) toward what Dees and Anderson (2003) called “sector-bending.” As they noted, traditional sector boundaries are increasingly breaking down. This phenomenon takes form as increasing adoption of business techniques and practices (e.g., total quality management [TQM] within universities), increased interaction and partnering across sectors (e.g., when for-profit firms hire nonprofit providers), increased intermingling of nonprofit and for-profit
enterprises (e.g., hybrid organizations formed where FPOs create nonprofit affiliates and nonprofits establish for-profit subsidiaries), and many other possibilities.

Whichever side of this debate one takes up, the implications are clear that what is going on is an attempt to remake what was different—NPO and FPO management—into something that will look more like the FPO model we are familiar with today. Some of the challenges faced by those who wish to bring increased momentum to this innovation, and the challenges faced by those who favor keeping NPO management a pure and different form, concern how communication and management more broadly may be unique in NPOs. I note this debate here to serve as evidence that there is wide recognition of significant and important differences between the sectors.

One further qualification is needed here. It is important to recognize the great range of types of NPOs (O’Neill, 2002). NPOs range significantly on “hard criteria” such as size, budget, infrastructure, resource base, and more intangibles such as “loftiness” of mission, commitment of volunteers, depth of culture, and diversity of membership. There may be vast differences between nonprofit hospitals, churches, grassroots advocacy organizations, and membership clubs. Those working within the nonprofit literature struggle with questions of inclusion and generalization. Should theory and practical literatures apply to all NPOs or to subsectors? Are there categories of NPOs that are meaningful distinctions in terms of understanding basic managerial processes, structures, and ideologies? There are not easy answers to these questions in these literatures (I might add that similar debates can appropriately be applied to other sectors).

For the purposes of this article, I restrict my agenda to primarily focus on all NPOs to which typical organizational communication frames and constructs could be usefully applied. That sounds like a slippery qualification; however, I mean only to eliminate some “organizations” that might not yield useful study with our current approaches—the moms’ and kids’ play group, the lunch-hour chess club. Although these entities might qualify as NPOs in some basic sense, the absence of formal roles, formal structure, deep history, high resource needs, complex social structure, and the like would
probably limit how much an organizational communication perspective could bring to it. I aim to prompt research in somewhat larger, more complex organizational types because it seems that is where the most value-added contributions for organizational communication theory and practice are likely to be found.

SOCIAL CAPITAL

A civil society has been defined as the “space of uncoerced human association and also the set of relational networks—formed for the sake of family, faith, interest and ideology—that fill this space” (Walzer, 1995, p. 7). This notion of a civil society, apart from government and marketplace, appealed greatly to Alexis de Tocqueville, who writing in the mid-1800s forcefully argued that American democracy depended upon its “extensive network of voluntary associations” (Smith, 2003, p. 37). For Tocqueville, NPOs (as they are now known) provided average citizens with a vehicle for voice and organization around causes and mutual interests. NPOs allowed individuals to self-organize, pursue collective purposes, learn skills for community management, stir public debate, and provide forums for voice among other important democratic practices.

In another influential work, Putnam (2000) argued that voluntary associations are vital in building “social capital.” This concept is defined by Smith (2003) as “the networks of cooperation and collaboration that exists in a community or region” (p. 37) and by Coleman (1990) as a quality of relationships among people that is created when “the relations among persons change in ways that facilitate action” (p. 304). Examples of changes brought by social capital include basic relational qualities such as trust, mutual understanding, camaraderie, shared vision, group values, and large social outcomes such as those brought through social movements. In addition, Putnam (2000) found significant relationships between social capital and satisfaction of citizens, effectiveness of local government, and levels of economic development. In this view, social capital is built when groups of individuals voluntarily come
together in a local community to get work done, join a cause, or enjoy an activity. It is in the doing of the tasks of those activities that social capital is built. As Frumkin (2002) argued,

Individuals find connections to one another and build a sense of community and solidarity that leads to greater enthusiasm for community life. This trust or "social capital," represents a critical reservoir of good will and serves as a catalyst for civic and political engagement. (pp. 29-30)

Organizational communication scholarship has begun to embrace constructs that certainly approach the notion of social capital. Organizational citizenship, community, and deep attachment and identification are clearly related ideas. However, the ways in which we typically make use of these constructs has tended to be limited to examination of relationships and behaviors within a very nearly closed system. We ask questions of the degree of commitment/attachment/identification individuals have toward their employing organization or the average level of citizenship behavior within an organization and then appropriately ask about causes and correlates of those levels.

What we may have overlooked, in such work, is the notion of community in a larger sense (e.g., locality, region, city, town, neighborhood) and how organizations are integral to building social capital. How do organizations enable, ignite, and provide conduits for social capital within a community? Some might suggest that this is a more appropriate topic for organizational sociologists or perhaps political scientists rather than organizational communication scholars. I argue that we are uniquely qualified to bring a communication lens to such issues and that we ought to be participating in that conversation. Organizational sociologists are interested in explaining large societal trends; how such trends have come to be, what social forces drive them, and in what directions. They are not as likely to be concerned with what now might be considered a more "micro" focus of the individual interactions of organizations with their communities, the manner in which organizations emerge to foster relationships among people, the sorts of organizational activities that are likely to reap the strongest return of social capital and other similar questions. Although manage-
ment scholars might be best positioned to show how organizations can create financial and physical capital, organizational communication scholars are likely well positioned to show how organizations create social capital and create explanations for communicative practice, process, and structure so critical in building social capital.

If we are to do this job, what should we study? It seems, in this case, that basic beginning points are best. Social capital is a construct receiving a great deal of rhetorical treatment and, in certain domains, much empirical exploration as well. Research and theory have been directed at accounting for the effects of social capital in mental health, community attachment, well-being of the aged population, voluntarism, its role in race relations, neighborhood cohesion, and crime rates among other outcomes (for reviews of this literature, see Baron, Field, & Schuller, 2000; Edwards, Foley, & Diani, 2001). The communicative piece that is largely left unexplored to date concerns the mechanics of creating structures, processes, procedures, rules, narratives, ideologies, roles, and resources interactively that, in turn, give rise to social capital. A basic outline for the research agenda in this area would include fundamental descriptive work. What organizations in our communities are making claims (explicitly or implicitly) to their role in building social capital? What communicative vehicles are they using to bring individuals, organizations, agencies, and neighborhoods together to work, exercise voice, and interact? Which of these activities and/or practices are yielding the greatest returns in perceived and (if measurable) real social capital? What are the challenges faced by such organizations? What works and what does not?

An example might serve to illustrate the potential here. In my own community, there is a network organization called the Community Action Network (CAN). This organization is made up of a diverse set of “partner organizations.” Many of the partners are representative associations composed of multiple organizational members. For example, partners include the local chamber of commerce, higher education association, countywide health consortium, United Way, and a local interreligious coalition, as well as city and county government agencies. For the past 7 years, this network organization (staffed by only three paid individuals) has
worked to create useful information sharing in the community, address community issues and problems (e.g., homelessness, mental health, basic needs, public safety, education, early child care, workforce development), and to help create forums for engagement, planning, collaboration, and resource leveraging. Although CAN has certainly had many successes and now claims a strong credibility with lawmakers, policy makers, social service providers, the business community, neighborhood groups, and the media, they struggle with the communicative piece of their work. How can they bring such diverse groups with diverse interests and perspectives into a room (indeed, many rooms) and work through problem solving? How do they meaningfully shape the interaction between the various players in this community such that real partnering will occur and real work will get done? And because they are dealing not just with individuals with their own personal opinions, tendencies, ideas, and commitments but also with organizations who are engaging one another in macro-interorganizational relationships, their job is even more complex. It is not enough to get those around a table to agree and take action; organizations must then become engaged at a broader level. Collaborative structures need to be created and maintained. Diverse organizational cultures must find ways to communicate despite vast differences in assumptions about basic values, morals, and beliefs about people, organizations, and community. Work styles need to be coordinated where issues of expediency, decision making, timeliness, channel use, and myriad other microbehavioral factors vary widely.

This example strikes me as a wonderful opportunity to bring an organizational perspective to this communication puzzle. Answering the pragmatic questions of the CAN's administrators and board will take a sophisticated understanding of interpersonal communication dynamics, rhetorical sensitivity, and the structural and procedural dynamics of organizations as they relate to one another and to various community stakeholders. Organizational communication scholars are well positioned to aid such organizations as the CAN in learning about issues such as how channels affect communication flow, how group size affects decision-making quality, what communicative structures and practices spawn participation, identification, commitment, and ultimately social capital. There
are dozens of organizations like CAN across the nation. The National Association of Planning Councils is a membership organization that gathers professionals involved in such community planning and communication endeavors and boasts a membership of more than 50 organizations nationwide. The potential for learning about social capital through study of these organizations and their partner organizations is great.

Theoretically, such opportunities are rich with possibilities. We have been calling for years for more contextual and “open systems” perspectives and/or theories of organizations. What better way to develop these theoretical moves than to examine how organizations participate within their community? This approach repositions the locus of our research and theory from a firm-centered approach that examines the relationships of the individual firm within its own boundaries or with its own immediate environment, to a community-centered exploration of how organizations within a community participate and engage one another and the citizens that make up the community. One important contribution is in accounting for the role of organizations in communicatively generating social capital.

In doing this work, the communication discipline will benefit from the existing richly theoretical work in social capital that has been ongoing for decades. That work has already developed and examined the basic theoretical concepts around social capital (e.g., bonding capital and bridging capital) and provided a wonderful boost to the communication researcher who wishes now to enter the scene and inform his or her own work in areas of organizational decision making, interorganizational communication, identification, attachment and commitment, and so on. Furthermore, work in the management and business ethics literature on corporate social responsibility (Clark, 2000; Dentchev, 2004; Garriga & Mele, 2004; Hemphill, 2004) provides a further launching point for organizational communication research and theory building. This work has begun to address the managerial concerns (benefits and risks) associated with corporate participation and responsibilities in communities. How corporations partner with NPOs and government in the social capital enterprise would be an abundantly useful approach within this research domain.
MISSION, EFFECTIVENESS, AND ACCOUNTABILITY

For a nonprofit to thrive, it must fulfill a mission that is valued by the community, staff, board, and funders. Nonprofits must create value within operational and environmental constraints that are at once more complex than those faced by corporations and more opaque than [sic] those confronted by government. (Frumkin & Andre-Clark, 2000, p. 160)

Kanter and Summers (1987) argued that NPO missions are notoriously difficult to measure. This is true because NPO missions are usually focused on services and values, and various constituencies (clients, volunteers, private funders, government funders, and communities) view these outcomes very differently. An additional constraint on many mission-driven NPOs concerns their flexibility of action. As Kanter and Summers pointed out, businesses can find many ways to make money. They can change product lines, readjust priorities to maximize profits, and use other similar strategies. Many NPOs do not have this freedom to cast aside a mission and move to something that is more financially secure or easier to do well at. If addressing homelessness is your mission, you are not going to start a soccer league because there’s more funding for it.

It is exactly this sort of behavior (if not so extreme as the above example) that some commentators (Bush, 1992; Young, 2002) caution against. It is in a climate of shrinking resources and increasing accountability pressures on NPOs, as well as competition from for-profit service providers (see Frumkin & Andre-Clark, 2000, for discussion) where managers of those organizations are under increased pressure to balance the financial sheet and demonstrate effectiveness, that “mission drift” (Dees & Anderson, 2003) may occur. Dees and Anderson cited examples of mission drift that included the social service agency that alters the client base toward individuals who are somewhat less disadvantaged because it is cheaper to fund those programs than find grants for helping the extreme poor; a homeless shelter that starts a business to train and employ shelter residents, and then finds it too financially difficult to carry out for the clients who are most troubled, so it refocuses on the clients who are more able (a practice that Frumkin & Andre-
Clark, 2000 referred to as “creaming clients”); a university switches its resources away from humanities and basic sciences to applied sciences to attract lucrative contracts from business. It is this sort of mission drift, critics argue, that can result in dramatic change in the character and culture of the NPO.

While there is debate in the NPO literature about how mission drift occurs and the trends that account for it (e.g., sector bending, financial pressures, accountability pressures in light of recent high-profile NPO scandals), the very existence of the problem highlights the critical role mission plays in this sort of organization. Although considering missions and mission statements for the FPO sector, some authors have come to the conclusion that such company rhetoric is fairly rapid (cf. Ackoff, 1987; Collins & Porras, 1991). A more common conclusion in the NPO literature is that mission is at the heart of the organization’s identity and has great implications for managerial behavior and organizational performance, and perceptions of NPO effectiveness (Bush, 1992; Kanter & Summers, 1987; O’Connell, 1988; Young, 2002). In one large study (Light, 2002), as compared with federal or for-profit employees, nonprofit employees were more likely to be able to very easily describe how their jobs contribute to their organization’s mission, and more likely to say they personally contribute to helping accomplish that mission. However, Brown and Yoshioka (2003) found that mission may be key in attracting employees rather than retaining them. Furthermore, Frumkin and Andre-Clark (2000) argued that high-value commitments within NPO missions can create competitive disadvantages. Frumkin and Andre-Clark suggested that these organizations may sacrifice a degree of efficiency in favor of client treatment and counseling that is more in line with the organization’s values (e.g., including bible study in a job training program conducted by a faith-based organization).

One of the key challenges of many NPOs is being able to measure and then aptly convince others of the degree to which they are accomplishing their mission. Writers in the nonprofit literature (cf. James, 2003; Kanter & Summers, 1987; Sawhill & Williamson, 2001) continue to discuss the dilemmas raised by assessing organizational effectiveness where handy bottom-line measures are not reflective of the achievement of the organization’s purpose.
Although certainly fiscal realities demand attention to budget, that
tells only a piece of the picture. Funders and individual donors and
volunteers do not wish to give to organizations that are merely
financially sound. They must also show that they are providing
value to the community, serving intended clients in useful ways,
maintaining desirable values and image, and progressively
chipping away at important social problems.

NPOs grapple with difficult issues in being able to determine for
themselves (set aside the issue of convincing others) that they are
doing what they say they are (Ospina, Diaz, & O’Sullivan, 2002).
Sawhill and Williamson (2001) demonstrated the complexity with
an example of a nature conservancy’s struggle to develop metrics to
assess its goal achievement. Although the conservancy had a clear
philosophical mission “to preserve the diversity of plants and ani-
mals around the world by protecting habitats,” their measures
somewhat paled as sophisticated measures of those goals. They
measured the numbers of dollars collected toward their cause and
the numbers of acres it was protecting. Although these were easily
quantifiable metrics that had some appeal to volunteers and donors
alike, they really did not capture the mission of the organization.
“The conservancy’s goal, after all, isn’t to buy land or raise money,
it is to preserve the diversity of life on Earth” (Sawhill & William-
son, 2001, p. 101). Because the extinction of species continued to
spiral higher and higher every year since the organization’s found-
ing, from that perspective, the organization was a failure. Organiza-
tions as diverse as the Girl Scouts, the American Civil Liberties
Union, and the Sierra Club struggle to measure similarly lofty and
inscrutable missions.

A further complication of the problem of NPO mission assess-
ment concerns the public’s image of NPOs. The public seems to
expect that such organizations will and should accomplish their
contended that Americans hold an overly romanticized ideal image
of NPOs as benevolent, volunteer-driven organizations that rely
more on the kindness of willingly underpaid staff, small individual
contributions, and local and humble operations. He argued that this
image has harmed the ability of NPOs to garner the understanding
and support they need from society at large. He cited the recent crit-
icisms of the American Red Cross’ September 11, 2001, funds (and
other similar agencies) as an example of how so many Americans misunderstand the complex, expensive, and professional operation that is required for NPOs to solve and address the many social problems that have been laid at their doorsteps. In that case, many Americans were outraged at the idea that the Red Cross would set aside any donated monies for overhead and future disasters wanting every penny to go directly to aid victims and victim’s families. For Carson, this was a reflection of the great misunderstanding of how NPOs operate and the reasonable needs they have to pay reasonable salaries to professional staff, provide benefits to its employees, and pay for the infrastructure that coordinates services and operates programs (sometimes on an national and international level). He criticized NPO managers who roll over in these public moments of crisis—in the case of the September 11, 2001, funds many agencies actually embarked on separate fund-raising campaigns to pay for overhead so that 100% of the donated monies could go directly to victims—rather than use them as “teachable moments” wherein the public might learn something about how real NPOs operate and the costs associated with producing quality results.

It is clear that organizational communication scholars should have and have had something important to say on the subject of missions (cf. Eisenberg, 1984; Fairhurst, Jordan, & Neuwirth, 1997). However, we have not fully embraced the opportunities to study organizational mission or related issues of effectiveness and accountability through an examination of particular dynamics elegantly observable within the NPO context. Such dynamics include the wide array of stakeholder perspectives that must often be served by single missions; the challenges of communicating mission to wide audiences of stakeholders some of whom have only tentative and intermittent contact with the organization (e.g., members of a widely dispersed national NPO); the process of crafting messages of mission that will serve the needs of recruitment of volunteers, communicating purpose to potential clients, set tone for accountability for funders, and present a branded image for mass audiences; and decision-making and assessment communication activity as it relates to measuring mission accomplishment or progress. Examination of such questions would, I think, enhance our understanding of how communication plays a key role in social construc-
tion of “effectiveness,” “success,” and “failure” as well as providing insight into the narratives around progress and purpose in organizations.

The research agenda implied by these interests would include building from what we now understand about the communicative challenges and activities associated with “managing the meaning of the mission” (Fairhurst et al., 1997). Frequency of mission delivery, content of the rhetoric of mission, modes and spokespersons of mission, processes of mission interpretation, and identification with mission are all topics and questions that have so far been raised in the literature. When one translates these research interests to the settings typical of many NPOs, new opportunities emerge. Consideration of the context of NPOs provokes us to consider the issue of mission drift and its causes and consequences for traditional outcomes of member satisfaction, identification, productivity, and variation in interpretation. Relationships between perceived mission clarity, assessment metrics, and narratives of “success” or “failure” would be a useful approach to help unpack our understanding of how efficiency and effectiveness are constructed in NPOs especially when organizations embrace highly lofty or ambitious end goals (e.g., end cancer, eradicate disease, stop homelessness). Frumkin and Andre-Clark (2000) suggested that there are types of NPOs that reflect high and low degrees of commitment to “values” and “performance.” Describing how these different “ideal types” communicate differently about their outcomes, failures, and successes would be a great starting point.

At a more micro-level, consideration of various stakeholders’ perceived relationships to the organizational mission would add value to our conceptualization of attachment processes and internalization of organizational philosophy and values. Are volunteers connected more to their tasks or to the overarching mission of organizations, and what communicative antecedents provoke these outcomes? Do staff serve the mission or the manager? Do funders pay attention to the mission statement in directing their giving? How do various stakeholders of NPOs construct messages of “outcome” (in failing circumstances, in successful circumstances, in ambiguous circumstances) regarding that organization, and what predicts the strategies that are taken and the results obtained. For example,
Ospina et al. (2002) illustrated in their study how a communication perspective on "negotiated accountability" yields insight into the translation and creation of measurement of mission in NPOs.

These questions have practical implications for how NPOs might be able to shape images others have of them as well as theoretical import in helping us unpack explanation for the language of judgment concerning NPOs. Effectiveness has generally been a topic we have deferred to the management scholars to address. This is an opportunity for us to take up our part of this conversation and provide critical insights and evidence.

GOVERNANCE AND DECISION MAKING

The governance picture of many NPOs is quite complex. Most nonprofits are governed by self-perpetuating, largely self-appointing boards of directors. "Though trustees are not elected by society at large, their essential purpose is to hold an organization in trust for the benefit of society, as specified in its papers of incorporation and grants of tax exemption" (Young, 2002, p. 4). And as Young (2002) pointed out, NPOs may have many masters, "they are dependent on markets to sell services; on donors to provide gifts and grants; and on government for contract revenues, tax benefits, and legal oversight" (p. 4). In addition, as Young noted, some NPOs operate in federated systems such as the United Way or Girls Scouts of the USA, with which they also must coordinate.

Of course, key players in the governance of NPOs are the CEO and the board. Several models of the relationship between these partners have been discussed in the literature. Some writers have suggested that, in some cases, CEOs actually lead and guide the board even though the board oversees the work of the CEO (Herman & Heimovics, 1991; Middleton, 1987). Young (2002) developed three scenarios of board-CEO relationships: Boards may be very strong and ruled by single-minded groups or individuals, may be weak and merely rubber stamp the decisions of staff, or may be confused and unclear about what they and the organization should be doing. Each case of these scenarios presents different
challenges for how NPOs are governed and how that style trickles down into the daily management of the organization.

NPO boards play some unique roles and have unique features from those of FPOs. NPO boards are likely composed of fewer insiders and are more conflicted than those of FPOs (Oster, 1995). They also tend to be larger and more diverse than FPO boards and are focused on fund-raising for the organization (McFarlan, 1999). Also as McFarlan noted, FPO boards are increasingly enjoying generous compensation for serving, whereas NPO board members serve on a volunteer basis and are expected to contribute substantial financial gifts, thus the adage, “give, get, or get off.” There is also greater diversity in terms of motivation for service by NPO board members. NPO board members might serve for the honor associated with the role, the opportunity to shape community initiatives or assume civic leadership, or merely for the personal gratification the role brings (Widmere, 1989).

Composition of NPO boards has been the subject of a great deal of research. Abzug and Galaskewicz (2001) posited that community members often look to the makeup of the board of NPOs to discern whether it is a legitimate and representative organization. For many, the board has become a symbol of what and for whom the organization stands. Just what the right combination of professionals, generous donors, community representatives, and well-connected individuals is for any given NPO is still subject of much debate. In addition, network approaches to the study of NPO board membership have explored various effects of linkages created in the composition of boards. Salzman and Dornhoff (cited in Middleton, 1987) found that nonprofits were central to the “full-tie networks” (communication networks for information sharing and creating of common viewpoints across corporations) and concluded that “nonprofit boards serve an important function by providing a place where business elites in a community meet to exchange information, create common viewpoints, and thus reinforce class cohesion” (Middleton, 1987, p. 145). These authors argued that it is through the interaction facilitated by shared roles serving on nonprofit boards, that elites form relationships that affect other sectors and community life.

Inclusive governance is another critical topic in the NPO literature.
An inclusive board demonstrates awareness of the community and constituents who benefit from and contribute to the services of the organization. . . . seeks information from multiple sources . . . and establishes policies and structures . . . to foster stakeholder involvement. (Brown, 2002, p. 370)

Although much focus has been given in the empirical NPO literature on composition of boards as a means toward constructing inclusiveness, far less attention has been paid to practices of open and inclusive communication by boards and other leaders of NPOs (Brown, 2002). Although several authors have called for such attention and some recommend a “multi-constituency approach” in which the “ideal performance assessment system in a nonprofit would acknowledge the existence of multiple constituencies and build measures around all of them” (Kanter & Summers, 1987, p. 164), we do not have a good sense of how this ought to be done or the extent to which it is being attempted. In studies (Lewis et al., 2001; Lewis et al., 2003) of stakeholder communication in NPOs in the context of planned change initiatives, we have found evidence that executives tend to focus their communication on those groups and individuals perceived to have the greatest resources available to aid the change program—typically boards, paid staff, and donors. These studies provide, within the single context of planned change initiatives, a sense of the frequency and topics about which stakeholders are communicated. We still have a lot of work left to do in charting the variety of means, methods, and channels used to practice inclusiveness in NPOs and to test the effects of various practices on the community, organization, and individual levels.

Strong points of departure to further a research agenda in the areas of governance and decision making in NPOs can be created by tapping an increasingly rich literature in our subdiscipline in participatory practices and organizational democracy. Cheney (1995) defined workplace democracy as

a system of governance which truly values individual goals and feelings . . . as well as typically organizational objectives . . . which actively fosters the connection between those two sets of concerns by encouraging individual contributions to important organizational choices, and which allows for the ongoing modification of the organization’s activities and policies by the group. (p. 170)
In the NPO context, where a perhaps more complex set of stakeholder relationships exists, this definition may need broadening. However, the general idea of balance between individuals (multiple constituencies) and the organization (the collective) is certainly applicable. We might add a third layer to this balance sheet by incorporating the needs and goals of the community at large for whom the NPO is held in trust. The research questions then would revolve around how this balance is maintained in NPOs and the role of boards and CEOs in creating balance. To some extent, all NPOs have an expectation of being good at communicating with multiple constituencies, incorporating multiple viewpoints into decision making, and providing voice from many perspectives. Thus, explorations of practical questions are also useful beginning points. What are the best practices in creating real or perceived inclusiveness? What roles are necessary in the leadership of NPOs that are able to achieve this result? What occurs in organizations that fail to create inclusiveness around key issues and initiatives? Although in the FPO context we might treat inclusiveness as a “nice to have” but not essential, in the NPO context we might be provoked to ask, To what degree is survival dependent on inclusiveness practices?

VOLUNTEER RELATIONSHIPS

“Volunteering means any activity in which time is given freely to benefit another person, group or organization” (Wilson, 2000, p. 215). Organizational volunteering can further be defined as proactive (e.g., signing up to serve meals at a shelter every Sunday) rather than reactive (e.g., stopping to help an accident victim after a car accident) and entails commitment of time and effort. According to the 1998 Gallup Organization poll (cited in Wilson, 2000), 56% of the U.S. population had reported volunteering at some point during the past year. Given this statistic, it is somewhat startling to learn that so little research has been devoted to exploring the experience of volunteering in organizational contexts.

Pearce (1993) posited that uncertainty is the key characteristic marking volunteer experiences in NPOs: “Volunteers simply face less crystallized expectations about their behavior, purposes, and
affective reactions than do paid workers” (p. 4). Very different beliefs exist about what volunteering really means in organizations. As Pearce described it,

One the one hand, their efforts are degraded by expressions such as “you get what you pay for,” and “if society really wanted it done, it would pay for it.” Yet volunteers are also virtuous, self-sacrificial contributors—“givers” not “takers.” Without the concrete crutch of “working for living,” volunteers are suspect: they are too autonomous and, therefore, cannot be made reliable; they have no visible “payoff” and so, are not predictable; they must have hidden, “selfish” reasons for working and, so are hypocrites. (p. 10)

Pearce also noted the different ways in which volunteer work is organized: Their work is more piecemeal and part-time, their relationships less strong and more limited, and feedback is limited or nonexistent. Ashcraft and Kedrowicz (2002) added to this list that volunteers are often less credentialed, receive little job training, provided with little or no path for development in the organization because of staff concerns of high risk of turnover, and frequently work alone and sometimes off-site. Some authors also have noted that volunteering is a work and leisure activity (Merrell, 2000; Pearce, 1993).

In Ashcraft and Kedrowicz’s (2002) study of a domestic violence prevention organization, they found that these differences in the nature of volunteer work coupled with volunteers’ own constructions of their volunteer roles resulted in a unique volunteer contract with their organization about what it meant to be empowered. They further found that the staff members’ construction of volunteer empowerment in that organization varied from the volunteers’ constructions. They wrote,

Our analysis . . . demonstrated how the staff’s empowerment program, although consistent with dominant models of empowerment, sat at odds with volunteers’ experiences. Staff members tacitly portrayed volunteers as conventional employee subordinates, and they reified hierarchy even as they raised volunteer expectations that it should not exist. Meanwhile, volunteers constructed their membership as a unique contract enabled by sufficient social support. Minimized hierarchy and increased responsibility and participation were neither necessary nor necessarily empowering. (p. 105)
An additional set of complexities in the volunteer-staff relationship occurs when the roles of volunteers become confounded with other critical roles in and outside of NPOs: NPOs sometimes recruit volunteers from among their clients (Pearce, 1993), volunteers sometimes serve on boards as well as in a program capacity, volunteers are sometimes hired and become paid staff, paid staff sometimes volunteer volunteers are sometimes voting members of associational NPOs, volunteers are often donors, and a huge trend in corporate volunteer programs means that some volunteers are really “loaned labor” from corporate sponsors (Tschirhart, 2005). These mixed roles have yet to be addressed in the empirical literature on volunteer relationships in any detail; however, they are indicative of the potential challenges present in the organizational volunteer relationship.

The rise of episodic volunteering is another huge trend in volunteering that is altering the landscape of NPO labor and presents interesting challenges to contemporary understandings of organizational communication dynamics. Episodic volunteers contribute their time to NPOs sporadically, only during special times of year (e.g., Thanksgiving) or for one-time events (e.g., summer festival). This is in juxtaposition to the “periodic” volunteer who schedules his or her volunteering at some regular intervals on a daily, weekly, or monthly basis (Macduff, 2005). Macduff explained that episodic volunteers are of two types. The first type is the temporary volunteer who gives service that is short in duration and who does not otherwise become involved in the organization. The corporate volunteer who comes for one day to help build a playground or staff a large event is a typical example of this type of worker. The interim volunteer is the second type. This volunteer may give service regularly for up to 6 months and then disassociate from the organization. Students in service learning roles, experts consulting for organizations on a specific project, or court-ordered volunteers doing community service hours would be examples of the interim volunteer.

The above dynamics certainly call into question much of what we know about superior-subordinate communication in the traditional paid-staff context. How one socializes, disciplines, appraises, directs, and forms and maintains relationships with subordinates who exist in these nebulous and oftentimes ill-defined
roles are fascinating questions. Similarly, the means by which volunteers navigate these complex relationships warrant more attention. In one empirical example, Adams et al. (1988) found that supervisors of volunteers are more likely to use compliance-gaining strategies of esteem, promise, logic, ingratiation, and altruism, whereas supervisors of paid staff are more likely to use punishment and threat to gain compliance. In another example, Merrell (2000) explored the complexity of ambiguous roles of volunteers. More work that focuses on unpacking the complexities of volunteer-staff relationships is critical. As Lee and Jablin (1995) suggested, superior-subordinate relationships are critical to many organizational (as well as individual) outcomes.

Furthermore, one can tie the relationships forged between NPOs and their volunteers (of various types) to the questions posed earlier about social capital. If one positive outcome of strong volunteer relationships is the building of a sense of community, increases in civic participation, and the creation of social capital, then understanding how the variety of volunteer-organizational relationships affect such outcomes is a ripe direction for exploration.

A research agenda in NPOs concerning volunteer-staff relationships would include retracing many of the steps that have been made in the FPO literature considering these added complexities of role ambiguity, value of the volunteer role, multiple roles, and the nature of volunteer work. Beginning points should include consideration of the recruitment and entry of volunteers into the NPO and the socialization of paid staff as to their relationship with volunteers. How from the very beginning are these individuals taught to consider one another and what sources and types of messages do they receive about their interactions with one another? Are service learners, court-ordered volunteers, corporate volunteers, and member-volunteers socialized and communicated with in vastly different ways, and what outcomes are reaped from those differences? Consideration of problematic communication would include examination of conflict, upward distortion, and performance evaluation. In the area of peer communication, a prime potential focus would describe the experience of close working relationships between volunteer and paid staff who work side by side with very different contracts with their organizations and with one another. How are the differences acknowledged and managed?
What different expectations do they have for one another, and how are those rhetorically managed? To what extent are communication practices adjusted in cases where role switching has occurred (e.g., when paid staff or client volunteers)? This new context may either reinforce or challenge much of what we now feel secure in recommending regarding positive superior-subordinate and coworker relationships.

CONCLUSION

The nonprofit context is one rich with possibility and one deeply neglected from a communication theory standpoint. Although we have become glancingly familiar with nonprofit settings in one sense, like distracted tourists, we seemed to have missed much. For many of us, our time spent in nonprofits was merely a stand-in for another type of organization in which we might rather have had access. I contend that, in doing some of those studies, we have overlooked tremendous potential for contributing to various literatures. The more I observe NPOs and the more I read about their features and complexities, the more I question some of what I teach my undergraduates about organizational communication. If we really do think of organizational communication as that communication that takes place in and around complex systems, that helps to create, sustain, grow, and sometimes terminate collective organized activities of humankind, we need to get a bigger picture than that of large organizations existing in corporate America.

Increased examination of nonprofits will not only allow us to more fully describe the field of organizational types (corporate, government, nonprofit) and their communicative characteristics and dynamics but also will provide a wealth of opportunities to validate and/or question our current theoretical assumptions that have largely been based on the empirical picture presented in corporate organizations. So, although I firmly believe that management communication scholars have a lot to offer the nonprofit literature in bringing experience (methodological), theoretical heritage, and a focus on meaning, messages, interaction, communicative structure, and process, I believe also that increased exposure to and
focus on NPOs will enrich and possibly question much of what we hold as theoretical truths within our own discipline. As the above examples have hopefully illustrated, we might very well be making overgeneralized statements about superior-subordinate relationships, governance and decision making, structure and process, mission and effectiveness, and open systems environments that have only been tested in a fairly limited domain.

Furthermore, there is a "boat" to be missed or jumped on here. Other disciplines have, for a number of years, discovered this sector and are beginning to make theoretical and empirical headway. The Association for Research on Nonprofit Organizations and Voluntary Action (ARNOVA) is a cross-disciplinary academic association that has existed since the early 1970s. It counts among its members academics from disciplines as widely varied as sociology, public affairs and public administration, fine arts, management, philanthropy, law, and political science among many others. The membership also spans the globe with significant numbers of non-U.S. members. Several journals (many of which are cited in this article) feed these scholars. From my observations, management communication scholars' participation in this network is nearly absent. In being absent, we are limiting the contributions we can make to their conversations and the access we have to the theory, experience, and empirical evidence they are collecting.

Although I certainly argue that NPOs are significantly and importantly different from FPOs, this need not serve as the only rationale to justify their exploration by communication scholars. It may be that although some similar dynamics play out elsewhere, NPOs serve as a useful and in some cases, clearer or better example of some phenomena. This article provides but a fraction of the multitude of ideas possible for examination of NPO communication dynamics. I look forward to the day when we might garner enough interest to justify a special forum in Management Communication Quarterly, regularly sponsor panels at national communication conferences on nonprofit communication issues, and see regular contributions of management communication scholars at ARNOVA conferences and journals such as Nonprofit Management & Leadership and Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly. More important than those indicators will be an increase in empirical and theoretical treatment of some of the issues noted above. It
seems to me that with more than 1.8 million NPOs in the United States alone, the time has come to take notice.

NOTE

1. Frumkin (2002) also argued that these three criteria are controversial and that arguments have been made questioning each of these characteristics as defining of the NPO sector. He concluded this discussion, “The notion that there is some simple and unambiguous test that can be developed to decide what sector an organization belongs to is no longer reasonable” (p. 7)

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