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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Legitimacy of Public Organizations Through Time: Communicating the Case of the 43 Disappeared Students in Mexico

Monica Naime

Literature on organization theory has long argued that organizations' communication has an impact on their legitimacy, which is necessary for their survival. Nonetheless, studies focus on private organizations rather than public ones. This article examines how legitimacy is constructed by communicating through time. Using a mixed-method content-analysis, the paper focuses on the press releases of the Mexican Office of the Prosecutor concerning the 2014 disappearance of 43 students in Ayotiznapa. Findings indicate that, in order to pursue legitimacy, the organization uses mostly rationalization and authorization strategies, whereas normalization and moralization strategies are seldom used. Unlike private organizations, the legal system and the nature of the public service provided are relevant for public organizations, and these influence the strategies used to communicate for legitimacy. The article concludes by discussing implications for theory and practice.

Keywords: legitimacy; organizations; communication; content analysis; Mexico

La literatura sobre teoría de la organización ha sostenido durante mucho tiempo que la comunicación organizacional tiene impacto en su legitimidad, la cual es necesaria para su supervivencia. No obstante, los estudios se concentran en las organizaciones privadas más que en las públicas. Este artículo examina cómo una organización pública se comunica para obtener legitimidad a través del tiempo. Utilizando un análisis de contenido de método mixto, el trabajo se centra en los comunicados de prensa de la Procuraduría General de la República en México relativos a la desaparición en 2014 de 43 estudiantes en Ayotiznapa. Los resultados indican que, para lograr mayor legitimidad, la organización utiliza principalmente estrategias de racionalización y autorización, mientras que las estrategias de normalización y moralización rara vez se utilizan. A diferencia de las organizaciones privadas, el sistema legal y la naturaleza del servicio público que se provee son relevantes para las organizaciones públicas, y éstos influencian las estrategias usadas para comunicar hacia la legitimidad. El artículo concluye discutiendo las implicaciones para la teoría y para la práctica.

Palabras clave: legitimidad; organización; comunicación; análisis de contenido; México

Introduction

How do public organizations pursue legitimacy over time? Sociological theories have long highlighted the importance of legitimacy for organizational growth and survival (Meyer and Rowan 1977, Weber 1978, Zucker 1987, Zimmerman and Zeitz 2002, Persson *et al.* 2017, Díez-de-Castro and Peris-Ortiz 2018): Not only what an organization does is important, but also how the public perceives it. Organizations themselves can influence their perception and legitimacy by communicating what they do.

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Previous studies have focused on how organizations in the private sector build legitimacy through communication (Vaara *et al.* 2006, Golant and Sillince 2007, Lamertz and Baum 2009, Erkama and Vaara 2010, Patala *et al.* 2019), but the subject remains rare in the literature of public organizations.

The purpose of the paper is to study if public organizations use different communication strategies for legitimacy and, if so, how these evolve over time. The article is structured in four sections. The first presents the theoretical discussions of organizational legitimacy and communication. Afterward, to approach the strategies used for legitimacy, a longitudinal mixed-method approach was undertaken to analyze the content of the communication

of the Mexican Office of the Prosecutor in the case of the 2014 disappearance of 43 students. Before concluding, findings are presented and discussed.

The study offers a novel perspective to study public organizations' legitimacy, and it highlights the importance of the strategies of communication for organizations that are facing serious threats to their legitimacy. The case studied provides relevant insights for the legitimacy of governments and institutions in Mexico and Latin America, as it highlights systematic human rights violations in the country and how failures in the justice systems in the region put organizational legitimacy at stake.

Theoretical Framework

Legitimacy and its dimensions

Legitimacy, defined as the belief that the organization is socially acceptable (Suchman 1995), has long been addressed from public administration and organization theory. Since Weber conceptualized legitimacy as the belief that an order is binding (1978), there has been an academic consensus that organizational survival depends not only on what the organization does but also on the degree in which what it does is considered legitimate (Meyer and Rowan 1977, Ashforth and Gibbs 1990, Hearit 1995).

Legitimacy is especially important for public organizations in democracies because a lack of legitimacy can lead to policy failure (Wallner 2008). As such, legitimacy has been linked with improved perception of policies (Woo *et al.* 2015, Peters 2016), with facilitating policy-making (Rudolph and Evans 2005), explaining policy success (Wallner 2008, Miranda *et al.* 2018), policy effectiveness of governments (Jones 2004), and citizens' compliance (Scholz and Lubell 1998). As such, legitimacy fulfills a social function: it can improve the acceptability of a decision as well as policy outcomes.

To understand how legitimacy comes into being, Weber proposed a typology (1978), which has influenced how public administration and organizations theorists conceptualize legitimacy. Stryker (1994) and Suchman (1995) develop a model based on different organizational logics: constitutive, instrumental and normative, and pragmatic, moral and cognitive, respectively. Other studies (Ruef and Scott 1998, Scott 2008) argue that organizational legitimacy can be either normative, regulative or cognitive. Zimmeman and Zeitz (2002) include an additional category of industrial legitimacy, while Vaara, Tienari and Laurila (2006) identify five types: authorization, rationalization, moralization, normalization, and narrativization, although these authors specify that narrativization frames the other four types of legitimacy (2006, p. 804). Brown *et al.* (2012) develop three categories: logos, pathos and ethos, arguing that previous categories emphasized rationality, disregarding the irrational aspect of legitimacy. The different conceptualizations are described in **Table 1**.

Table 1: Different dimensions and of legitimacy and its definitions.

Authors	Dimensions of legitimacy	Definition
Weber (1978)	Tradition	Routines, prevailing practices, custom
	Charisma	Trust and faith, moral stance, affectual attitudes
	Legal-rational	Laws and procedures
Stryker (1994)	Constitutive	Rules of the game
	Instrumental	Orientation to outcomes
	Normative	Orientation to internalized rules
Suchman (1995)	Pragmatic	Self-interested calculation or benefits of an organization's most immediate audiences
	Moral	Positive normative evaluation of the organization and its activities
	Cognitive	Comprehensibility (plausibility and predictability) or on taken-for-grantedness (inevitability)
Ruef and Scott (1998), Scott (2008)	Regulative	Explicit regulative processes: rule-setting, monitoring and sanctioning – laws
	Normative	Rules that introduce a prescriptive, evaluative and obligatory dimension to the organization – beliefs
	Cognitive	Rules that specify what types of actors can exist, what procedures they can follow – culture
Zimmerman and Zeitz (2002)	Regulatory	Derived from regulations, rules, standards, credentialing associations
	Normative	Derived from the norms of society
	Cognitive	Derived from beliefs and values
	Industrial	Derived from the operation, actions and consequences

(Contd.)

Authors	Dimensions of legitimacy	Definition
Vaara, Tienari, Laurila (2006)	Normalization	Exemplifies normal function or behavior
	Authorization	Authorizes claims
	Rationalization	Reference to the utility or function of actions or practices
	Moralization	Reference to values
	Narrativization	Provides a narrative structure to concretize and dramatize
Brown *et al.* (2012)	Logos	Rational calculation of means and ends, and desires of efficient and effective actions
	Pathos	Impact on emotional responses
	Ethos	Moral or ethical sensibilities, encouraging feelings of "rightness"
	Moralization	Moral values or norms
	Rationalization	Utility, benefits, functions or outcomes

Table 2: Categorization of dimensions of legitimacy.

Author	Rationalization	Authorization	Normalization	Moralization
Weber (1978)	Rational-legal		Tradition	Charisma
Stryker (1994)	Instrumental	Constitutive	Normative	–
Suchman (1995)	Pragmatic	–	Cognitive	Moral
Ruef and Scott (1998)	–	Regulative	Normative	Cognitive
Zimmerman and Zeitz (2002)	Industrial	Regulative	Normative	Cognitive
Vaara *et al.* (2006)	Rationalization	Authorization	Normalization	Moralization
		Narrativization		
Brown *et al.* (2012)	Logos	–	Pathos	Ethos

Legitimacy and communication

Organizations routinely pursue legitimacy through communication (Ashforth and Gibbs 1990). They use language as an instrument of legitimacy (Suchman 1995). Studying organizational communication becomes important as it can reveal the mechanisms for legitimacy (Meyer and Rowan 1977, DiMaggio and Powell 1983, Phillips *et al.* 2004). "Organizations gain legitimacy by communicating that their structures and procedures correspond with perceptions about what is rational, reasonable and modern" (Christensen *et al.* 2007, p. 135).

Considering that the use of language influences legitimacy, speeches, gestures, texts, pictures and other symbols are relevant to understand if and how an organization is legitimate (Wallner 2008, Tallberg and Zürn 2019). If the language used resonates positively with the constituency, legitimacy will increase. If not, they might compromise or even hinder it, leading to a legitimation crisis (Habermas 1988).

The dimensions recognized in the literature and presented above have been linked to different strategies of communication. Patala *et al.* (2019) consider four communicative strategies: authorization, normalization, moralization and rationalization. Authorization would relate to authority, such as rules, directives or expert knowledge; normalization would relate to references to the past or normal actions; moralization relates to moral values or norms, and rationalization refers to utility, benefits, functions or outcomes.

The four categories presented by Patala *et al.* (2019) conceptually contain the other ideal types presented by other authors, resulting in comprehensive and mutually exclusive categories (see **Table 2**). These categories differentiate between rationalization and authorization strategies, which some authors often treat indistinctly (Suchman 1995, Ruef and Scott 1998, Brown *et al.* 2012).

Theoretical and empirical studies of private organizations have used these concepts (Sturges 1994, Patel *et al.* 2005, Vaara *et al.* 2006, Golant and Sillince 2007, Lamertz and Baum 2009, Erkama and Vaara 2010, Veil *et al.* 2012, Patala *et al.* 2019). Few studies focus on public organizations (Brown *et al.* 2012), and they seldom include time as a variable to study changes in the use of the different communicative strategies. As private organizations can use legitimacy to protect or increase their sales and market shares, responding and communicating for this purpose is more salient, which is more likely to attract academic interest.

The present study contrasts findings from private organizations with a public organization, to cover the gap of how legitimacy strategies are used in public organizations through time. The studies relating to private organizations' legitimacy strategies indicate several changes in the communicative strategies used over time. Overall,

authorization strategies are rare, whereas moralization strategies are predominant: Referencing moral values and emotions is much more common than referencing legal norms. Also, normalization strategies and rationalization strategies behave inversely: rationalization strategies are important at the beginning but leave their place to normalization strategies. This is because stability is important for organizations, so over time, they seek to return to the *status quo* and go back to business-as-usual situations by referencing past actions.

These expectations are a starting point to examine the similarities and differences in the communicative strategies used by private and public organizations. According to institutional theories, communication, as any other type of organizational process, is affected by norms, practices, routines and expectations (Fredriksson *et al.* 2014). This means that it would also be reasonable to expect some differences in the communication of public organizations compared to private ones, considering their particular context and organizational variables.

Methodology

Before setting out the description of the method and data and, the following section explains the case selection and provides the empirical context.

Case selection: empirical context

Organizations communicate their actions regularly. They do so through several means: press releases, speeches, press conferences, reports to Congress, etc. Some events require more actions and more public attention than others, thus more legitimacy and communication. The selection of a paradigmatic case is considered appropriate for the present study, as paradigmatic cases allow to render a phenomenon intelligible (Mills *et al.* 2010, p. 645). As the phenomenon under study in the present article is organizational legitimacy and communication over time, selecting a case that unambiguously falls within that scope can reveal key elements of the phenomenon, such as changes in communicative strategies over time.

This study analyzes the communication of the organization that is responsible for investigating the events that happened in a southern state of Mexico on September 26, 2014. That night, 43 students went missing in Ayotzinapa. The media attention on the events increased day by day, as there was no notice of the whereabouts of the students. This event would first be looked into by the local Office of the Prosecutor, but ten days later, after the case attracted international attention, the Federal Office of the Prosecutor led the search and the criminal investigation.

The fact that the Federal Office of the Prosecutor was silent for nine days before communicating on the case created an informational vacuum that corresponds with a refusal to acknowledge the severity of the event. This opened the door for other stakeholders –families and non-governmental organizations– to attract attention from the media that led to a loss of persuasiveness of communication (Arpan and Roskos-Ewoldsen 2005) that would weight for the rest of the investigation of the case. Every action of the Office of the Prosecutor would be closely looked into, not only by families of the victims but also by national and international human rights organizations such as the National Human Rights Commission, the Inter-American Commission of Human Rights, the International Committee of the Red Cross and the United Nations. The legitimacy of the Federal Office of the Prosecutor became central, which is why studying its communication on this case is unambiguously a case of the phenomenon under study.

It is important to consider the nature of the public service this organization provides. The Office of the Prosecutor holds the monopoly and is responsible for the provision of the public service of prosecution of crimes at the federal level. It leads all criminal investigations and accusations before courts. As a monopoly, one cannot opt-out of public prosecution looking for private alternatives, as would be the case with transportation, housing, health or education.

Data and method

As the purpose is to examine the strategies employed by the Federal Office of the Prosecutor to communicate the event of the 43 disappeared students in Mexico in 2014, press releases are the main source of data. They fulfill several functions: provide information to the general public, highlight success, present staff members, announce upcoming events, report on past events, etc. They are highly suitable for this study because they can quickly publicize information that may be of particular interests to a wide range of actors such as media, governmental institutions, public servants and society at large, and are not directed to specific stakeholders (Brown *et al.* 2012, Drori and Honig 2013, Patala *et al.* 2019). Since the organization has high control over them, portraying it as it wishes to be seen, "their content is created with the intention of enhancing a positive image, making them ideal for examining legitimation strategies" (Patala *et al.* 2019).

Press releases for five consecutive years were collected from the organization's webpage (FGR 2020). September 26, 2014 was selected as the starting date because it marked the occurrence of the disappearance of the students. The ending date is on December 17, 2018, as it marks the date of the transformation of the Office of the Prosecution from an organization dependent on the executive power to one constitutionally autonomous. During this period, over 20,000 press releases were issued. These documents were then selected and filtered, both by title and by content, to consider those press releases referencing the case of the 43 students disappeared, either explicitly or implicitly. As a result, a total of 153 documents were analyzed. Each press release is identified by two numbers separated by a hyphen: first, the number of the press release assigned by the Office of the Prosecutor –or a date, in case they lack this number–, followed by two digits relating to the year the press release was issued. **Figure 1** presents a heat map illustrating the date and frequency of the press releases regarding the case under study. The heat map shows the relative intensity of the data: the darker the cell, the more press releases published that day. The black cell shows the day the disappearance of the students happened. The first press release was issued on October 4, nine days after the events. The frequency of press releases

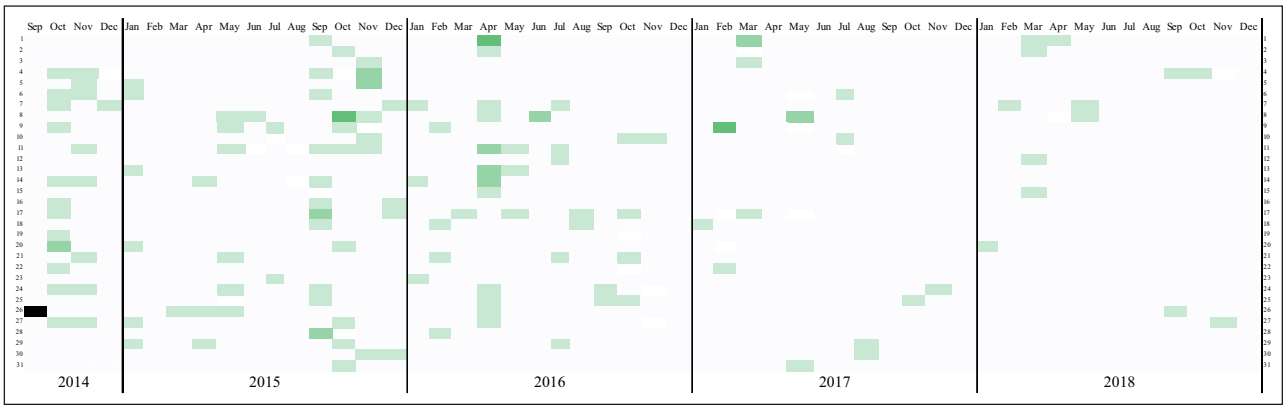

Figure 1: Heat map of press releases.

Table 3: Visualization of the coding process of a press release.

Press release 230–18	Theme coded	Strategy of legitimacy
"AS IT HAS DONE SO FAR, the Government of the Republic REITERATES that it WILL CONTINUE WORKING	Alignment with the past	Normalization
with the follow-up mechanism of the INTERAMERICAN COMMISSION OF HUMAN RIGHTS	International organization	Authorization
as well as with the families of the victims and their representatives until the full clarification of this case EXHAUSTING ALL POSSIBLE LINES OF INVESTIGATION that allows to know everything that has happened with the disappeared students, and to punish those responsible,	Actions in the case	Rationalization
in accordance with the MEXICAN LEGAL FRAMEWORK and INTERNATIONAL OBLIGATIONS in the matter."	Rules and regulations	Authorization

is relatively constant over the first two years and afterward reduces considerably. Reiterations are made around every anniversary of the event.

The study employs a mixed-method content analysis, which has the advantage of broadening the results of the qualitative study to larger amounts of data and facilitates quantitative comparisons. The analytical process will be described in detail because, considering the method applied, a way to ensure reliability is through a thorough description as "public justification of the analysis replaces inter-rater reliability, requiring that authors show their readers how the analysis was completed, with many links back to the original texts" (Drisko and Maschi 2016, p. 6).

Qualitative content-analysis implies both inductive definitions and deductive application of categories to data (Drisko and Maschi 2016, p. 6) in three steps. First, inductively identifying latent themes from the data to discover how the strategies manifest specifically. Considering the recommendations set out by Mayring (2000), this involved independent coding of two random samples of 10% of the universe to ensure a formative check of reliability.

Following this step, a comparison of the codes and combination into latent themes was made and, after full coding, a summative check of reliability was done. Then, word dictionaries were formed for each theme. During the process of creating the dictionaries, this process was followed: first, extracting a list of commonly used words in a category and identifying synonyms. Afterward, themes were defined and an expert assessment followed to assure unidimensionality and mutually exclusiveness and to increase the reliability and validity of the process (Short *et al.* 2010, Schreier 2014).

The findings from the qualitative content-analysis where then used quantitatively, based on theme occurrence. NVivo 12 software (QSR International Pty Ltd 2018) was used to assist in codifying, organizing and analyzing the data, facilitating the task of qualitative and quantitative analysis of the themes from the press releases. **Table 3** illustrates the process of codifying press releases.

Findings

Results of the qualitative content-analysis

The codes were aggregated under eight main themes. The themes represent distinct categories presented in the press releases, which can be related to the four strategies. Altogether, there were three themes representing rationalization strategies, three representing authorization strategies, and one theme each related to moralization and normalization strategies. The results are presented in **Table 4**.

Rationalization

Rationalization strategies focused on communicating outcomes. They relied mainly on informing actions done by the prosecutors regarding the case as well as actions related to meetings with the family and lawyers of the students. Often, it consisted of enlisting resources used: "[The deployment consists of] a total of 16 intelligence teams, 16 K-9 officers, 17 helicopters, 3 recognition aircrafts, a brigade of six divers and four mobile laboratories"

Table 4: Emergent themes in the qualitative analysis.

	Main theme	Definition	Exemplary quote
Rationalization Justification through outcomes, results, instrumental demands	Actions in the case	Search, prosecution and administrative actions	"He informed that, from February 18 to this date [March 17], 93 ministerial requirements, 24 forensic opinions, two field search actions, four ministerial inspections and 18 ministerial statements were collected, with the purpose to meet all the lines of investigation of the case." (395–16)
	Technical knowledge	Use of scientific and technological resources	"All the evidence in the file found by the various experts and instances will be put under the consideration of the experts and will be analyzed and verified before issuing their own report." (313–16)
	Presumed perpetrators	Individuals linked to the criminal investigation	"He stressed that in recent weeks important information has been gathered [...] which would also account for the level of involvement of the criminal organization, and the role of municipal corporations, in an important scheme of criminal organization" (172–18)
Authorization References to an authority or a mechanism of an authority	Rules and regulations	Legal instruments	"This, in view of the priority and duty of the State to assure victims of human rights violations an effective reparation and in accordance with the American Convention on Human Rights and other relevant treaties" (501–15)
	International Organizations	International human rights forums	"Many of them [elements] have emerged from the relationship of technical support established with the Interdisciplinary Group of Independent Experts (IGIE) of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights" (679–15)
	Instructions	Instructions given by the President or by the head of the Office of the Prosecutor	"As President Enrique Peña Nieto instructed, the Office of the Prosecutor is analyzing the report, in order to enrich the investigation of the unfortunate events of September 26 and 27, 2014." (603–16)
Moralization Justification through values	Values	Impacts of the events on society and moral goals	"We are looking to have institutions for the prosecution of justice that grant absolute trust and credibility to citizens" (548–15)
Normalization Justification through references to the past	Alignment with past	Alignment of present actions with past actions and routines	"As has been reiterated, the investigation for the clarification of the facts of the case continues to be open, thus on a permanent basis we are continuing with search actions" (24apr-16)

(194–14). Another frequently used theme was informing on the status of the presumed perpetrators even as early as October 17, 2014: "In this investigation [...] it was found that 14 of them [municipal policemen] are presumably responsible for the persecution and disappearance of the students" (193–14). Lastly, references to technical knowledge were also used "The Office has requested the Institute of Forensic Medicine of the University of Innsbruck to proceed immediately with the aforementioned studies [DNA analysis]" (09–15).

Authorization

Authorization strategies deployed in the press releases referred to aspects of authority as a justification for actions. Various references to authorization strategies were classified into three key themes. Rules and regulations comprise situations where the Office of the Prosecutor referred to constitutional, conventional, legal or other formal instruments. Also, several references were grouped under the theme International Organizations, as they provided authoritative arguments linked most often to human rights. Finally, explicit instructions or orders to justify decisions were also employed. This can either be an instruction of the President to the General Prosecutor, or from the head of the Prosecution to any of its public servants: "The General Prosecutor has instructed this public servant [vice-prosecutor] and Attorney Higuera to exhaust all the lines of investigation" (212–17). These references are most often not innovative but rather have a legal basis, yet they are communicated as explicit instructions.

Moralization

The moralization strategies identified comprised both normatively positive and negative tones. An example of the former is "the pursuit of justice in the 21st century must aspire to the highest standards in the investigation of crimes and strengthen the attention to victims, through greater institutional accompaniment that provides them with confidence, security and certainty" (1502–16), and of the latter: "It is also about finding the intellectual authors

of an act that hurts us all, of an act that hurts the rule of law and that we cannot allow to be repeated." (191–14).

Normalization

Normalization strategies related to referencing past and continuous actions and routines. Common verbs were "reiterates" and "reconfirms", as well as references to how the case is still open: "The Government of the Republic reiterates its determination to exhaust all lines of investigation in the Iguala case and to continue working" (449–18).

Results of the quantitative content-analysis

Following the qualitative analysis, the occurrences of the themes in the press releases were quantified to compare themes over time. The main indicator of theme prevalence was its occurrence.

Overall, as can be seen in **Figure 2**, the most employed strategy was rationalization with 36.66%, followed by authorization with 34.88%, and then moralization and normalization with 14.62% and 13.83% respectively.

Almost a third of the strategies used were moralization and normalization strategies, and another third for authorization strategies and rationalization strategies, respectively. Within rationalization strategies, actions of the case alone (30.92%) was used more than moralization and normalization strategies together.

When time is considered in the quantitative analysis, results show that the different strategies vary over time. This is shown in **Figure 3**.

For 2014, rationalization strategies were predominantly used (57.72%), while normalization strategies rarely (1.6%). Moralization and authoritative strategies were both used as frequently (20.32%).

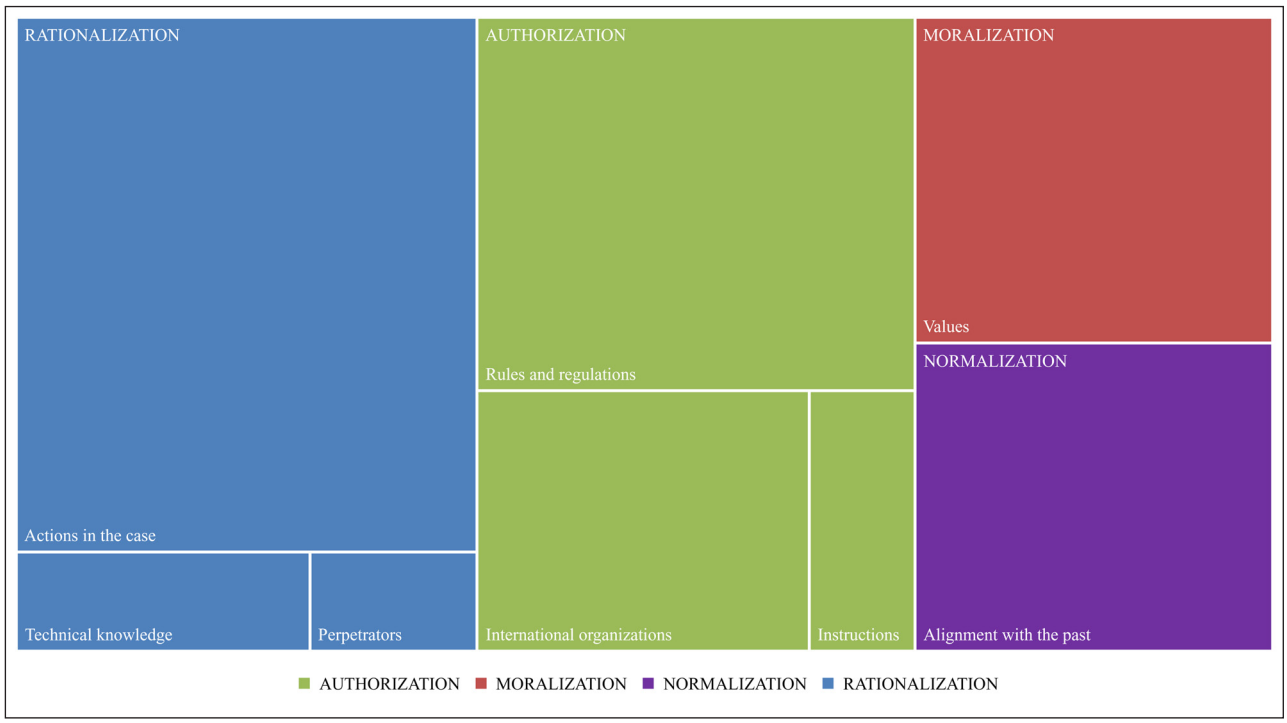

Figure 2: Overall themes and strategies.

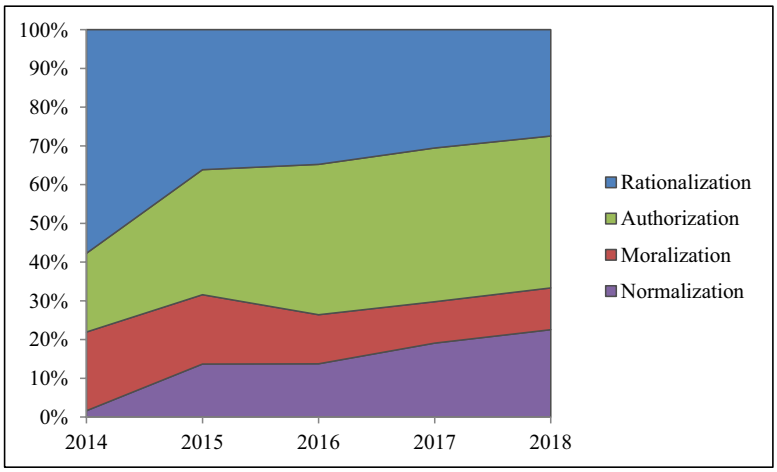

Figure 3: Evolution of strategies.

For the year 2015, there is an increase in authoritative strategies from 20.32% to 32.28%, as well in normalization strategies from 1.62% to 13.68%. Just as for 2014, rationalization strategies were predominantly used (36.14%) and normalization strategies the least. Moralization strategies decreased from 20.32% to 17.89%.

For the year 2016, authoritative strategies substitute rationalization strategies as the most predominantly used (38.81% versus 34.77%). It is also the first year that normalization strategies are used more frequently than moralization strategies (13.74% versus 12.66%).

The years 2017 and 2018 follow the same trend as in 2016. Rationalization strategies continue to drop (30.54% and 27.45% respectively), while authorization and normalization strategies continue to increase (39.69% and 39.21% for authorization and 19.08% and 22.54% for normalization). Moralization strategies remain almost constant (10.68% and 10.78% for 2017 and 2018, respectively).

Discussion

As more and more evidence gathers supporting the view that communication can have a constitutive effect on legitimacy (Hoefer and Green Jr 2016), discovering and understanding how language is used for legitimacy is becoming increasingly important for organizational research. The study empirically explored the strategies employed by the Mexican Federal Office of the Prosecutor in communications related to the case of the 43 students who disappeared in 2014. This article shows that, in addition to being overall differences in the strategies used, these are used differently over time, and that public organizations use them differently than private organizations.

The study contributes to research on institutional communication in two main ways: from a static and dynamic perspective, depending on if time is considered or not. First, from a static perspective, it is interesting that, contrary to expectations, moralization strategies are not the main strategy adopted. Instead, references to rules and regulations, within a strategy of authorization, are used more. The relative unimportance of moralization strategies contrasts with studies highlighting the importance of morality and emotional reassurance in communication (An 2011, Zamoum and Gorpe 2018). In public organizations, this counterintuitive finding can be explained by the fact that the public service of prosecution is a monopoly. In the case studied, it is not of the utmost importance to persuade the public that the organization is morally valuable, as it is the sole organization that can be responsible for the investigation of the case. This allows for identifying an organizational variable that influences communicative strategies: the nature of the public service provided by the organization matters.

A second contribution of the study results from incorporating a temporal dimension, which provides evidence that not only does the amount and frequency of communication change over time, but also the strategies of communication of the organization.

The decrease in the number of press releases over time can be explained by the changes in the media landscape, as year after the disappearance, other cases gained importance in media, such as the escape of El Chapo from prison in July 2015 (BBC News 2015), and the Odebrecht corruption scandal in April 2017 (BBC News 2019).

Findings also show that whereas rationalization strategies prevail at the beginning, normalization strategies increase at a later stage. This is in line with the expectations set out taking from studies in private organizations.

The theoretical framework presented in this article can also explain the decrease in rationalization strategies: When rationalization strategies were not enough to gain legitimacy, the organization appealed to past glory and normalization strategies increased (Patala *et al.* 2019). This increase may point towards an intention of the Office of the Prosecution to highlight past actions, as well as an attempt to deprioritize the case: the investigation is open and will continue to be open. It refers to the increasing importance of getting back to routines and the *status quo,* because stability is important for organizations so, over time, they go back to business-as-usual situations by referencing past actions.

The importance and the increase in authorization strategies is an interesting finding that sets a difference with studies on private organizations. In this case, the salience of authorization strategies over time points towards the organizational embeddedness for communication. As Mexico is a civil law country, references to legal texts are a prerequisite for any public action. The legal tradition in which it operates puts formality at the center of public action. The finding confirms that communication does not occur in a context-free space for improvisation, but is rather affected by norms, practices, routines and expectations (Fredriksson *et al.* 2014).

In sum, the study indicates that communicating legitimacy for public organizations does not occur in a vacuum, but rather it is embedded in the organizational *status quo*, which is also the case for private organizations. This article also points towards a difference between public and private organizations: for the former, the legal system and the nature of the public service in question matters.

Conclusion

The present study investigated if public organizations use different communicative strategies to pursue legitimacy and how the strategies used change over time. What an organization does and how it communicates can make the difference between strengthening or weakening its legitimacy (Boin *et al.* 2009).

This article contributes to understand how public organizations build legitimacy through communication, which is a relatively understudied topic, especially compared to the wide literature on private organizations' legitimacy and communication. The findings derive from a mixed-method content-analysis of over four years of press releases by the Mexican Office of the Prosecutor regarding actions on a paradigmatic case: the 2014 disappearance of 43 students.

The methodology used in this paper allows for analytical generalization rather than statistical generalization.

Nonetheless, this article has theoretical and practical implications. It offers a novel perspective to study public organizations' legitimacy, and it highlights the practical importance of the strategies of communication, which are especially relevant for organizations that are facing serious threats to their legitimacy.

The analysis has limitations that must be addressed. First, the analysis was limited to the public communication released by the organization. Future research might complement the analysis of legitimacy by investigating the effects of these strategies on citizens' perceptions of the Office of the Prosecutor by analyzing how news and other media outlets framed the event. Second, the disappearance of the 43 students occurred while the Office of the Prosecutor was in the process of becoming a constitutionally autonomous organ and whoever was head Prosecutor in its transformation would become the constitutional autonomous Prosecutor for nine years. This means that the events occurred in the context of organizational reforms and leaderships, as well as with competing events like the El Chapo escape or the Odebrecht scandals. Thus, another subject worth investigating further is how executive politics and administrative leadership affected the communication of the Office of the Prosecutor from 2014 to 2018. Finally, and especially for Latin America, the study gives insights into the behavior of public organizations in the face of serious human rights violations. To further our understanding, future studies that examine other events in the region are needed.

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Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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