The role of different modes of communication in addressing unsettled environments and wicked problems

Recent work in organisation theory emphasises that organisations exist in unsettled environments characterised by overlapping crises (Meyer, 2025) and fragmentation (Quattrone & Zilber, 2025). Within these environments, organisations encounter 'wicked' problems (Rittel & Webber, 1973).

While it is generally assumed that these can be addressed through collaborations between organisations and other actors across public, private and civil society sectors, different spheres of life and areas of expertise, such collaboration has itself been problematised and understood as a complex challenge (e.g., Kornberger et al., 2025; Leixnering et al., 2025).

One requirement for collaboration is the ability to communicate effectively across differences and achieve shared understandings of challenges and ways of mitigating them.

Existing research suggests that communication should be 'multivocal' (Ferraro et al., 2015), that is, speak to multiple audiences without locking in understandings prematurely. The combination of written and spoken words, images and other visualisations, sound and music, smells, spatial design, and other material and embodied cues, arguably has vast potential for connecting diverse communities and facilitating coordination and collaboration.

In recent organisation research, such combination has been called 'multimodal' communication (e.g. Höllerer et al., 2019). Organisations interface with others through a variety of multimodal formats, including websites, social media, promotional videos, and corporate reports. Currently, there is a need for more

work exploring how organisations use multimodal designs specifically to support collaboration in unsettled environments.

The University of Liverpool's Work, Organisation and Management Group are therefore interested in receiving proposals on a variety of research questions within this broader topic area. These could include – but are by no means limited to – the following:

- Disorganisation and fragmentation are 'messy', while most organisation theories are orderly and 'neat'. How can multimodality offer ways of understanding organisational realities that get closer to such 'messiness' (Shao et al., 2025), and how can organisations employ it to deal with disorganisation and fragmentation?
- Scholars have argued that multimodality can capture knowledge that is difficult to express in words (Toraldo et al., 2018). How can organisations mobilise multimodal designs to mobilise different forms of expertise, and how can they tap into knowledge from marginalised groups?
- Multimodality offers new perspectives on organisational issues (Barry & Meisiek, 2010). How can this help understand novel problems in more generative ways across partners?

Such research can be conducted across a variety of societal sectors and organisations, and can focus on various organisational issues, including organisational design and governance, organisational communication, culture, identity, or change, to name just a few.

We are generally open to different theoretical approaches within organisation research but prefer cultural and constructivist theories, such as institutional organisation theory or sensemaking theory.

Similarly, we particularly invite qualitative research designs that study the use of multimodality in depth. Our Group is open, however, to computational approaches and mixed method designs if these have a strong grounding in interpretive research traditions (e.g., Goldenstein et al., 2026).

The feasibility of relevant projects should be high, since it is possible to primarily focus on archival data and multimodal text or discourse analysis. Data availability can therefore be established early on. Should applicants have privileged access to interesting organisations, primary data collection is also possible.

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