**How AOM’s Storytelling can have social, policy, and practical sensemaking impact on Carboniferous Capitalism?**

David M. Boje

Submission to AMLE special issue on Oct 3 2018

Once upon a time, quality meant making things, *built to* last, but now management is the coordination and planning of a strategy called *built to fail*. My assertion is this has everything to do with Walter Benjamin’s (1936) observation, that storytelling is coming to an end. Benjamin (1936/2007: 83-84), for example, declares storytelling “ability to exchange experience” disintegrates as “experience has fallen in value”. Benjamin says two tribes of storytellers existed and interpenetrated: (1) storytellers who traveled from far away lands; (2) storytellers who lived in a place and knew the locale tales and traditions as “resident tiller of the soil” (1936: #II). He also observes that the epic story forms of prose literature once grounded in oral tradition (fairy tale, the legend, myth) have also been transformed. Benjamin adds several other contradictions and replacements that combined to bring about the decline of storytelling, especially after WWI (1936: # I).

My presupposition to this storytelling sensemaking hypothesis is in the nature of how as William James (1907: 96) put it, “things tell a story” and so too does the waste of things by ‘planned obsolescence’ a strategic management practice initiated by Alfred P. Sloan, to overtake Henri Ford’s Model T that was ‘*built to last*.’ Sloan used ‘perceived obsolescence, annual changes in styling and color combinations, while keeping the chases and drive train the same. We are equally complicit. Quality management education was ‘built to last’, and we read classic books by pioneering authors, but now our management textbooks, are *built to be replaced* in a year or two, by a new edition, that has hardly any new content. In today’s management textbooks, little changes mean pages moved around, a paragraph here and there is shorter or longer. The test bank questions are shuffled into a new order, or some questions for three or four editions ago brought back. The publishers gain production and sales profits, we are often required to use the newest edition to sustain reaccreditation, and our students pay the price of planned obsolescence.

According to a recent ‘*impact*’ report, Academy of Management’s (AOM’s) practices have attained high academic legitimacy, but relatively little or no social, policy, or practical *impact* (Haley, Page, Pitsis, Rivas, José, & Yu, 2017). The big problems included:

“The overarching problems that the interviews identified included: Academic researchers focusing on journal editors’ preferences to get published, rather than on impactful and meaningful research (60%, 6 interviewees); inability to incorporate non-US knowledge of practice, and relations, and not just publishable research, into the stock of Management knowledge (10%); need for greater emphasis on teaching effectiveness (10%); and, differences in Business School’s and the rest of the University’s purposes and focus (10%)”(2017: 10)

Since AOM storytelling practices have achieved high academic legitimacy there is potential to use it to leverage greater social, policy, and practical impact. My purpose here, as a storytelling theorist, is to tell a story of the weakness of AOM’s will in the face of the planned obsolescence of management knowledge means we have little impact on what Lewis Mumford (1934/2010: 156) called “Carboniferous Capitalism”, the movement toward burning fossil fuels (coal, then gas & oil) to power industry:

“The great shift in population and industry that took place in the eighteenth century was due to the introduction of coal as a source of mechanical power, to the use of new means of making that power effective--the steam engine--and to new methods of smelting and working up iron. Out of this coal and iron complex, a new civilization developed.”

My purpose here is to explore how AOM storytelling theory and research can find direction in Mumford’s critique of three *impacts* of Carboniferous Capitalism: environmental depletion, degradation of labor, and imbalance of production and consumerism.

“The psychological results of carboniferous capitalism —the lowered morale, the expectation of getting something for nothing, the disregard for a balance mode of production and consumption, the habituation of wreckage and debris as part of normal human environment—all these results were plainly mischievous” (Mumford, 2934/2007: 158).

I propose that AOM leverage its academic ‘storytelling’ legitimacy by generating *impact* on the biopolitics of fossil fuel capital, and the increasingly obvious circumstances of the Anthropocene. I will also argue that it is shortsighted to blame carboniferous capitalism for the ways of management and coordination that have exceeded planetary limits. Elsewhere I have argued we need a rapid de-carbonization of the global economy (Boje, *in press*). Rather, the Sixth Extinction, which is now happening, the die off of most of marine life (as well as most of humanity) is because we hold onto a fake storytelling about globalization that assumes there is a Planet B or some technological wunderkind technology, around the corner, that will allow business as usual to persist. We need a new kind of storytelling that explores the myths of globalization that is plunging humanity into the Sixth Extinction. After all there is no Planet B!

I take a different tack on storytelling, treating narrative and story as constituents of what I term ‘storytelling’, along with *antenarrative processes* (connective & transformative) of sensemaking (Haley & Boje, 2014; Boje, Haley, & Saylors, 2016; Saylors, Boje, & Mueller, 2014). By antenarrative I mean processes already happening, necessary to constituting story or narrative. This ‘new’ AOM storytelling is about waste and quality. Zero-waste is the new peace movement, renouncing carboniferous capitalism’s global economy. This is a storytelling of complexity fouling the *impact* of the simplest waste-free solution. Quality is, after all, the enemy of planned obsolescence. I propose to tell the tangled tale of carboniferous capitalism, and how what Deleuze implicates the outdated, confused, and chaotic practices of managers, he calls “*aleatory points*” (or paradoxical points of contradiction) in multiplicities of mobile distributions of *dis-place-ment* (Deleuze, 1990: 56). In carboniferous capitalism there are many examples of contradictions, and dis-place-ment that have senseless nihilistic consequence until the ultimate nihilism, Sixth Extinction.

There is always more to the story. Michael Sandel (2012) points out how we have migrated from market economy to market society. His new part of the story is how speculative financing is entangled in the coal, gas and oil, bets on future revenues. Carboniferous capitalism is using casino financing to make every institution from family to education about the market society. For example, the annual British Petroleum (bp) oil scenarios of emissions pathways[[1]](#footnote-1), include more carbon than the bp reserves in the business-as-usual scenario of burning fossil fuels at ever increasing rates results in 550 parts per million (Heinberg, 2007, 2011), 2011) which means the end of growth, as earth’s resources are depleted. This is unrealistic corporate storytelling of the future. This corporate storytelling is not all about climate change, and we need to consider depletion of 25 billions tons of topsoil, species of animals and plants going extinct at 1,000 times the background rate — because this is a systemic problem that means redesigning the industrial process, and the ways in which they are being managed.

Hoping for a ‘technological fix’ narrative: running out of fresh water, attack with delineation plants, attack climate change with bio reengineering, etc. But is it realistic storytelling to approach a systemic problem by treating the system. What is required is for management to readjust its practices according to natural planetary limits. Now we live in the planetary limits being exceeded, resulting in climate change, loss of bio diversity, depletion of top soil, a scarcity of drinkable water, growing wealth inequality, and so on. We don’t have managerial carbon-indicators of throughput of extracted natural resources, and their planned obsolescence. The ‘peak oil’ narrative was overly optimistic, that problems would emerge by 2010. Richard Heinberg (2005, 2007) now admits his prediction of global peak in 2010 and dirty oil by 2015 was overly optimistic. He did not consider fracking stimulated by the financial investments. We need to understand the reality of energy optimism storytelling. The untold story (Hitchin, 2014) is how Federal Reserve was pumping billions of dollars in the world’s financial systems, much of it going to world’s energy companies, and used for horizontal drilling and fracking to extract light, tight oil. Oil energy policy, cheap credit investment capital injected into energy companies has produced this soaring oil production, lowering prices, and forestalling the inevitable consequences. The Seneca Cliff (economic decline generated fast rate than its creation); growth will be prolonged for a few years, and there will a quicker collapse of the tight oil (fracking) industry. This Seneca narrative Heinberg (2017)[[2]](#footnote-2) is talking about, is the depletion of the classic oil, and we have extra heavy oil in Venezuela, and light tight oil extraction in the US, with result that the oil prices cannot be maintained. There are losses for almost every barrel of oil producing energy (now 10:1 investment ratio that was a return of 50:1). This has real systemic impact, for every unit invested in exploring for oil, extracting it, was 50:1 energy generation. We need a better than 10:1 Energy Returned on Energy Investment (EROEI) ratio to maintain the economic growth rates from cheap abundant energy production.

There is yet another untold story. Most of investment in fracking, is going in to single-use plastic production and consumption. Therefore plastic has an untold *story to tell* (James, 1907). Its planned obsolesce is telling. Recall the movie, The Graduate (1967), when the rich and successful executive, Mr. McGuire, gave his advice to Dustin Hoffman: “I’ve got one word for you: Plastic!”[[3]](#footnote-3) Plastic comes from the Greek verb *plassein*, which means "to mold or shape." I recommend the presentation by May on ‘Why does Capitalism love plastic?’ She says, ‘the story of plastic gets to the hard of capitalism.’ Plastic things have a story tell, but it also offers an ironic possibility, about the transition to post-carbon economy. If you look at the history of plastic, what pops out, is how in its beginning, plastic was organic, and invented to resolve the Victoria age crisis of overconsumption of whales for whale oil, and elephants to make billiard balls.

**Table 1: A Brief History of Plastic**

|  |
| --- |
| * 1534 Marco Polo encounters early version of Shellac in Orient made by beetles in Lac Tree; 1856 Shellac - Invented by Alfred Critchlow and Samuel Peck; After WWI the Beatle-production-method gives way to Polyurethane chemistry
* 1839 - [Polystyrene or PS discovered by Eduard Simon](https://www.thoughtco.com/invention-of-polystyrene-and-styrofoam-1992332); made practical in 1938 by Ray McIntire, working for Dow Chemicals, invented **Styrofoam** (polystyrene foam)
* 1863 Billiard ball manufacturer offered $10,000 to anyone inventing alternative to ivory for making billiard balls
* 1867 NYT warned elephants going extinct due to insatiable Victorian age demand for ivory, mostly for making billiard balls.
* 1869 John Wesley Hyatt invented **plastic cellulose** from cotton fiber ([Source](https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/a-brief-history-of-plastic-world-conquest/))
* 1872 **PVC (Polyvinyl chloride)** invented by Eugene Baumann, but he did not apply for patent, and it was pretty useless until 1926 when Waldo Lonsbury Semon, working for the B.F. Goodrich Company in the United States as a researcher, when he invented plasticized polyvinyl chloride, and golf balls and heels on shoes were made
* 1907 Leo Bakelite invented first **synthetic fossil fuel plastic** to replace shellac. He used formaldehyde with phenol, a waste product of coal. The Bakelite combs, phones, radio consoles were made by baking the chemicals in a mold.
* 1933 R.O Gibson and E.W. Fawcetts, working for the Imperial Chemical Industries Research Lab, accidentally created a white, waxy substance called, **Polyethylene**. Used in WWII to insulate underwater cable and radar
* 1935, Wallace Carothers, working for DuPont, invented **Nylon**, and tragically committed suicide 1937. DuPont advertised nylon ‘as strong as steel’ and it was too strong, and DuPont sent chemists back to the drawing board to make it fragile so stocking would run. ***Planned Obsolesce was the DuPont strategy***
* 1938 **- Polytetrafluoroethylene or PTFE** [tradenamed Teflon - Invented by Roy Plunkett](https://www.thoughtco.com/invention-of-teflon-4076517)
* 1941 **- Polyethylene Terephthalate or PET** - Invented by Whinfield and Dickson
* **1950s – Plastic Mass production expands to 1.7million tons per year globally & increases exponentially**
* 1951 **- High-density polyethylene or HDPE** trade named Marlex - Invented by Paul Hogan and Robert Banks
* 1953 Karl Ziegler of the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute and Erhard Holzkamp invented **HDPE (High Density Polyethylene)**
* **2014 – plastic production 211 million tons per year, globally**
* **2050 – plastic production expected 2000 million tons per year, globally**
 |

The cellulose billiard balls made a by Hyatt, made a loud crack like a shotgun blast, prompting a saloonkeeper to remark: "he didn't mind, but every time the balls collided, every man in the room pulled a gun”.[[4]](#footnote-4) My point is that the decadence of one era, prompts the succeeding era to innovate solutions. There have existed for a century, and continue to exist, organic plastic solutions, and alternative to what comes after *carboniferous capitalism*?

We have reached the end of the epoch of *carboniferous capitalism*, but the tradition is not so easy. The hidden cost (Savall & Zardet, 2008) of transitioning to substitutes (solar & wind) result in a slow transition before the fundamental changes in production, consumption, and financial investment practices have the *impact* needed. We are living in a different era, than prior to the 1973 and 2008 financial crises. A lot of people are fed up with the results of globalization: loss of good well paying manufacturing jobs, etc. But the result is a Trump government in denial about climate change, depletion of top soil, the destruction of marine life in the ocean, the escalating health impacts, and loss of quality of life for our grandchildren. The US Department of Energy, Trump transition team (Vanity Fair article, 2017)[[5]](#footnote-5) comes in late, is not concerned with how to manage that institution, and obsessed with firing anyone the believes in climate change. “The managerial functions of the federal government are being hollowed out: (Heinberg, 2017).[[6]](#footnote-6)

We in AOM need to take ethical answerability to bring about civility and cooperation during the transition from *carboniferous capitalism* to *post-carbon capitalism*. AOM can work in our local communities, with the small businesses, city agencies, and NGOs, where decisions are being made closer to where the ‘*impact*’ is being felt, than at the globalization level where entrenched interests of the *carboniferous capitalism* are in play. Nanoplastic has a story to tell. All macro- & nano-scale plastic absorb and leach hazardous substances during polymerization-manufacturing & in distribution & disposal plastic life cycle. Polymer chains fragment into monomers (or small oligomers), and macro-scale plastic becomes microplastic (size of grain of sand) and fragments to infinitesimal nanoplastic particles too tiny to see, light enough to float in the air, entering all spaces of the environment, penetrating marine, animal, plant, and human bodies to their very core.

I teach management in Las Cruces, New Mexico, where there are already carboniferous alternatives emerging, building local small business alternatives to meeting peoples needs: cooperative that drive community well-being. More people are employed in local small businesses than in giant multinational corporations. They have the flexibility to be entrepreneurs in a post-carboniferous capitalism Yet, check any management or organizational behavior, or strategy textbook and its all about Apple, Google, Amazon, Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook; that is not where the buy local, eat local, use local marketplace, or bicycle alternative transportation is already happening. This means AOM need not invent something new, but support the local buy local businesses that already exist. This is where the *impact* is local, and not *impacted* by the initiatives of the Trump initiative. AOM can *impact* an ecological resilient production, distribution, and consumption groundwork for zero-waste organization development, an AOM culture that is worthy of survival.

During times of natural disaster, war, Great Depression — people cooperate and business management as usual becomes forgotten scenario. But during these disaster times, people look for scapegoats, someone to blame, and that the story of the election of 2016, but it is also the reason for the reputation and legitimacy crisis of AOM progress narrative by business-as-usual. AOM can be a leader in the transition to what comes after *carboniferous capitalism*, to build local energy, food, and financial systems that are generative of the next form of capitalism. We have an educational audience, a policy audience, and a management practice audience that we can *impact*. AOM can have storyteller’s vision of what alternative future is possible in managerial education and managerial work. AOM can have more local *impact*. What about a 20 year strategic plan by AOM to educate resilience, and how to relocalize the small business economy, and get the focus off the MNC and SME [greenwash] cases in management, OB, HRM, OT, and strategy textbooks.

We need management stories from the field of what to do about the giant MNCs and the SMEs that are crashing local small business economy. This can be about measuring AOM *impact* and effectiveness, such as, metrics on how many people impacted by saving or averting carbon emissions, amount of carbon saving per carbon investment, and amount of actual behavior change on the part of management students, and practicing managers.

AOM’s *impact* can be the management and coordination of the transition of carboniferous capitalism into a new form, by influencing social policy and practical education, unleashes a countermovement as capitalism finds a new *center of gravity* beyond carbon financed initiative. This AOM storytelling *impact* comes into being in the foundations of ‘organization and environment’, ‘critical management studies’, and some rumblings in the other divisions, disquiet about the future of carboniferous practices.

**References**

Benjamin, Walter. (1936/1968). The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov was first published in 1936 (Orien Und Okzident); 1968 is the English translation included in Hannah Arendt (ed.), ***Walter Benjamin Illuminations*** (pp. 83-109). In referencing, I use section numbers.

Boje, David M. (*in press*). *Storytelling in the Global Age: There is No Planet B*. Singapore: World Scientific Publishing Co. Pte. Ltd.

Boje, D. M., Haley, U. C., & Saylors, R. (2016). Antenarratives of organizational change: The microstoria of Burger King’s storytelling in space, time and strategic context. ***Human Relations***, *69*(2), 391-418.

Deleuze, Gilles. (1990). *The Logic of Sense*. Translated by Mark Lester with Charles Stivale from the 1969 French (*Les Edition des Minuit*), and edited by Constantin V. Boundas. NY: Columbia University Press.

Haley, Usha C. V.; Page, Melanie C.; Pitsis, Tyrone S.; Rivas, José Luis; Yu, Kuo Frank. (2017). *Measuring and Achieving Scholarly Impact:* *A Report from the Academy of Management’s Practice Theme Committee.* Accessed Oct. 2 2018 at http://aom.org/uploadedFiles/About\_AOM/StrategicPlan/AOMScholarlyImpactReport.pdf

Haley, Usha CV, and David M. Boje. "Storytelling the internationalization of the multinational enterprise." ***Journal of International Business Studies***45, no. 9 (2014): 1115-1132.

Heinberg, R. (2005). *The party's over: oil, war and the fate of industrial societies*. New Society Publishers.

Heinberg, R. (2007). *Peak everything: waking up to the century of decline in Earth's resources*. Clairview Books.

Heinberg, R. (2010). *Peak everything: waking up to the century of declines*. New Society Publishers.

Heinberg, R. (2011). *The end of growth: Adapting to our new economic reality*. New Society Publishers.

Heinberg, R., & Lerch, D. (2010). *What Is Sustainability?* Pp. 11-19 in Richard Heinberg and Daniel Lerch, *The Post Carbon Reader: Managing the 21st century's sustainability crises.* Watershed Media,.

Hitchin, L. (2014). Method and story fragments: Working through untold method. In Izak, M., Hitchin, L., & Anderson, D. (Eds.) *Untold stories in organizations*. Routledge.

James, William. (1907). *Pragmatism and four essays from the Meaning of Truth*. Pragmatism 1907, Meaning of Truth 1909, there combination in 1955 edition. NY: A Meridian Book (New American Library, Times Mirror).

Mumford, L. (1934/2010). *Technics and civilization*. First published 1934, and Foreword by Langdon Winner in 2010 edition. IL: University of Chicago Press.

Nietzsche, Friedrich. (1968). *The Will to Powe*r. Translated by Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale; Edited by Walter Kaufmann. NY: Vintage Books.

Sandel, M. J. (2012). *What money can't buy: the moral limits of markets*. Macmillan.

Savall, H., & Zardet, V. (Eds.). (2008). *Mastering hidden costs and socioeconomic performance*. IAP.

Saylors, R., Boje, D. M., & Mueller, T. J. (2014). Entrepreneurial Storytelling in Moments of Friendship: Antenarratives of business plans, risk taking, and venture capital narratives. *Tamara Journal of Critical Organisation Inquiry*, *12*(4), 3-15.

1. Bp Energy Outlook, 2018, accessed Oct 3 2018 at https://www.bp.com/en/global/corporate/energy-economics/energy-outlook.html [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Post Carbon Institute YouTube ‘Richard Heinberg: transition in the age of denial’ published Nov 14, accessed Oct 3, 2018 at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=BRIA5NxSrVU](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BRIA5NxSrVU) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Famous Quotes from The Gaduate, accessed Oct. 3, 2018 at https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0061722/quotes [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Scientific America, online article by Susan Frankel May 27, 2012, A Brief History of Plastic's Conquest of the World, accessed Oct 3 2018 at https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/a-brief-history-of-plastic-world-conquest/ [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Vanity Fair, WHY THE SCARIEST NUCLEAR THREAT MAY BE COMING FROM INSIDE THE WHITE HOUSE by Michael Lewis, July 26, accessed Oct 3 2018 at https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2017/07/department-of-energy-risks-michael-lewis [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Post Carbon Institute YouTube ‘Richard Heinberg: transition in the age of denial’ published Nov 14, accessed Oct 3, 2018 at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=BRIA5NxSrVU](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BRIA5NxSrVU) [↑](#footnote-ref-6)