Antenarratives, Narratives and Anaemic Stories

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Abstract

What is antenarrative theory? An antenarrative is a gambler's bet that a before-story (pre-story) can take flight and disrupt and transform narrative practice. Antenarrative derives its organizing force in emergent storytelling where plots are not possible, or at least contested, and speculative, rich in polyphony and polysemy. Stories are antenarrative when told without proper plot sequence and mediated coherence preferred by narrative theorists. Antenarratives lack the cohesive accomplishment of narratives, and do not as yet possess their closure of beginning, middle, and ending. Antenarrative dynamics include the plurivocal (many voiced), polysemous (rich in multiple interpretations), and dispersed pre-narrations that interpenetrate wider social contexts. Antenarrative theory makes a contribution to inquiry by exploring gaps and excesses excluded in traditional narratology.

The Ante - Antenarrative is part of storytelling, but does not appear to meet Czarniawska or Gabriel's criteria for what constitutes a proper story or proper narrative. In the spirit of dialogic imagination, this essay is a juxtaposition of our competing points of view. We each theorize the power to narrate differently. Our thesis is that actionable knowledge is a worked out in the "story space" of competing narratives and antenarratives, where sometimes a terse story can change the world.

When Two Antenarratives Meet:
        If we say to you "9/11" then I think you know the story of the planes crashing like missiles into the two towers and the Pentagon. And if we say to you "Fahrenheit 911" you recall a different storyline.

What about just the words "Enron" or "Enrongate," does these each word conjure up an organizational story in you? And how do these storylines weave and diverge over time?

In past work, I called these terse stories; stories so coded, that a single word conveys them (Boje, 1991). Each terse story is also a case of two antenarratives meeting, competing for your attention.

"Antenarrative" is defined as a "bet" that a "pre-story" will become a full-fledged narrative (Boje, 2001). Michael Moore's "Fahrenheit 911" antenarrative competes with President Bush's rendition. "Enron" is a bundle of antenarratives, first blaming Andrew Fastow, and then Jeffrey Skilling and now Kenneth Lay; this linear trajectory of antenarratives competes with "Enrongate" which enrolls a cast of characters from the Whitehouse to mimic the older antenarrative of "Watergate."

We will argue that the tersely-told story and the "antenarrative" are related. They participate with less-terse storytelling and with narrative. Here is the main point: there is disagreement in the field, as to what constitutes a story, narrative, and antenarrative. We think this symposium intends to stir that pot. We shall dip our ladle into the pot now.

Yannis Gabriel (2000), Barbara Czarniawska (1997) and Boje (2001) have paradigm differences. Gabriel thinks my terse stories and my fragmented antenarratives are not "proper" stories. Czarniawska, like so many others (e.g. Russian Formalism) privileges narrative over story.

Before showing differences in our respective definitions, we want to define something called, "storytelling space." "Story space" is defined as the co-mingling, morphing, and collision of narrative, antenarrative, story, and terse story. Now, let's look at the definitions (and there are many others):

Table 1: Some Proper and Improper Story/Narrative Definitions
- ♠ Proper Story Definitions:
    - o **Story -** "*Stories are narratives with plots and characters, generating emotion in narrator and audience, through a poetic elaboration of symbolic material*" – Gabriel (2000: 239, italics in original)
    - o **Story -** "A story consists of a plot comprising causally related episodes that culminate in a solution to a problem" (Czarniawska, 1997: 78)
- ♠ Proper Narrative to Story Relationship:
    - o **Narrative > Story -** "For them to become a narrative, they require a plot, that is, some way to bring them into a meaningful whole" Czarniawska (1999: 2)
    - o **Stories > Narrative -** "I shall argue not all narratives are stories; in particular, factual or descriptive accounts of events that aspire at objectivity rather than emotional effect must not be treated as stories" (Gabriel 2000: 5)
- ♠ Improper Story/Narrative Definitions:
    - o **Terse Story** – "A terse telling is an abbreviated and succinct simplification of the story in which parts of the plot, some of the characters, and segments of the sequence of events are left to the hearer's imagination" (Boje, 1991)

o **Antenarrative -** "I give 'antenarrative' a double meaning: as being before and as a bet. First story is 'ante' to narrative; it is antenarrative'. A 'narrative is something that is narrated, i.e. 'story''. Story is an account of incidents or events, but narrative comes after and adds 'plot' and 'coherence' to the story line. (Boje, 2001: 1, UK punctuation in original)

Gabriel and Boje want to privilege story theory over narrative; Czarniawska does the opposite. The three seem to disagree over what is a proper story, and whether story is a subset of narrative, or narrating fits under storytelling. Antenarrative and terse story, in short, lack the power to narrate. Yet, these improper forms do create actionable knowledge.

There are other, more difficult theory-issues in our respective approaches, and this symposium needs to stir that around. Our purpose here is to be dialogic with Gabriel and Czarniawska, to fully express each view. So let's get to that. Concerning my "terse story" theory Gabriel charges:

> One suspects that Boje is driven to this conclusion because his commitment to viewing organizations as storytelling systems does not square with the **anaemic** quality of the stories he collected. Yet, in taking this extreme position (and the strength of Boje's argument lies in its extremism), Boje loses the very qualities that he cherishes in stories, performativity, memorableness, ingenuity, and symbolism (Gabriel, 2000: 20, boldness is mine).

What is 'anaemic'? I (Boje) looked up this word, anaemic. It was not in my New World Dictionary, but I did find a definition (Your Dictionary.com).[i]

1. Relating to or suffering from anemia.
2. Lacking vitality; listless and weak: an anemic attempt to hit the baseball; an anemic economic recovery.

Since I do not suffer from anemia, I focused on the second meaning. I did in fact need glasses, and for three years of Little League, did miss most, (actually) every ball pitched. Am I listless and weak as Bush's economic recovery? Seriously, I do agree that organizational stories are often more *anaemic* than folkloric story and mythology.[ii] Does this mean we do not study coded stories such as 9/11 or Enrongate?

In a study of Enron spectacles, in a recent issue of *Organization Studies*, we refined our definition: "Antenarratives are bets that a pre-story can be told and theatrically performed that will enroll stakeholders in 'intertextual' ways transforming the world of action into theatrics" (Boje, Rosile, Durant, & Luhman (2004: 756). Sometimes this is a terse performance, at other times quite poetic.

We think that there is an answer: that in a storytelling organization system, there are narratives and stories that meet Gabriel and Czarniawska's criteria, and there are

antenarratives and terse performances that meet my own criteria. They dance together in what I am calling "story space"!

We think the concept of "story space" gives us common ground with traditional narrativists. Those of us working on the antenarrative project have asserted antenarratives have trajectories that are non-linear, the telling is incoherent and collective, a very improper storytelling that has actionable knowledge consequences (Boje, 2001, 2002; Boje & Rosile, 2003, Dalcher & Drevin, 2003; Barge, 2002; Vickers, 2002; Boje 2003, 2004; Boje, Driver, & Cai 2004; Boje, Rosile, Durant & Luhman, 2004). The non-linear antenarratives compete with narratives that diffuse in linear trajectories.

For example, Bruno Latour (1996: 118) argues there is a difference between the linear narrative *diffusion* model (narratives that erupt fully formed in the mind of Zeus) and the non-linear *whirlwind* model of what we call antenarrative. Looking at both models in the same story space of complex organization is a collaborative way to proceed.

But let us not cut off this dialogic exploration prematurely. Perhaps it is time to self-reflect. Am I in my old age, becoming a story cop? Are all three of us acting like narrative cops, policing the "good stories," the "good narratives" and those pesky "antenarratives" and "terse coded stories?" I was recently tackled by a young woman, irate because in my review of her book chapter, I had suggested so many references on the difference sin narrative and story paradigms, she ended up revising her whole chapter. You know the story: we all change our submitted work in a collective process of reediting and gate-keeping.

Let's look at the *anaemic* storytelling. My "you know the story: is for Gabriel a very bad, terse story, Gabriel (2000: 20) tells me, it is not an "integrated piece of narrative with a full plot and a complete cast of characters; instead they exist in a state of continuous flux, fragments, allusions, as people contribute bits, often talking together (Boje, 1991: 12-13)."

Here is the point I want to reflect upon: Gabriel goes on to explain (footnote 8, p. 20) why my theory does not square with the anaemic quality of the stories "extricated from 100 hours of taped interview material" (2000: 19-20). Here is footnote 8 that tells us the "truth of the story":

> The concept of dialogical truth originates in Bakhtin's analysis of Dostoevsky's novel, the *non plus ultra* of dialogical consciousness that embodies all the consciousnesses of all the characters. There is no higher level of narrative that incorporates the partial narratives offered by characters. "For the author the hero is not "he" and not "I", but a fully valued "thou", that is, another fully fledged "I" ("Thou art")' (Bakhtin, 1929/1973: 51).

I pulled out my Bakhtin (1929/1973: 51) book, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*; Turning to p. 51, I did not find anything about "the concept of dialogical truth" that Gabriel (2000: 20, footnote 8) criticized me about. I carefully reread Bakhtin (1929/1973: 51). Immediately before the sentence Gabriel put in footnote 8 is one that I prefer:

> "The new artistic position of the author vis-à-vis the hero in Dostoevsky's polyphonic novel is a consequent and fully realized dialogical position which confirms the hero's independence, inner freedom, unfinalizedness and indeterminacy" (Bakhtin, 1929/1973: 51).

I do not think that Bakhtin or Dostoevsky would want to restrict storytelling so severely or overlook antenarrative processes. These were quite radical storytellers. For example, Bakhtin (1929/1973: 44-45) cites a segment of "*A Gentle Creature*" where Dostoevsky says:

> The point is that this is not a story and not a sketch. Imagine a husband whose wife, a suicide who several hours earlier has thrown herself out a window, is laid out on a table before him. He is distraught and has not yet had time to gather his thoughts. He paces to and from one room to another trying to comprehend what has taken place, to 'get his thoughts together. In addition, he is a confirmed hypochondriac, one of those who talk to themselves. So he talks to himself, relating what has happened, **explaining** it to himself. Despite the apparent continuity of what he says, he contradicts himself several times, both in his logic and in his emotions. He justifies himself and blames his wife; he enters into extraneous explanations, now displaying crudity of thought and of heart, now deep emotion. Gradually he does in fact explain matters to himself and does 'get his thoughts together.' The series of recollections which he has evoked leads him irresistably to the **truth**; the truth irresistably edifies his mind and his heart. Toward the end even the tone of the story is modified, in relation to its disorderly beginning. The truth reveals itself rather clearly and definitively to the bereaved, or at least it seems so to him.
>
> Such is the theme. Of course the action of the story takes place over several hours, with fits and starts and in a confused and erratic form: first he speaks to himself, then he addresses an invisible listener, as if addressing a judge. And so it is in reality. If a stenographer would have overheard him and taken down all that he said, the result would have been a little rougher and less polished than I represent it, but the psychological sequence would, it seems to me, remain the same. The assumption of a stenographer making notes (that I would the put into polished form) is what I call the fantastic in the story (bold words from Bakhtin, not Dostoevsky).

I read this as improper storytelling, and as a terse telling of an antenarrative. There is a "truth" that reveals itself (p. 44) but it is an antenarrative one, a telling that takes place with "fits and starts," in a "confused and erratic form."

The antenarrative device used by Dostoevsky is that of the teller recounting and making sense of recollections to an "invisible stenographer." Are we not "visible stenographers" when we enter the 'story space' of an organization?

I am a stenographer when I enter the story space of the Office Supply Company, or Disney, Nike, Enron, and McDonald's. As Dostoevsky puts it, in proper storytelling "I would then put it [stenographer notes] into a polished form" (bracketed addition, mine). The danger is that antenarrating gets tidied up and put into the "proper" narrative configuration, to make it a "good story."

We think there are organizational storytelling systems or "storytelling organizations" (Boje, 1991; 1995; Boje, Baak & Luhman, 1998). Storytelling organization is a system of opposed narrating and antenarrating in 'story space' that is contested collective memory.

Some Antenarrative Threads

There is, for me, a special world of storytelling that includes antenarrating. To me, in the fabric of the messy antenarratives, with their fits and starts, and untidiness there are what Bakhtin (1973: 45) calls the "fabric of the story." Storytelling can be studied from several different points of view, by the narrativists, the storytelling purists, and by the antenarrativists. I think we all agree that, storytelling, narrating, and antenarrating need to be studied *in situ* (in context). I am interested in the dynamic processes between narrative and antenarrative. Narrative and antenarrative are the two faces of Janus.

Table 1: Ante-propositions about Story Space Dynamics

1. Narrative and antenarrative co-habit storytelling space;
2. Stories do not emerge as fully formed narratives; and antenarratives do not always become narratives;
3. Stories are embedded in storytelling systems that are embedded in socioeconomic context of struggling viewpoints;
4. Antenarrative is reactionary to narrative confinement; narrative is reactionary to antenarrative terseness and fragmentation;
5. Antenarrative and narrative are dynamic flux, with simultaneous generative and degenerative processes;
6. Antenarratives are cracking and reshaping (grand) narratives, just as narrative (proper story) is shaping antenarrative, in acts of accretion and erosion.
7. Story space is inter-individual in the Tamara-land sense of the sequence of arrival and departure from a story performance give it different meaning;
8. Antenarrating and narrating constitute a multi-story layering of romantic, adventure, travel, biography, and carnivalesque emplotment;
9. Narrative theory holds that antenarrative theory is a sort of "proton pseudo" (Bakhtin/ Volosinov, 1973: 27) antenarrative has not achieved an event bond between poetic form and performance;
10. Antenarrative and narrative blur the boundaries between inner psyche wanting to get a story sorted out and the dynamic inter-individual (Tamara-esque) networking of storytelling organizations.

Next we look at the studies of antenarrating.

Field Studies of Antenarrating

There have been several studies of antenarrating which we will annotate.

Vickers (2002: 2-3), for example, looks at how "postmodern antenarratives encourage the possibility that there may be no story to tell, only fragments that may never come together coherently. She combines Heideggerian phenomenology with an antenarrative exploration of multi-voiced ways of telling stories, of putting fragments together. Using in-depth interviews of people whose lives were shattered by chronic illness and suffering, Vickers' study presents what does not fit into coherence narratives.

Barge (2002) takes an antenarrative approach to organizational communication and managerial practice by focusing attention on ways people manage the multi-voiced nonlinear character of organizational life. Antenarrative, for example, says Barge (2002: 7) "requires managers to recognize the multiplicity of stories living and being told in organizations." He gives examples of the managerial practice in the Kensington Consultation Centre in London.

Dalcher and Drevin (2003), for example, are studying software failures in information systems using narrative and antenarrative methods. On the one hand, "failure storytelling can be understood as a narrative recounting with the unlocking of patterns or a plot"

(Dalcher & Drevin, 2003: 140). A more antenarrative process focuses on how "the reality in failure stories is of multi-stranded stories of experiences and reactions that lack collective consensus" (p. 141). During lack of collective consensus, there are more disparate accounts and perspectives, where webs of narrative and antenarrative work things out.

Gardner (2002) did a dissertation contrasting heroic, bureaucratic, chaos and postmodern narratives of expatriates. The relevant finding is that the quest and bureaucratic forms are cohesive and tidy narratives, while the chaos and postmodern forms are more akin to antenarratives. Gardner looks at the hybrids, how in the same conversation, the narrator switches between, say bureaucratic and more chaos forms.

Enron Antenarrative Studies - I began in 2002 at the Discourse Conference keynote to apply antenarrative trajectory theory to Enron, and have been helped sense by my colleagues. The project was too big, so I invited my colleagues to help (Boje, Rosile, Durant, and Luhman, 2004). We looked at a set of eight antenarrative clusters, and their trajectory, that appeared to explain some of the dynamics of various types of Enron spectacles. "The antenarrative roots of Enron's collapse go back to its beginning in ways that are rhizomatic and intertextual" (p. 769). Antenarrative rhizomatic flight continues as long as there is context left to transform (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987).
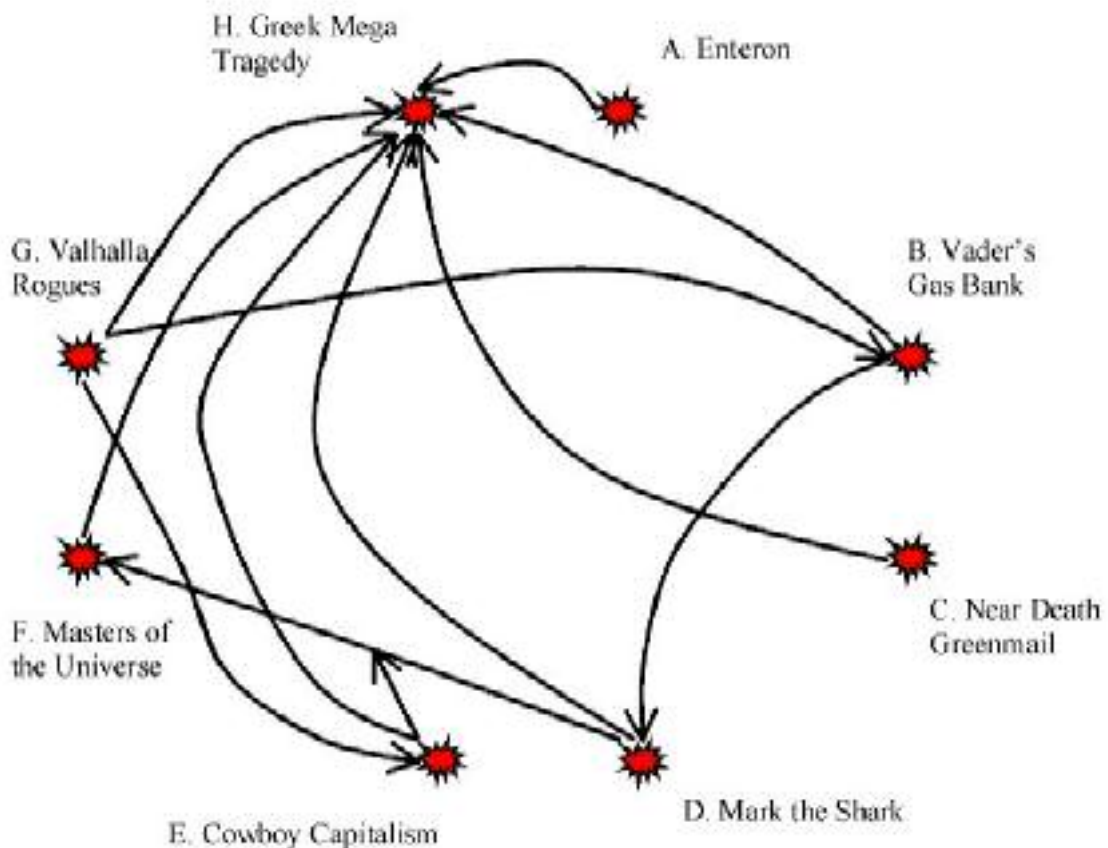
Figure 1: Antenarrative Clusters and Trajectories

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Then, we (Boje and Rosile, 2003) studied the antenarrative bets made about Enron, sorting out their causal texture. The approach was to recover the antenarrative circumstances of causal assertions by tracing shifting intertextual and inter-plot linkages. Was it Fastow, Skilling or Lay, or do we put the blame on general greed and hubris, or say it was those Evil Corporations, something about Enrongate, or what we teach in the Business College.

We (Boje and Rosile, 2004) continued the exploration of Enron. This time we looked at antenarratives as the clash of Aristotle's epic and more tragic narrative poetics. Antenarratives are highly interactive, constituting and constructing evolving and shifting patterns of prestory connections that territorialize, deterritorialize, and reterritorialize (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987) an emergent labyrinth that can veer out of collective authorial control.

> Antenarratives become part of Enron's facade, and they become ways to unmask that facade, to resist narrow tragic narration. Enron made the antenarrative bluff that Washington politicians, business professors, and Wall Street analysts would not be able to distinguish between fiction and real. Antenarrative plays a special role in the emergent oscillating, contending, and morphing labyrinth of Enron SPEs, and in their unraveling.

The McDonald Antenarrative studies – There are several articles in preparation, published (*Metamorphosis*), or in submission to various journals; four are proceedings articles; plus book chapter and several conference presentations. We also wrote two plays that set McDonald's system of production and its antenarration/narration in juxtaposition with Brecht, Boal, and Bakhtin (Boje, 2004c; Boje, Cai, & Thomas, 2004a, b).

The antenarrative work is to show how the spheres of McDonald's, McDonaldland, and McDonaldization overlap Boje & Cai, 2004; Boje, Driver & Cai, 2004a, b). In terms of leadership, we have been looking at how Ray Kroc is an epic leader, while Ronald McDonald is a more antenarrative leader construct (Boje, 2004f) whereas a leader such as Colonel Harland Sanders has gone from epic to animated and to antenarrative virtual leader construct (Boje, 2004e). We did eight ethnographies and transcribed six films starring Ronald McDonald as the basis for an antenarrative approach to system theory (Boje, Cai, Duvan, Keller, McGrane, Schweig, & Watanaratkul, 2004).

Six Narrative/Antenarrative Paradigms - My colleagues (Downs, Gardner, Rosile, & Durant) and I have spent the last two year working out a dynamic model of narrative and antenarrative paradigms we see operative in the Academy of Management. We have been reading and coding every story and narrative journal article, sorting them into sight paradigms. The Narrativist and Antenarrativist paradigms about storytelling are magnetic poles affecting what we term the Interpretivist, Praxis, Materialist, and Abstractionist paradigms.

Table 2: Epistemologies, Ontologies, and Methodologies of Narrative Paradigms

Disciple

Perspectives	Epistemologies	Ontologies	Methods
1. Narrativist	Narrativist epistemology can be regarded as an inversion of empiricism.	The past as at least partially an effect of narrativization.	Narrate Diffusion; discursive closure
2.Antenarrative Studies	Rhizomatics	Realizing & derealizing	Genealogy; Intertextuality/ deconstructionist
3.Interpretivist	Subjectivist – inquirer and knowledge fuse into one	Relativist – local and specific, and multiple constructed realities and meanings	Ethnography, thick description, & interviewing; hermeneutic and dialectic analysis of social constructs
4. Praxis	Knowledge with utility in social, economic, & political realms.	Reformist practice or accepted custom; Praxis includes self-determination, intentionality, sociality, creativity & rationality	Hermeneutical; Cultural criticism; Dialogic/ dialectical
5. Materialist	Positivism – dualist/ objectivist; findings probably true, but not value-laden or subjective	Realist – reality exists out there; combine naïve realism and critical realism; "real" reality is apprehendable	Ideological critique; Historical chronology; verification of hypotheses in documentary traces of past events
6.Abstractionist	Reduces knowledge to essentials; Not representing or imitating external reality	World is represented in formal models. Opposite of contextualism	Nomothetic science; Experimental manipulations; falsification of hypotheses under carefully controlled conditions

Implications of Antenarrative Theory

There are several important implications of antenarrative theory for future projects.

First, the Narrative paradigm can no longer ignore antenarrative dynamics. It is important to not only compare narratives or poetic stories, but also to see how antenarratives form, reform and transform in intertextual ways with narratives, terse stories and proper stories in storytelling organizations.

Second, the field of management and organization studies has given priority to epic and tragic narratives of CEO and or founders. A more balanced approach would be to look at the implications of too strong an epic or tragic narrative. For example, both Ray Kroc and Walt Disney had epic narratives that became constraining after they had died. It led to a "what would Walt or Kroc have done mentality?" In leadership succession, the counter-antenarrating of microstoria, such as antenarratives of those little people, who do not write history.

Finally, narrative and antenarrative are part of the deviation-countering and deviation-amplifying forces of organizational transformation (Maruyama, 1974; Pondy & Boje, 1979). The implication for management theory is that when there are narrative forces for standardization (epic or tragic) there are also counter-acting forces of the antenarrative variety. Both forces rehistoricize collective memory.

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[i] http://www.yourdictionary.com/ahd/a/a0294700.html

[ii] "Organizational stories rarely achieve the depth and complexity of myths and should not be treated as part of a *mythology* (Gabriel, 2000: 6).

[iii] http://cbae.nmsu.edu/~dboje/papers/DisneyTamaraland.html