

## Artifact Analysis

Julian Eckl

International organizations could not exist without the artifacts through which they manifest and that range from buildings via official records and badges to accounting software. Artifacts are ubiquitous but, with the exemption of artifacts that feature an inscribed text (i.e., documents), they tend to be overlooked. Artifact analysis rectifies this neglect. The analysis (Lueger and Froschauer 2018) is guided by questions such as the following: How can the artifact be described? What can be done with it? What effects does it have on people?

An artifact that struck me in my research on global health governance are “traffic lights” (see fig. 6). They are omnipresent at the assembly of the World Health Organization (WHO) but can also be found at other decision-making bodies. Attending the assembly, I was intrigued by the fact that the traffic lights were in continuous use in this setting but rarely spoken about. When I started to document the functioning of the traffic lights and to time the individual phases, I was met with disbelief. The participants took the traffic lights for granted while analyzing such an artifact helps to unearth some of the implicit assumptions concerning the social relations that they enable and reinforce.

In particular, the traffic lights can be interpreted as constituting a calm and indiscriminate way of governing the governors and as a material manifestation of the considerable time pressure under which governance bodies work. To begin with, traffic lights sequence speakers’ interventions into three phases: the first and longest phase could be called “you can talk” (green); the second and transitory phase could be called “you have to wrap up” (yellow); the third and unwanted phase could be called “you should have stopped” (red). Moreover, traffic lights display these phases to everyone in the room,



Figure 6. Traffic light as used in meetings at the World Health Organization

Source: Julian Eckl

which puts speakers under pressure, assures the audience that the time limit is taken seriously, sends the message that country delegates are treated equally, and provides the meeting's chair with shared visual evidence on whether speakers may be plausibly requested to conclude (or forced to stop). Unlike a sound signal, traffic lights can be used to indicate the (approaching) end of the speaking time without immediately disturbing the speaker. Finally, traffic lights are a constant reminder that time is of the essence and that timing is privileged over other ends such as elaborate deliberation.

A closer engagement with artifacts, however, does not only provide an important perspective on present practices. It also alerts to their historical emergence. In the case of the traffic lights, their omnipresence is a tangible consequence of decades-long reform efforts aimed at making WHO governance “more efficient” (Eckl 2017). Regarding general discussions in the plenary, no time limit had been set initially but speaking time was reduced incrementally to five minutes that were long common in the years before the COVID-19 pandemic; this amounts to a speech that is only as long as the text in this box since delegates are meant to read slowly to allow for simultaneous translation. When the first in-person assembly since the outbreak of COVID-19 took place in 2022, time pressure was increased even further and plenary statements were restricted to three minutes as had been common for statements in committee meetings for quite some time.

## References

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# International Organizations and Research Methods

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*An Introduction*

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