COMMUNICATION IN SOCIAL INNOVATION PLATFORMS

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RESUMEN

Al mismo tiempo que necesitamos nuevos modelos de organización para abordar problemas complejos relacionados con la sostenibilidad, también necesitamos un modelo de comunicación que ayude a construir la visión colectiva de esos problemas y, por ende, de las posibles soluciones. El modelo que proponemos lo hemos denominado "comunicación evolutiva", aquella que se desarrolla en las plataformas de innovación social -organizaciones multiactor, multicapa y multiproyecto- y que pone el énfasis en los procesos y en las interacciones que llevan a conversaciones transformadoras. La conversación se convierte así en materia prima de la comunicación y, a través de una curación de contenidos y difusión, será más probable que la comunicación lleve a la acción. El rol del comunicador también cambia y pasa a moverse en un entorno más difuso en el que tendrá que prestar especial atención al contexto en el que trabaja (ritmo, diversidad…), al lenguaje y a las narrativas.

Palabras clave: Comunicación evolutiva, Conversaciones, Plataformas de innovación, Narrativas

ABSTRACT

Just as the complex problems relating to sustainability issues now require new organisational models, we also need a new communication model to help create a collective view of these problems and thus find solutions to them. Our proposed model is called "evolutive communication" and refers to communication through platforms on social innovation -multistakeholder, multi-layered and multi-project organisations. It is communication which focuses on those processes and interactions which lead to transformative dialogues.

Such dialogue therefore becomes the raw material for communication and, through content curation and dissemination, is more likely to be transformed into action. The role played by the communicator also changes to a more diffuse environment in which s/he must pay special attention to the context (rhythm, diversity etc.) of the work as well as to the language and the narratives.

Keywords: Evolutive communication, Dialogues, Social innovation platforms, Narratives

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1. COMMUNICATING COMPLEX SYSTEMS IN TIMES OF CHANGE

The 21st century began with a number of crises, social and technological changes and environmental challenges. In short, "bigger problems than oneself" (Crompton 2010), characterized by complexity and the impossibility of addressing these in a straightforward way, without feeling the frustration or false illusion that occurs when we simplify the complex.

The term *"wicked problem"* is also often used to describe a problem that is difficult or impossible to solve for various reasons: conflicting or incomplete knowledge, the volume and variety of people and actors involved, the financial burden of potential solutions, and the natural connection between these and other problems. Thus, one of the most widely referenced wicked problems is the climate crisis, or those mentioned in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

It is precisely times like these that traditional communication, without the capacity to deal with these problems and their complexity, often takes refuge in a combination of stereotypes and biased assumptions in order to interpret such problems. This is also a reflection of what tends to happen in organizations that center around a traditional model; when faced with complex problems, their view of these is essentially subjective and the answer tends to be limited by bias.

However, organizations, along with developing an innovative approach to communication, can play a critical role in tackling complex problems in a different way and in breaking with those biased perspectives.

In this article, on the one hand, we aim to address the unavoidable changes that have occurred and are still occurring in the field of communication, and on the other hand, how the role of communication and communication professionals is changing, or at least *should* be rapidly changing within the work model of social innovation platforms. This is because such organizations, which stem from the need to respond to complex problems, require communication that helps construct a collective vision among their target audience as a prerequisite for action.

2. NEW PARADIGM: NEW AUDIENCES AND FORMS OF INTERACTION

One of the main changes taking place in the field of communication in the 21st century is the role of the target audience. During the 20th century - the century of mass media - communication has essentially flowed in one direction, replacing the public arena as the main channel of communication. Neither interaction, conversation nor exchange play a strategic role here. Today, despite the fact that society already communicates in a different way, this approach is overwhelmingly persistent in companies, NGOs, public administrations, etc. Perhaps it is the social movements that have set the pace of change that will spearhead the shift from results-based communication to a different form of communication; one that emphasizes processes and interactions, although this is not yet the norm.

The interaction or public discussion that has dominated digital relations in the 21st century is likely the major shift that will determine the need to adopt a new approach to communication; one based on the participation of the target audience.

In the image "The Myth of Web 2.0 Non-Participation" (Figure 2), Gary Hayes classifies the public as consumers - passive consumers of content; sharers - who forward and share content; critics - who evaluate or

comment on content; editors - who modify the content of others; and creators - who submit original content. The traditional roles of communication - mainly those involving generating and sharing content - are also taken on by that target audience, which might be more accurately described nowadays as a "community".
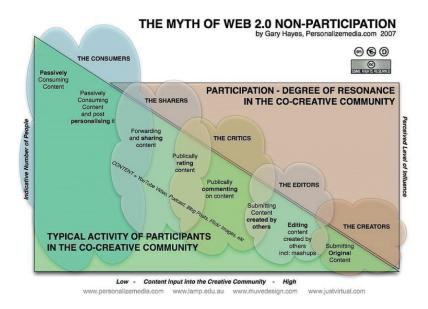

Figure 1. The Myth of Web 2.0 Non-Participation. By Gary Hayes (2007)

In 2014, the Rockefeller Foundation published the report, "Digital Storytelling for Social Impact," in order to understand the role that information and communication technologies can play in generating narratives that contribute to improving the lives of the most vulnerable populations.

Based on interviews with leaders and media executives, technology companies, NGOs and philanthropic organizations, the report outlines the organizational model (Figure 3), which, through the creation of various narratives, builds a community of support that will help it expand its resources and the scope of its mission.
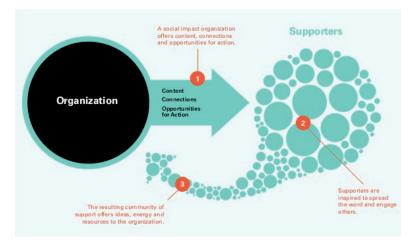

Figure 2. A Storytelling Organization Builds a Community of Support to Expand its Reach and Resources. Rockefeller Foundation, 2014

Although this figure only addresses the "subscribers" to the content provided by the organization to the extent that they are inspired to share it, (which is how social networks actually work), it lacks the element of interaction, conversation and discussion between the organization and subscribers, as well as among the subscribers themselves.

As described in the figure, Step 3 - the formation of a group that offers ideas, is undoubtedly the most difficult step to achieve in communication and can only be done through very high levels of interaction between subscribers. This high degree of interaction is what needs to be generated among the organizations and the people working within social innovation platforms, to ensure that transformative conversations occur.

Social Innovation Platforms are a set of actors, methodologies and actions that generate new processes, products and services in an integrated and open way, in order to address complex challenges (Espiau, 2017).
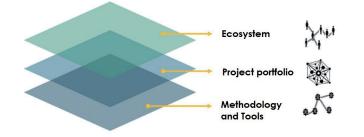

Figure 3. Social innovation platforms (prepared by the authors)

These provide ample space for collaboration between diverse social actors (ecosystem), which, using a shared methodology and tools, co-create interconnected solutions linked by design (project portfolio) in order to address complex problems, such as the climate crisis or the SDGs, acting within different layers of the system at the same time. To put it simply, a social innovation platform is an organizational space designed to foster collaboration and multi-stakeholder partnerships as a means to tackle complex problems.

Communication in social innovation platforms cannot adhere to the same standards or rules as traditional communication. As a multi-actor, multi-layer and multi-project organizational scheme, the communication model must essentially evolve towards the use of a different formula; one that is less *top-down* and unidirectional, and more conversation-focused. This is known as "evolutive communication."

In this new organizational model, the role of communication evolves from the transmission of messages that are defined a priori, towards the creation of opportunities and spaces so that those affected by a complex problem can create conversations. As a result, a shared narrative is created that helps address the wicked problems by reframing them.

In this model, conversation is the raw material for communication, and through content curation and dissemination of the conversation, communication more easily leads to action. Through a virtuous circle that focuses on five key points, we will present an approach to communication for social innovation platforms.

The key points of the virtuous circle are as follows: the location of the target audience and the connections established between them, facilitating conversations and spaces of confluence, the visibility of those conversations, the collective construction of that narrative, and sharing the narrative with a wider audience.

3. THE VIRTUOUS CIRCLE OF COMMUNICATION IN SOCIAL INNOVATION PLATFORMS: A PROPOSAL

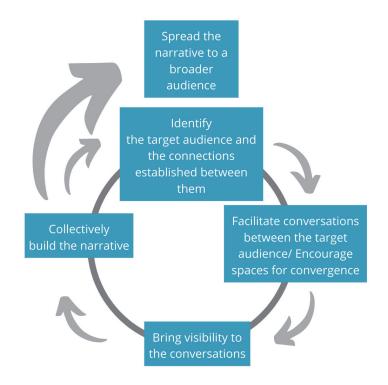**A proposal for the virtuous circle of communication**

Figure 4. The Virtuous Circle of Communication in Social Innovation Platforms (prepared by the authors)
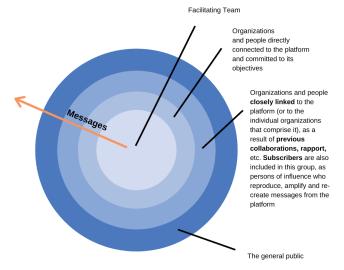
1. LOCATE THE TARGET AUDIENCE AND THE CONNECTIONS BETWEEN THEM, THE SUBSCRIBERS AND NETWORKS

Before describing the steps of the virtuous circle of communication in innovation platforms, it is worth noting that the previous scheme is the result of an educational exercise, meant to facilitate the understanding of phases that are not so clearly separated in reality.

As was previously mentioned, a social innovation platform is comprised of at least an ecosystem of actors; that is, institutions that share a common objective from the start, along with a work methodology, tools and a portfolio of projects, with the shared goal of addressing a complex problem and generating systemic change.

In such an ecosystem, the initial target audience is represented by the organizations of the platform themselves, where each institution and each person who participates in the work "in platform mode" has their own approach and interpretation of the problem. Their views may be different but are as equally valuable as the those of the other people and organizations involved. In addition to the general public, other organizations, which are identified due to their proximity to the platform, their involvement and interest in the actions carried out, are also target audiences, although to a lesser extent.

With these criteria, it is possible to divide the target audience into at least four levels:

Figure 5. Map of target audiences of a social innovation platform (prepared by the authors)

At this stage, the role of communication is to identify and bring awareness to the connections between the nodes (people and organizations) that make up the target audience.

2. FACILITATE AND CURATE CONVERSATIONS

At the second stage, the role of communication is to facilitate conversations between the different nodes of the network of actors, and to foster spaces so that these transformative conversations can take place. In other words, it is about creating an appropriate context for conversation, building trust and creating new positions and narratives. Creating and giving visibility to this context can translate into a physical space associated with the target audience or the objective of the platform, but it also refers to the immaterial and organizational context. The type of conversations encouraged are dialogic conversations; that is, conversations where the positions are not established in advance, and the opinions or points of view of one of the actors involved are not favoured over another. On the contrary, as a result of this conversation between the actors, new and unknown territories are explored precisely because of this interaction.

	Dialectic conversation	Dialogic conversation
Beginning	• The positions of each party are previously established • Preparation is done individually and prior to the conversation	• Positions are not previously established • The contextualization is previously designed so that the conversation is symmetrical
Conversation process	• The mediators are moderators who supervise the tone of the conversation • An agreement or victory is sought in a certain amount of time	• The mediators are responsible for designing the context • Rather than acting as moderators, they nurture the process • The process can lead to breaking new ground
Result	• It is assumed that the debate between opposites will lead to a new outcome	• The process should leave a positive mark on the participants, even if it does not culminate in a new outcome

Table 1. Differences between dialectical conversation and dialogic conversation (prepared by the authors)

3. BRING ATTENTION TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF SHARED NARRATIVES

As a result of the dialogic conversations, the people and actors involved in the conversation develop a distinct, deeper and more complex understanding of the problem, enriched by the points of view of the other nodes of the ecosystem. Therefore, after multiple dialogic conversations, they develop shared narratives around the issue and the possibilities of solving it. At this point in the virtuous circle, the role of communication in platforms is to draw attention to those conversations and to discuss the shared narratives, making these explicit. On the one hand, by bringing attention to the narratives that underlie the conversations, communication makes explicit the implicit and, on the other hand, strengthens the cohesion between nodes (people and organizations) of the ecosystem-platform. In this regard, it can be said that through these conversations, not only are new narratives shared, but a new sense of trust is also instilled. This is an indispensable element for working in 'platform mode', where there is no strict and detailed planning involved, and no single organization is considered more prominent than the others.

This new role of communication as a facilitator of transformative conversations is especially relevant, as collaboration networks tend to separate into disconnected projects. However, if there is an integrative function that highlights the connections between the nodes, and enables these shared conversations and new narratives, the risk of disconnection is significantly reduced.

4. GENERATING NEW SHARED NARRATIVES

In the following step, the role of communication in platforms is to expand the new narratives that have already been translated into new messages to a wider audience. For example, one of the stories or narratives with the greatest transformative potential, with its ability to neutralize negative stereotypes and assumptions about our environment, is the story featured in the Sustainable Development Goals; due to its ability to "become a common language for the collective interpretation of the greatest challenges for the planet, through a positive narrative about the great transformative capacity of our current generation" (Carlos Mataix, 2019).

4. CASE STUDY: COMMUNICATION IN THE CITIES PLATFORM

In order to explain the virtuous circle of communication in social innovation platforms, we present the case of the Cities Platform, a broad collaborative space that was created in 2018 at the initiative of the City of Madrid and the Technical University of Madrid (UPM). Its aim is to contribute to the public strategy to combat climate change in the city of Madrid through an interdisciplinary approach, with the coordinated action of all actors involved: the public, private and professional sectors, as well as civil society.
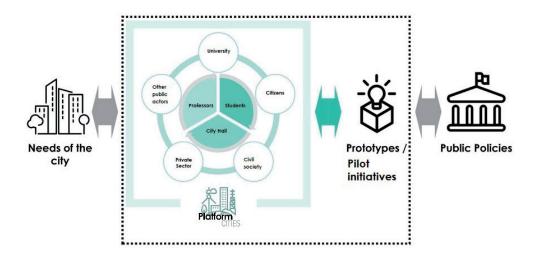
Figure 6. Diagram of action of the UPM-Madrid City Council platform (prepared by the authors)

Since its inception, the Madrid Cities Platform has addressed climate change adaptation or emissions reduction among its various lines of work.

In the field of **climate change adaptation**, the platform been working to turn the Matadero Madrid artistic exhibition area into a space to demonstrate how the re-greening of cities can contribute to climate change adaptation and, at the same time, serve as a place for public awareness through art. To this end, a number of interdisciplinary workshops and conversations led by artists and architects have been held, in which more than eighty professionals from the fields of geology, botany, engineering, sociology, anthropology, design and more have participated. As a result of this ensemble process, there are now five prototypes of potential garden solutions, in a space characterized by its location in the middle of an urban heat island.

In the field of **emissions reduction**, the Cities Platform, together with the Municipal Transport Company (EMT) and the university campus community, has been searching for new, more sustainable models of mobility in the city. For example, a collective intelligence tool was implemented, known as CoLab.upm, enabling the interaction of ideas proposed by users that can be improved upon, thanks to the active participation of other users, analysts, expert advisers and a judging panel.

Next, we will apply the scheme of the virtuous circle of communication to the case of the Cities Platform.

Target audiences. The first target audience level is comprised of the Technical University of Madrid, members of the Madrid City Council (both technical and political personnel) and the Matadero Madrid staff. On a second level, organizations and individuals who closely collaborate with the aforementioned target audience (such as, for example, the Municipal Transport Company, artists collectives that are typically in residence at the Matadero, companies interested in a sustainable transformation, and UPM partners, such as Iberdrola).

Facilitate and Curate Conversations. As the platform's areas of interest are climate change adaptation and the sustainable transformation of mobility in the city, the development team has enabled conversations in various formats between UPM professors specializing in different subjects, artists from the Matadero, municipal officials and the general public, with the aim of reaching a common understanding of both the problem and the scope of the solution. Examples of these conversations include multidisciplinary workshops

to design a garden at the Matadero, 'walkshops' (conversations while walking) between UPM researchers, municipal representatives and members of the Madrid neighbourhood of Vallecas, and conversations between sustainability experts or managers of electric transport companies, representatives of the Madrid City Council, students and the general public.

Bring attention to the development of shared narratives. As these conversations have taken place, shared narratives have emerged around the possibilities of transformation in the city, which have been distilled and returned to the participants in the conversations and the general public through graphic, audio-visual, textual or expository pieces.

For example:

Figure 7. Work sessions and dialogue between UPM professors and artists from the Matadero to co-design a garden in the Matadero (Prepared by the authors, 2019)

Figure 8. Conversations between one of the artists from the Matadero, UPM professors and the general public about a prototype for the garden (©Matadero Madrid, 2019)

Figure 9: 'Walkshop' (conversations while walking) between UPM researchers, Madrid City Council officials and residents of the neighbourhood of Vallecas, regarding mobility in the neighbourhood (2019)

Figure 10: Conversations and online co-creation process, seeking solutions for the sustainable transformation of mobility on UPM campuses through the CoLab.upm tool (2019/2020)

Figure 11. Closing dialogue for the collective design process, with representation of all actors involved (2019)

Figure 12. Dialogue between professors of the Technical University of Madrid (UPM), members of the Matadero Madrid and the general public, regarding the possibility of attaining a Green New Deal by 2030 (2019)

5. FROM TRADITIONAL COMMUNICATION TO EVOLUTIVE COMMUNICATION

As we have seen, communication like the one described above works in a more natural and agile way when we have organizational models and different types of internal and external relations, based on partnerships, co-creation processes, collaboration, etc.

The model we have centered on, social innovation platforms, also includes processes, such as listening or evolutive evaluation, which relies on the community as a whole to generate content, services and even solutions to such complex challenges.

If we use traditional communication in this type of platform, the most we will achieve is a tool for the dissemination of results or success stories that, in many cases, do not tell the whole story. Hence, the need to convey the process and bring awareness to the conversations.

We still lack many examples or references that could help us incorporate a platforms approach into communication. This, coupled with the uncertainty and risk involved in unlearning the precepts of traditional communication, leads us to the need for support, tools and, above all, understanding and patience from within the platform itself. "The platforms approach raises uncertainty and short-term risk, necessitates important cultural changes (...) and requires developing the art of ecosystem and network management" (Carlos Mataix, 2019).

Despite the fact that the ideal scenario would be to move directly from a traditional communication system to a platforms approach, logic and experience tell us that this leap should be done gradually, experimenting with this new system while maintaining the traditional one until the new system is fully incorporated.

Therefore, both evolutive and traditional communication can coexist as separate systems, although this coexistence can generate contradictions on occasion. Thus, it is important to emphasize the main differentiating elements between the two.

THE MESSAGE AND THE PROCESS: WHAT WE COMMUNICATE AND IN WHAT CONTEXT

The first difference between evolutive communication and traditional communication in the context of social innovation platforms is the content of the communication process. While it is customary in traditional communication systems to report the results of a process under way, the impact it has had and related events throughout the process, evolutive communication on the other hand begins by bringing visibility to the process itself and its added value, starting with its inception and launch.

In addition, it draws upon the listening process and the evolutive evaluation to communicate externally (aimed at communities, companies, public administrations and the general public) and internally (regarding advances in the platform itself and knowledge management systems).

Social innovation platforms, as live, versatile projects undergoing constant transformation, require rethinking the matter of timing in communication plans. In evolutive communication, the objective is not to communicate at the end of the process or at key points of the innovation process; that is, when there is a tangible result to announce. In practice, platforms do not evolve in a linear process. They are more like a circle, or a set of circles, so there is no point in measuring and planning key communication moments in advance with a previously established plan, however flexible it may be.

These platforms begin by communicating, and they continue to do so in a sustained manner throughout the process. In that complex and non-linear ecosystem, similar to the aforementioned *wicked problems*, in which the different phases overlap and take place simultaneously at different levels of development, communication is present throughout this process.

All of this makes it impossible to dissociate communication from other processes in social innovation platforms - listening, co-creation, prototyping, management or evaluation - (Work4Progress, 2019), which directly influences the way we understand the position and profile of the communication team as we now know it.

THE COMMUNICATION OBJECTIVES

Similarly, the objectives of the communication strategy cease to focus on transmitting successful outcomes to a passive target audience, documenting the results of a specific process or complying with the traditional communication plan in the different phases and different mediums. Instead, they begin to (1) bring attention to the value of the actions carried out; (2) document the internal and external processes; (3) involve the community and encourage their participation and; (4) be able to provide feedback in real time, with the understanding that there is no complete control over the process.

This absence of structured programming and the ability to adapt to the dynamics of the process are the main factors to consider when communicating within the platform. Thus, although the traditional communication plan should ideally be phased out, or at least undergo a complete transformation, we should avoid eliminating it right away, since working in an innovative and integrated way is as important as making a gradual transition towards this new approach to communication. Perhaps that plan could take on another format or be more closely linked to the general work plan, allowing for greater flexibility while also evolving throughout the process.

Innovation projects tend to separate external communication (the dissemination of general outcomes or cases of best practices aimed at experts) from internal communication (monitoring reports, meetings, etc.). However, this is not sustainable in a process that aims to communicate the process itself in a sustained manner, including the successes and failures in a non-linear system. This means that the role of the communicator must be integrated into the development team, so that internal and external communication are essentially two sides of the same coin. This dynamic also leads us to question the role of the communicator.

THE NEW ROLE OF THE COMMUNICATOR

Today, most communication strategies are still positioned as complementary or external to the management of the process. Despite seamlessly integrating social media and ICT tools, we continue to work as professionals dedicated to putting forth our best efforts. At best, it is not a consultancy contract, instead reporting to the department of the entity in charge, but a communications professional is still considered a complementary element.

Normally, the communication team objectively interprets the materials that the leadership or management team provides. Thus, the head of communications occasionally participates in meetings and has a series of tasks to perform based on the communication plan, but his or her contribution is not seen as being linked to the process of detecting a problem to be addressed, or as an instrument that can enrich the co-creation and prototyping phases of new initiatives.

The new approach that we propose understands the role of the evolutive communication team as being fully integrated into the leadership team of any innovation platform. The communication team becomes a facilitator of the process, actively participating in the management dynamics and the decision-making process. This new role is constantly connected to the process of listening, co-creation, prototyping and scale, understanding their logic and participating in their own development.

Thus, those in charge of communication in an innovation platform are not limited to generating content, nor are they limited to being mere broadcasters of information. This role will shift into a more amorphous environment, where greater attention will have to be paid to things that were perhaps not necessary before, such as the context in which he or she works (rhythm, diversity, etc.) or the language and the narratives used in his or her own organization/ platform.

The aforementioned is summarized in the following table:

	Traditional communication	Evolutive Communication
WHAT	Oriented towards communicating the results of the process of innovation / project/ initiative / program. For example, number of jobs created, the number of sessions held, acts or events in which they have participated.	Oriented towards communicating the process itself and its added value from the outset. Thrives on (intermediate) results in the different phases (listening, co-creation, etc.) and highlighting information on the implementation process, lessons learned and best practices.

WHEN	When tangible results are identified, generally related to the target audience of the program. At the end of the intervention or at certain intervals.	It is a cross-cutting activity carried out throughout the entire process, and it is impossible to separate the communication process from the implementation.
WHO	The communication team or personnel are considered external in relation to the management team. Communication is typically outsourced as a consultancy service or is entrusted to the department of one of the organizations participating in the platform, but dissociated from the intervention.	The task of communication is integrated into the Facilitating Team, participating in the development of all phases (listening, co-creation, etc.) in order to understand the logic and respective needs.
WHERE	External communication (dissemination of objectives or results fulfilled, or cases of best practices aimed at experts) is separated from internal communication (monitoring reports, annual reports, etc.).	By including communication as part of the Facilitating Team, the distinction between internal and external communication becomes blurred.
OBJECTIVES	» Transmit the positive results achieved (partial results and the total upon completion) » Document, almost exclusively, the developments or outcomes related to the objectives of the intervention » Target audience: experts working in the same sector » Comply with the traditional communication plan in the different phases and mediums	» Communicate the entire process carried out by the Platform, but above all, highlight the intrinsic value of the process » Document the process at an "internal" level of the Platform (for example, to explain changes in the way the organizations operate, which is important to highlight), and "external" (for example, how the co-creation sessions are organized with certain groups, etc.). » Engage the community in a broad sense and encourage their participation » Provide feedback in real time within the Facilitating Team, understanding its complexity.
PROFILE	El equipo o personal de comunicación reciben de forma acrítica los materiales / resultados que les proporciona el equipo implementador, para conducirlos por los canales establecidos.	The communication personnel are integrated into the Facilitating Team and become facilitators as well, participating as part of that team and in its processes, including decision making.

Table 2: Differences in the role of the communicator in traditional communication and in evolutive communication (prepared by the authors)

6. CONCLUSIONS

The main mission of communication in platforms is moving towards curating and bringing awareness to the conversations generated within the platform, and with the ecosystem that surrounds it. As Dunford and Palmer noted, "The organization is conversation. This does not mean that the conversation necessarily occurs in the organization, but that the conversation represents the organization" (Dunford, R. and Palmer, I., 1998).

At the same time that communication brings attention to the conversation, it also reinforces the story that the platform itself wishes to tell. "Communication in open innovation platforms must reinforce the alternative and transformative «story» that a community wants to build upon," (Gorka Espiau, 2018). In short, the relationships that are created through the platform and its ecosystem are what drive the narrative of the platform.

If a traditional organization uses communication to ensure that their audience shares a single, almost always hierarchical vision - or that they simply think along the same lines - in a social innovation platform, then the goal of communication must be to ensure that the audience experiences reality from an array of different perspectives. In that regard, a collective vision can be built through a deliberative process. This manner of communicating gives visibility to different accounts of what is happening, and the deliberative process generates transformative narratives that move in the same direction.

Projects tend to separate external communication (dissemination of general outcomes or cases of best practices aimed at experts) from internal communication (monitoring reports, meetings, etc.). However, this is not sustainable within a process that aims to draw attention to the process itself over time, including its success and failures. In social innovation platforms, the process itself is communicated instead of planned and completed products. Although the channels and formats belong to traditional communication (a post, a video, an exhibition, etc.), communication is centered on the process itself, as an enabler of systemic transformation that produces results in the long-term.

When it comes to communication in platforms, if the object of interest is the process itself, the role of the communicator essentially evolves, and should be much more integrated into the leadership team than in traditional organizations, so that both internal and external communication complement and feed into one another. This leads us to the main paradigm shift in communication in complex systems: the role of the communicator, which evolves from being an implementer of ready-made messages to that of facilitator of transformative conversations, as well as that of interpreter of the narratives arising from the high level of interaction between participants of the platform and other target audiences.

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