

Title: Using Press Releases as Ethnographic Site in Organization Studies

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“In the beginning was the word.” John 1.1. King James Version

Abstract

Ethnographic methodologies are fundamentally constrained by requirements of physical presence, institutional access, and participant cooperation that limit researchers’ ability to study organizational processes and practices. This paper argues for a methodological emancipation of ethnographic practice that transforms these apparent limitations into analytical advantage. By reconceptualizing texts as ethnographic sites rather than secondary sources, we demonstrate how researchers can access organizational processes and practices that would otherwise remain hidden behind institutional barriers. Through examination of 362 press releases issued by higher education institutions following major philanthropic donations, we illustrate how text-based ethnography provides direct access to organizations and organizing. This methodological approach enables researchers to study organizations without being subject to gatekeeping mechanisms or institutional surveillance, thereby expanding possibilities for critical organizational analysis. By advancing text-based ethnography as methodological innovation rather than methodological compromise, this paper contributes to ongoing debates about ethnographic practice in organizational research and establishes a framework for studying contemporary institutional life in contexts where traditional fieldwork access is restricted, politically compromised, or methodologically insufficient.

Key words: *Ethnography, Texts, Press Releases, Fundraising, Methodology, Organizations*

Introduction

Ethnographic methodologies are fundamentally constrained by issues of access, gatekeeping, and institutional control (Hammersley, 2006; Hammersley and Atkinson, 2019). These challenges are well recognized across organizational ethnographic scholarship, where ethnographers frequently find themselves dependent on institutional permission, subject to monitoring, and limited by what organizations choose to reveal (Ybema, Wels and Yanow, 2009; Zilber, 2014; Cunliffe and Alcadipani, 2016). However, these methodological constraints may also illuminate a generative potential embedded within the ethnographic practice itself.

Ethnography has long been a textual practice. The term ethnography itself is derived from the Greek words ‘ethnos,’ meaning people or cultural group and ‘gráphos,’ meaning to write (Reeves *et al.*, 2013). Ethnographers enter field settings, immerse themselves in social worlds, and document their experiences into fieldnotes which are then translated and developed into manuscripts (Turner and Bruner, 1986; Golden-Biddle and Locke, 1993). The writing and reading of ethnographic texts have been a well-explored area of inquiry, with scholars from different fields examining how ethnographers construct narratives, interpret cultures, and mediate meaning through writing (Clifford, 1980; Marcus and Cushman, 1982; Atkinson, 2014; Ghodsee, 2016; Hammersley, 2016). However, while ethnographers have extensively theorized the writing of ethnography, they have paid a far less attention to how organizational texts themselves can serve as ethnographic sites that circumvent traditional access barriers while providing authentic insight into social and organizational life (Lee, 2012).

organizational texts, such as press releases, despite their curated nature, are ideal for ethnographic engagement precisely because they reveal the strategic construction of institutional identity and legitimacy. While they are designed with specific audiences and narrative goals in mind, these communications nonetheless make visible the cultural logics, power relations, and discursive structures that shape organizational life. Thus, the very rhetorical and performative qualities that render them suspect as sources of objective truth become the grounds for their ethnographic value.

Smith (2001, p. 164) offers a broad definition of texts including any “definite forms of words, numbers or images that exist in a materially replicable form. The replication of words and numbers or images as texts in multiple local sites reproduces them across time and space and among people variously situate.” However, despite this broad understanding, texts are often viewed as secondary sources that simply document, reflect and represent existing social

realities, rather than being acknowledged as active agents in the construction and negotiation of social worlds (Smith, 2001; Atkinson and Coffey, 2004). This view is also reflected in Karppinen and Moe's (2012) distinction made between 'Documents as Sources' and 'Documents as Texts'. In the former, documents are understood as primarily descriptive data that reflect the actions or interests of agents or institutions, whereas in the latter, they are explicitly regarded as agentic and socially embedded artifacts (Karppinen and Moe, 2012, pp. 9–14).

Among the many textual forms produced by organizations, press releases represent a particularly valuable yet underexamined source (Johnson and Haythornthwaite, 1989). The Oxford English Dictionary defines press release as “an official statement issued to the media giving information on a particular matter” (Oxford Advanced American Dictionary, no date). Press releases are not passive records of organizational activity; they are performative texts that actively construct and reshape organizations (Johnson and Haythornthwaite, 1989; Gamson et al., 1992; Entman, 2007). While anchored in specific moments, press releases are also embedded within a broader temporal continuum that connects past organizational narratives with future aspirations (Smith, 2001; Tischer, Maurer and Leaver, 2019).

Recent scholarship in organizational discourse and communication studies (e.g., Sandhu, 2022; van den Broek et al., 2021) has increasingly examined how texts do institutional work, yet relatively few studies explicitly reconceptualize curated organizational texts as ethnographic sites of knowledge production. This paper contributes to filling that gap by proposing an approach that foregrounds strategic texts as entry points into the cultural construction of meaning within organizations.

In engaging with HEIs fundraising texts, we demonstrate how they can function as ethnographic sites, not simply textual representations of organizations but as dynamic artefacts that construct, sustain, and mediate institutional relationships and social realities (Smith, 2001; Riles, 2006). HEI fundraising is a domain that exemplifies the access constraints that traditional ethnography faces when studying sensitive organizational processes (Delamont, 2016). Philanthropic activity typically unfolds through closed-door negotiations, selective donor networks, and carefully managed communications that are shielded from outside scrutiny by institutional gatekeeping and confidentiality policies (Drezner and Huehls, 2014; Worth, 2015; Breeze, 2017). Instead of treating these institutional barriers as methodological impediments, we position them as baring the generative potential of a text-based ethnography. HE press

releases issued after major gifts, for instance, do organizing work as they co-create donor identities, reinforce legitimacy, and choreograph philanthropic and institutional relationships. By foregrounding these texts, we transform restricted access from a methodological limitation into a strategic vantage point for examining organizational processes of meaning-making.

This article unfolds in three stages. First, it outlines the conceptual foundations of text-based ethnography. Second, it situates this approach within HE fundraising, a domain that epitomizes institutionally protected practice. Third, it shows how university press releases issued after major gifts serve as arenas in which organizational processes and stakeholder relationships are authored and contested. We aim to demonstrate that text-based ethnography is not a methodological compromise but a *methodological emancipation* that expands the possibilities for understanding organizational life.

From Documents to Ethnographic Sites

The study of organizational documents has undergone a fundamental transformation, shifting from treating texts as static sources of information to recognizing them as active contributors in the construction of organizational realities. This evolution began with Miller's (1984) groundbreaking work on genre as social action, which demonstrated how document types function as institutionalized responses to organizational situations. Bowker and Star (1999) further advanced this perspective by revealing how classificatory systems embedded in documents become invisible infrastructures that shape organizational cognition and practices. These insights have culminated in a contemporary understanding of organizational fields as fundamentally textual phenomena. Phillips, Lawrence and Hardy (2004, p. 635) capture this perspective by arguing that "institutions are constituted through discourse and that it is not action per se that provides the basis for institutionalization but, rather, the texts that describe and communicate those actions." This discursive turn positioned organizational fields as fundamentally textual phenomena, where meaning, legitimacy, and institutional order emerge through the production, circulation, and interpretation of texts. Contemporary scholarship has further extended this understanding by conceptualizing texts as organizational agents (Cooren, 2004), functioning as constitutive elements that actively construct and maintain organizational life (Riles, 2006). This agentic view of texts recognizes that organizational documents participate in ongoing processes of organizing. However, while this body of work has established texts as organizationally significant, it has not fully explored their potential as methodological site for ethnographic inquiry.

Inspired by Frim's (2018) notion of 'Listening to Texts', we extend this understanding of texts beyond their role as organizational agents to position them as ethnographic sites in their own right. We argue that texts constitute spaces in which organizational process and practices unfold and can therefore be studied independently of traditional fieldwork constraints. When organizations produce such strategic communications, they are not simply engaging in routine organizational activities but are performing organizational work that necessarily highlights institutional values, power dynamics, and meaning-making processes, which are typically hidden from external observation. This reconceptualization of texts as ethnographic sites also finds theoretical resonance in Latour's (1986) concept of "immutable mobiles". These texts are "objects which have the properties of being mobile but also immutable, presentable, readable and combinable with one another" (Latour, 1986, p. 7). In organizational contexts, these properties enable texts to circulate across hierarchical, spatial, and temporal boundaries while retaining stable forms that can be systematically inspected, referenced, and analytically recombined (Latour, 1986; Czarniawska, 2004; Riles, 2006). We argue that the mobility and durability of texts, along with their constitutive role in organizational life, foster what we term "ethnographic emancipation", the capacity for ethnographers and researchers to engage with organizations through textual data that not only represent organizational practices and processes but actively participate in constructing and maintaining them. Since texts are fundamental components of organizational realities, rather than secondary reflections of it, analyzing these textual sites offers direct access to the work of organizing. Hence, researchers are not simply studying representations of organizational life; they are engaging with the very mechanisms through which institutions organize and construct meaning.

By reconceptualizing texts as ethnographic sites, we advance organizational research in three distinct ways. Empirically, we extend the notion of the field beyond bounded physical locations to include the textual infrastructures through which organizations operate (Smith, 2001; Riles, 2006). Methodologically, we furnish scholars with a toolkit for examining organizational life when gatekeepers curtail direct observation. Theoretically, we foreground the performativity of documents, showing that texts do not only mirror but actively constitute organizational realities (Austin, 1975; Fairclough, 2010).

Research Setting

Higher education institutions (HEIs) have been widely examined through ethnographic methodologies, with scholars highlighting the ways in which these institutions shape and are

shaped by social, cultural, and political dynamics (Berkowitz and Padavic, 1999; Meneley and Young, 2005; Mertz, 2007; Stevens, 2007; Tuchman, 2009; Nespor, 2014; Robinson and Shumar, 2014; Khan, 2015; Wilder *et al.*, 2017; Jr and Kochan, 2019). Philanthropic contributions play a central role in the functioning of HEIs, yet the processes through which fundraising activities are structured, communicated, and enacted remain largely an opaque and underexplored domain (Elliott, 1995; Kelly, 2012; Drezner and Huehls, 2014; Shaker and Borden, 2020; Shaker and Nelson, 2022; Shaker, 2023). Hence, these characteristics creates significant barriers to traditional ethnographic fieldwork, as much of the fundraising practices and processes occur behind closed doors (Amit, 1999; Delamont, 2016; Chaudhuri, 2017).

We argue that much like financial markets studied by Tischer, Maurer and Leaver (2019), HE fundraising activities operates within an environment of “opacity, secrecy, specialized argot” (p. 554), where access is restricted and decision-making processes and key interactions are often concealed. This limited visibility and restricted access present significant challenges to studying fundraising activities and processes. Furthermore, beyond the inaccessibility issues, fundraising activities within HE, like financial markets, are also not spatially fixed practices. Instead, they unfold across dispersed sites, involving closed-door negotiations and engagements with university leadership, confidential donor interactions, and carefully orchestrated philanthropic events (Elliott, 1995; Lasher and Cook, 1996; Nicholson, 2007; Inoue, 2016; Gearhart, Mamiseishvili and Murry, 2018; Nyman *et al.*, 2018; Conley and Shaker, 2021). Given these unique characteristics, ethnographic engagement with press releases offers a theoretically and methodologically viable alternative to conventional ethnographic fieldwork (Riles, 2006). However, beyond addressing methodological constraints, we argue that texts constitute a legitimate and underutilized avenue for the production of ethnographic knowledge. As a Tischer, Maurer and Leaver (2019, p. 567) posit “when stripping away the complex story told in those documents, organization becomes visible within them.” These texts are especially compelling for organizational ethnography precisely because they are produced not for academic scrutiny but for external stakeholders (Tischer, Maurer and Leaver, 2019). Therefore, through such ethnographic engagement, we can explore how these press releases construct meaning, mediate relationships, and actively contribute to broader social and organizational processes.

Data Collection: Press Releases

This paper emerges from a larger study examining the co-construction of philanthropic identities in HEIs. As part of this broader research, we employed a multi-step sampling approach to collect organizational texts for analysis. We first identified the top 100 HEIs in the United States based on the U.S. News & World Report 2024 rankings, then selected 50 elite donors who had made significant philanthropic contributions to these institutions. We subsequently collected the press releases issued by these HEIs pertaining to donations from our selected donors, as outlined in Table 1. The texts were collected based on a specific temporal frame, spanning from each donor's first documented donation (dates vary) until December 2023. This temporal framing not only establishes clear research boundaries but also enables longitudinal analysis of how donor-institution relationships evolve over time. Typically, each press release offers details about the donation and its projected impact on the beneficiary institution, accompanied by information about the donor, including their background, career achievements, and broader philanthropic activities.

Table 1. Summary of Collected Texts (N= 362)

HEIs	Collected Text	HEIs	Collected Text
Harvard University	41	Case Western Reserve University	11
Stanford University	24	University of Virginia	16
Massachusetts Institute of Technology	18	Boston College	12
Duke University	16	George Washington University	12
Princeton University	25	Michigan State University	19
Johns Hopkins University	22	University of Pittsburgh	22
Cornell University	62	University of California - Irvine	15
University of Pennsylvania	30	Ohio State University	17

Source: Authors

Data Analysis

Our analytical approach is distinct from conventional document analysis or archival research by treating texts as sites of organizational process and practice rather than sources of information about practices. If ethnography traditionally seeks to understand social and institutional life through direct engagement with cultures and people, we argue that texts

present a similar site where organizing processes are articulated, negotiated, and preserved (Smith, 2001; Riles, 2006; Tischer, Maurer and Leaver, 2019). We approached these press releases as living expressions of cultural, social, and organizational dynamics rather than static documents (Riles, 2006; Bowen, 2009).

The analysis employed two complementary methodological approaches. Narrative analysis, following frameworks developed by Gabriel (2000) and Czarniawska (2004), examined how press releases construct coherent stories about donor-institution relationships, institutional missions, and philanthropic impact. Content analysis was employed to identify patterns in language use, thematic emphasis, and rhetorical strategies across the dataset (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005; Neuendorf, 2017). Texts were coded inductively using open coding to identify emergent themes such as prestige signaling, philanthropic legacy, partnership framing, and institutional gratitude. Thematic categories were iteratively refined during analysis. This analytical strategy facilitated examination of both the structural elements of how philanthropic identities are narrated and the specific organizational work these texts perform in constructing philanthropic identities.

As researchers positioned outside the institutional advancement profession, we approached the data reflexively, aware that our interpretations are shaped by both our scholarly commitments and our outsider status. Our reading of press releases was informed by a critical stance toward organizational communications as both meaning-making practices and instruments of institutional power. A preliminary analysis of the collected press releases supports our argument that texts can function as an ethnographic site, as they offer access to the structures, relationships, and meaning-making processes (Smith, 2001; Cooren, 2004). Patterns in language, framing, and emphasis suggest that press releases are not descriptive but actively participate in the construction of identities and roles of both donors and institutions. Press releases do more than documenting philanthropic transactions and acknowledging the donor, they construct, mediate, and reinforce organizational narratives, donor identities, and the broader dynamics of philanthropy. Hence, press releases function as organizational devices, not only actively creating, sustaining, and managing relationships but also offering an entry point from which to access and interpret localized organizational practices (Smith, 2001; Tischer, Maurer and Leaver, 2019).

Limitations and Future Directions

This paper deliberately concentrates on publicly available texts, as internal documents and reports were not included. This boundary choice focuses on how organizational narratives are strategically curated for external audiences, yet inevitably restricts visibility into backstage deliberations and sense-making practices and processes. A potential critique of this approach is the rhetorical nature of press releases, which may prioritize image over authenticity. However, it is precisely in this selective narration that organizations reveal how they wish to be perceived, offering valuable insight into institutional identity work and legitimacy construction. Future scholarship could further develop text-based ethnography by expanding the corpus to incorporate internal memos made accessible through freedom-of-information requests, public inquiry, or archival deposits. Additionally, examining longitudinal shifts and intertextual links through comparisons of successive iterations of press releases could offer deeper insights into evolving organizational narratives. Furthermore, cross-genre analyses that connect press releases to speeches, social media posts, and annual reports would enrich our understanding of how organizational meanings are constructed and disseminated across various textual platforms.

While this paper focuses on HEI press releases, the methodological approach is broadly applicable to other organizational fields such as corporate philanthropy, CSR reporting, or government communications, i.e. domains where curated texts serve as instruments of institutional storytelling and stakeholder negotiation.

Conclusion

This paper has argued for a methodological emancipation of ethnographic practice that liberates researchers from traditional constraints while expanding access to organizations. By demonstrating how texts function as sites of ethnographic inquiry, we have highlighted how researchers can access authentic organizational practices and processes that would otherwise remain hidden behind institutional barriers. Our analysis of HEI press releases illustrates how this approach enables independent examination of organizational meaning-making processes, illuminating how HEIs exercise agency in co-construct philanthropic identities through strategic communications. The methodological contribution extends beyond any single empirical context to offer new possibilities for ethnographic practice in contemporary organizational research. By leveraging the properties of texts as immutable mobiles, researchers can transcend spatial, temporal, and political limitations that constrain traditional

ethnographic fieldwork. This approach is particularly valuable for studying sensitive organizational processes, restricted environments, or contexts where traditional access would compromise research independence.

This paper contributes to broader methodological debates in organizational studies by positioning text-based ethnography not as a compromise necessitated by access limitations, but as a methodological advancement that expands the possibilities for understanding organizational life. As organizations increasingly operate through distributed communications and strategic textual practices, ethnographic methods must evolve to meet these new realities while maintaining their commitment to understanding organizational processes and practices. Text-based ethnography offers such an evolution, providing researchers with tools to study organizations critically and independently while accessing the authentic cultural expressions that define contemporary institutional life.

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