

Spin

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Spin is the most neglected aspect of story research. Spin, though unstudied, is powerful in *storytelling organizations* such as Nike, Disney, McDonald's, and Wal-Mart. *Storytelling organization* is defined as "a collective system in which the performance of stories is a key part of members' sensemaking and a means to allow them to supplement individual memories with institutional memory" (Boje, 1991: 106). Each has its war room, orchestrates spin campaigns, and answers activist story campaigns with strategic spin. Why study spin? *Storytelling organizations* spend billions on story technology, hiring spin talent, increasingly appropriating our *living stories* (stories we live), consummating *spin* we are socialized to live, then selling them back to us to shape the very "reality" we story researchers study, robbing story magic.

When was story magical you ask? Well, that was long, long ago, before Hans Christian Andersen and brothers Grimm would steal story from the folk, and create with flourish mind you, quite fantastic collections that were popular not just with common folk, but with royalty. François Rabelais was the last collector who chronicled the power of story when it belonged to the folk, when a peasant could speak back to power (within limits). As Bakhtin's (1940/1968) dissertation thesis claims, during carnival time of early Renaissance, leaders of church and state put on their masks, mingling with the folk, listening to critiques of themselves that were often quite vulgar, I mean like tossing dung and revealing a bit of nudity. Speaking with profanity to power was a dialogic manner of story, not repressed narrative. You are right, those days are gone. Modernity turned to science. The powerful no longer attend carnival.

Appropriation began with old time folklorists, anthropologists and ship captains collecting story to enable colonization. Folklorists build huge collections of indigenous tales while mapping the territories for invasion. Anthropologists lifted cultural knowledge from the folk. Neither folklorist nor anthropologist shared authorship. Yes, both fields

have scholars now quite critical of their forbearers, and go about research differently now. I best end this introduction, by telling you a story (as if I had not already).

Story: It was March 10th, 1983, and we did assemble the new breed of folklorist and anthropologist to meet up with management researchers and a hoard of corporate and government executives for what we called “*Myth, Symbols & Folklore: Expanding the Analysis of Organizations*” (Jones, Boje, & Guiliano, 1983). I am looking at a program listing these management scholars (to drop a few names): Olaf Berg, Janice Beyer, Tom Cummings, Tom Dandridge, Peter Frost, Mary Jo Hatch, Craig Lundberg, Joanne Martin, Fred Massarik, Ian Mitroff, Karen Vinten, J.C. Spender, Harrison Trice, and William Wolf. And the who’s who from a fledgling field called ‘organizational folklore’: Gary Allen Fine, Robert Georges, Michael Owen Jones, Yvonne Lockwood, Elliott Oring, and William Wilson. Organization Folklore is not the same as traditional folklore done by Alan Dundes’ (1963) ‘diffusion models’ of tale-types migrating from country to country, or Stith Thompson’s (1946) ‘motif-index’ scheme to classify symbol and plot. Management studies adopted some of this, but left out the bottom-up-view and story-behaviors, so critical to ‘organization folklore.’ Management research found motif-indexing too confusing, finally jilting folklore for narratology.

And we invited executives from the Aerospace Corporation Anheuser-Bush, Hughes Aircraft, Mattel Toy, Max Factor Southern California Edison, Standard Brands Paint, and Wyle Labs.

Guess what happened? You got it. Like some school dance, folklorists went to one side of the hall, and management scholars to the other. Here is the punch line. And believe it, for I would not make up such a thing, it was the executives who danced with the folklorists; they had already heard what management researchers had to say; they glimpsed the holy grail; *story control*.

How do I put this politely? Management researchers tended to look at story from the *managerialist* viewpoint (top makes the story)! Organization folklorists were opposite, looked at story from the *workers’* viewpoint (bottom up).¹ Folklorists (given their history with colonizing) were very distrustful of management-types.

¹ There were exceptions, e.g. Martin & Powers (1983) critique of corporate story as propaganda

What about executives? Oh, you know this story! They stole the show. They saddled right up to the folklorists, to steal story magic powers. *Folk* “spun” yarns, stitched a weave of threads of fact and fiction. But management turned the magic to spinning, stretching, turning, shaping, twisting, and exploiting story.

It takes a critical approach to study spin. For me, that is ‘critical antenarratology.’

What is Critical Antenarratology? Its the study of hegemonic processes of collective story-spin practices that privilege some tellings over others; such as, creating a heroic façade in the face of activists, exposé journalists and critical scholars.

Antenarrative is defined as “ the fragmented, non-linear, incoherent, collective, unplotted, and pre-narrative speculation, a bet... a proper narrative can be constituted” (Boje, 2001: 1). “Stories are ‘antenarrative’ when told without the proper plot sequence and mediated coherence preferred in narrative theory” (2001: 3).

Antenarratives are dialogically pluralistic, emergent, fragmented, simultaneous, and collectively realized. Antenarratives self-deconstruct and reconstruct, picking up and discarding content and reference in trajectories between times and places, as people shape story differently in acts of co-construction.

Critical antenarratology research is skeptical of *spin*, holding out the possibility that *storytelling organizations* are dialogically-complex systemicities, more than fiction, they realized in, and shape, material conditions, with material consequence (Boje, 2001, 2005b, c, 2006a). I define systemicity as unmerged agents (each different), unfinalized and unfinishable wholeness.²

My thesis is that dialogized-story has been appropriated by corporate power, harnessed to technology to control story in ways we have not begun to research. I envision two directions for storytelling organization research: spin *consummation* and spin *answerability*. These are important because organizations are consummating stories in more sophisticated ways than ever before, and people around the world are demanding answerability for those stories. Bakhtin (1990: 11), in his first published essay (dated Sep 13 1919), asserts, “I have to answer with my own life for what I have experienced and understood.” Bakhtin (1990) did not buy into the assumption that the author is dead, and

² Bakhtin (1981: 152) uses the term “systematicalness” to denote unmerged parts, and unfinalized wholeness of systems; I abbreviated this to “systemicity.”

asked, how systemicity gets *consummated*, that is whom is “*authoring*” stories and when does *answerability* inquiry commence?

Answerability has been defined by Bakhtin (1993: 42): “An answerable act or deed is precisely that act which is performed on the basis of an acknowledgment of my obligative (ought-to-be) uniqueness.”

Story consummation is the study of the problem of story co-construction, how stories emerge as less-than-coherent antenarratives, are shaped collectively into wholes (cohesive, plots, sometimes petrified), transform, and can spin out of organizational control, disassociate, and destabilize into nothing.

Story answerability is the study of the problem of who is doing the storying, and who is listening, and are they aware of their answerability for stories being consummated. Each storytelling organization is a labyrinth of stories being produced, consumed, and distributed collectively that has *answerability*. *Living story* is the story we live, that comes out of our community and family life experience; it is no longer separate from storytelling organization.

Conceptual Debates in in Story Theory:

1. *Story is restricted by narrative to be a cohesive plot of beginning, middle, and end (hereafter, BME)*. According to Aristotle (350 BCE 1450b: 25: 233), narrative requires story to be a *proper* “imitation of an action that is complete in itself, as a whole of some magnitude... Now a whole is that which has beginning, middle, and end” the definition of coherent narrative (233). For my colleague Gabriel (2000) a ‘proper’ story must have Aristotelian narrative BME coherence. As well for my colleague Czarniawska’s early work (1997, 1998), narratives must have a casual sequence, a plot. Plot is grasped in retrospective sensemaking. I prefer a broader definition, *story* defined “as an exchange between two or more persons during which a past or anticipated experience was being referenced, recounted, interpreted, or challenged” (Boje, 1991: 111).

Recently, Czarniawska (2004: 38) relaxed the “proper story” restriction of narrative plot on story, allowing wider variety of forms: “storytelling in contemporary

organizations hardly follows the traditional pattern of a narrator telling a story from the beginning to end in front of an enchanted and attentive audience.”

2. *Story is restricted to reflecting upon experience as retrospective sensemaking while ignoring ‘spin.’* Weick (1995: 129), for example, argues that narrative control is accomplished retrospectively by “a repertoire of stories ... important for sensemaking” Retrospective sense-making is important. So is *prospective sense-spinning*, the ongoing antenarrative construction of spin, as the movie title put it, to “*Wag the Dog!*”³

McDonald’s is critiqued for its packaging and environmental waste, so it makes a strategic alliance *Environmental Defense Fund* (EDF), in a flurry of press releases, a green-spin story is created: McDonald’s is environmentally sustainable (Starkey and Crane, 2003). McDonald’s forms a strategic alliance with *People for Ethical Treatment of Animals* (PETA); there are more press releases, and a new spin: McDonald’s has seen the light, and has humane animal-slaughter practices. McDonald’s succeeded in parrying several, “my child is getting fat at McDonald’s” lawsuits.

McDonald’s sees 2004 *Supersize Me* documentary by Morgan Spurlock is garnering film awards, and headed into theatres everywhere; the story is about a young man eating at McDonald’s and he keeps getting fatter, and doctors are saying he is ruining his health. McDonald’s changes its “story strategy” (Barry & Elmes, 1997) by ceasing its Supersize options, redoing its tray liners, putting out new salads (Boje, Driver & Cai, 2005). McDonald’s global story strategy is respun: *Go Active!* “To be the leading restaurant promoting healthy, happy, active lifestyles everywhere we do business” (Kapica, 2004: slide 17). Spin: eating fast food is compatible with active, fitness, and balanced nutrition lifestyle. Ronald McDonald gets a new show, does fitness work out exercises; other fitness coaches, such as Bob Greene (Oprha Winfrey’s trainer) are recruited to sell the new spin strategy; trayliners are printed with references to Greene and Oprha, including nutrition charts; Adult Happy Meals include step-o-meters; stores gave out brochures instructing parents how many hours of exercise children required to keep them healthy on their fast food diet (Boje, Driver & Cai, 2005).

³ 1997 New Line Cinema, a Barry Levinson film starring Dustin Hoffman and Robert Deniro; war is fabricated to distract public attention from a sex scandal

It is unlikely that Oprah agrees to Mickey D's spin since she made such a disparaging remark on her Apr 15, 1996 show, when guest Howard Lyman, spoke out about Mad Cow disease, Oprah exclaimed, "It has just stopped me cold from eating another burger!" (Boje, Enríquez, González, & Macías, 2005). Millions of fans stopped eating burgers; sales plummeted; she was sued by Texas cattle barons, because in Texas it's illegal to disparage the meat industry.

My point is that there is a lot of corporate investment in spin, some based on changing reality to fit spin, such as removing *Supersize* portions, creating strategic alliances with fitness/nutrition experts; this way the story has many grains of truth; other times spin is just the triumph of fiction over reality, such as with Enron. There is story research opportunity studying spin.

Things that disturb me:

1. *I find managerialist linear story of progress to be particularly disturbing.* Managerialist means to tell just management's side of the story, as if it were not dialogic to counterstories. The challenge to story research is to move from managerialist (monophonic & monologic) story to polyphonic (many voices) and polylogic (many logics) story, what Bakhtin (1981: 25) calls "dialogized story" (Bakhtin, 1981: 25; Boje, 2005a, 2006a; Boje & Kadija, 2005). Rather than just abandon managerialist story, researchers could investigate multiple counterstories. My colleagues and I have been studying dialogic story, how McDonald's corporation narrates through other narrators (Boje, 2005a; Boje, Driver & Cai, 2005; Boje & Rhodes, a, b; Boje, Enríquez, González, & Macías, 2005).

Story advice books (Boje, 2006b) bother me, such as Denning's (2001) "springboard" story, "a story that enables a leap in understanding by the audience so as to grasp how an organization or community or complex system may change" (xviii). The executive gets to spring such stories, but they have decidedly linear and managerialist characteristics: (1) story from perspective of single protagonist [i.e. the manager/leader] in prototypical business predicament; (2) explicit story familiar to the audience; (3) stimulates their imagination; (4) must have a positive or happy ending (Denning, 2001: xix, 124, 126, & 198). It is ironic for Denning (p. xvi, footnote 5) to invoke Bakhtin's

(1973) polyphonic dialogism, since springboard story is not dialogic; it is a linear managerialist-narrative!

Bakhtin (1973: 4), for example, explored how Dostoyevsky's novels were marked by "the plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses and the genuine polyphony of full-valued voices," a *systematicity* that is "unfinalizedness [in] its open-endedness and indeterminacy" (p. 43) and gives rise to "the polyphonic manner of the story" (p.60).

2. *I find the concept of "positive" story in Appreciative Inquiry and story advice books to be particularly disturbing.* Cooperrider and Srivastva (1987) first developed *Appreciative Inquiry* (AI) as a positive science, to focus on the positive while facilitating the co-construction of new organization-story; four Ds: Discovery (Appreciating), Dream (Envisioning results), Design (co-constructing), and Delivery (Sustaining) form a cycle (Cooperrider et al, 2000). AI devotees are against deconstruction, since that would be negative, not positive science; story work at that time focused on telling only positive stories. Ludema, Wilmot & Srivastva (1996: 6) say deconstructionists have "failed to become catalysts for positive organizational transformation because they rely on methodologies that by design are meant to de-legitimate existing organizational theories rather than create new constructs that hold positive possibilities for future." My colleague from the UK, Cliff Oswick, says "it is time for a *Depreciative Inquiry*" (DI) so that AI can learn the value of being critical (Oswick, personal communication, 1999). Two AI experts, Spicochi and Tyran (2002), have done pioneering story research by looking at how to use AI after assessing the more hegemonic story domination processes of organizations; they do not, however mention the word "deconstruction."

3. *Most story research is about textuality instead of intertextuality.* There are exceptions: Fairclough (1992) studied intertextuality and hegemony in newspaper stories; O'Connor (2002) studied intertextuality in entrepreneurial narratives; and I deconstructed the intertextuality of Nike's press releases, to illustrate how the official Nike story, here and there an answer to an activist story (Boje, 2001: 79-92); and my colleagues and I analyzed the intertextuality of antenarratives in over 5,000 Enron stories (Boje & Rosile, 2002, 2003; Boje, Rosile, Durant, & Luhman, 2004).

One reason story-intertextual research is not progressing is an over-reliance upon qualitative research software, such as Ethnograph and NUDIST (renamed to more politically correct, NVIVO). Story research has become a matter of collecting story-text (from interview, observation, or documents) then developing a codebook of variables to facilitate text classification and model building. Yet, once entered into story databases, the context of the story is lost. It is not impossible to do intertextual work with software, just difficult. While reviewers seem to like text software, to give the article that empirical feel, I still prefer highlighting a transcript (or document), and then making margin notes how various words and phrases, and sometimes a story, are intertextual to other texts and other stories.

What we could be doing and Questions we could be asking:

1. *Stop placing story research emphasis on written and verbal story; we miss the multiple stylistic modes of telling that are very telling.* It's time to look at visual and gestural and ways people move bureaucratically (or not) was modes of telling.

When I enter a Disney place, a McDonald's, Wal-Mart, or a NikeTown, I am assaulted by visual storying that is more than the words spoken or written. There are visual displays arranged in storyboard, portraits of stars and customers covered in brand images, ways of storying products in juxtaposition with architecture and décor that is to some a feast for the eyes, or to others, a visual nightmare. I am under the influence of not only visual story, but smells, and invitations to touch the merchandise, to enter into the experience of story that involves all five senses.

One avenue of research would be to look at how all five senses are being engaged in the storytelling that organizations erect and orchestrate for us to participate within. Bakhtin (1981) provides a way to proceed, by suggesting there are at the very least five stylistic modes of expression. Stylistics is defined as the interaction of various modes of communication. There are five styles Bakhtin (1981: 262) imagines, and these are in a special kind of relationship, one where by various modes of style, a storytelling occurs (in spoken, architectural, & several modes of writing, some scientific, other more everyday speech or "skaz" such as "Just Do It" or all those "Mc" accented words). *Multi-Stylistic Dialogism* is a manner of story told through a juxtaposition of pictures of characters that

invite the reader into the pictures, stars using narrated words (skaz & direct speech), numbers in scientific charts followed by names of institutions, workers buzzing about in uniforms, will customers queue up, and so forth.

Some potential research questions: How story is told with multiple modes of telling? Does one stylistic mode dominate other story expression? How do the styles juxtapose to constitute story that appeals to each of our senses? How does multi-mode stylistics influence customer, worker, or activist behavior? What does it mean when one style of telling is mismatched with a style telling a counter-story?

2. *In placing emphasis on story told to all in one room, we may miss the obvious point: You can not be in every room at once.* In my story research on Disney, I proposed a new model of *storytelling organization*; I called *Tamara* (Boje, 1995). *Tamara* is defined as the landscape of story co-production, distributed across simultaneous performance sites, where chasing storylines means networking with others, and people in the same time and place can experience story differently because they arrive from different telling in other places; and no one is everywhere at once. *Tamara* is a postmodern play, where characters unfold their story, before a running, often running, fragmenting audience chasing story from room to room instead of the fixed seating and elevated stage of modern theatre. I think many story researchers agree that it is virtually “impossible to sustain monological accounts of social reality” under conditions of simultaneous storytelling and story networking going on between tellers and listeners in organizations (Bryant & Cox, 2004: 580, citing Oswick & Keenoy, 2001: 224).

3. *Do storytelling organizations have lots of story power?* I mean the ability to command resources (talent & technology), to make one’s way of telling a story ready-to-hand to millions of people. Part of managing and controlling a *storytelling organization*, is deploying storytellers to offset damage from counterstories activists disseminate in their campaigns. For example, Nike has followed Monsanto’s tactic of sending staff members to academic conference to counter activist accounts. McDonald’s spends a billion a year on its advertising to children and parents that fast food is healthy for you. Nike spent more advertising dollars on Michael Jordan annually than the entire workforce of Indonesia earned making Nike sneakers and garments (Ballinger & Olsson, 1997);

Tiger Woods makes more in a year than all the Nike workers in Asia. Advertising budgets of these and other multi-national and global corporations produce story leverage.

The activist strategy can also be studied; putting a human face on the plight of sweatshop workers, since consumers often have no idea who makes their clothing, sneakers, toys, computers, etc. Research can indicate whether such tactics make any difference.

How story is orchestrated in war rooms is a topic of study. Ray Kroc formed a “war room” to keep track of “agitators” and to strategize “campaigns” that included managing the stories being told; taking out full page ads in newspapers, getting positive stories told in the press. McDonald’s counters activist claims by wrapping the “M” in patriotism (US flags flown over most stores US), community charity (Ronald McDonald House), green ways of packaging, etc. Nike’s *war room* staff is very aggressive about discouraging authors and activists from pursuing stories that might negatively affect the bottom line. I should know. Nike blocked my publishing activist stories, rattling its Swoosh saber at a UK book publisher, and *Journal of Organizational Change Management*. MCB (publishers of JOCM) were terrified, and decided to never again to allow me to write any article using the word “Nike.” Nike said they’d sue me and the publisher if a certain chapter I wrote was published, and sue me if I divulge their critique. The irony is that this chapter had already been published as a JOCM article (Boje, 1999). And the article I had in production at JOCM on Nike was pulled, and in its place I did the same radical critique, but on Disney (Boje, 2000a), then wrote to exposé story in *Management Communication Quarterly* Boje, 2000b).

4. *What happens when the wagons circle and corporations have to change their ways?* I suspect that given the resources that organizations are investing in telling a story-image-management, that change is partly due to the growing legion of activists. There are also calls for more dialogically polylogical organizations (Boje, 1995, 2006a) with more polyphonic (multi-voiced) story strategy have been issued (Barry & Elmes, 1997).

Wal-Mart is the biggest corporation in the world, 1.2 million employees worldwide and \$256 billion in global revenue fiscal year 2005. Research can look at how aggressively a corporation stories itself in reaction to activism. As CEO Lee Scott puts it,

“For me personally, you can expect to see me continue to tell the Wal-Mart story more aggressively” (Wal-Mart, 2005 Annual Report, p. 13).ⁱ Aggressive storytelling includes the work of consulting firms; PSG consulting, for example creates and implements “managed grassroots campaigns” to win both public and political support toward Wal-Mart store construction.ⁱⁱ Other consulting firms such as, Global Insight Inc. host economic summits for Wal-Mart, such as one on Nov 4 2005 to deal aggressively with negative press expected from a new film, “*Wal-Mart: The High Cost of Low Price,*” by Robert Greenwald.

Quinn (1998) asserts that Wal-Mart managers, in some locations, keep a full-time associate busy collecting prices from any business selling competitive goods at the same or lower prices; Wal-Mart then undercut those prices. By contrast, Wal-Mart stories itself as the engine of economic progress, as the kindest of employers to its “associates.”

Attorneys for six lead plaintiffs have won the largest certified civil-rights class-action (filed 2001) in U.S. history, and it’s against Wal-Mart; it could results in billions in added economic losses. The suit alleges Wal-Mart discriminated against female employees in pay, promotion and training, and retaliated against women who complained about any alleged abuse. Wal-Mart has is now appealing the verdict and award to a higher court. Earlier in 2005, Wal-Mart agreed to pay a record \$11 million to settle civil charges that it knowingly hired floor-cleaning contractors who employed illegal aliens.

Wal-Mart has updated its web sites, setting of the kinds of answers to tough questions one sees at Nike’s site. It is managing its story, doing its best to put its most positive image in play. Activist groups such as Wake Up Wal-Mart, Wal-Mart Watch have initiated their own war rooms that now counter strategies of Wal-Mart’s war room.

CONCLUSIONS

There is no such thing as story neutrality, or an unbiased storyteller, in the dialogized story arena. I take the position that researchers, executives, employees, journalists, and activists hold organizations *answerable* for stories they *consummate*.

It is time throw off narrative shackles placed onto “proper” story. The debate between story and narrative scholars centers on whether “story” is in the collective mind

of tellers and spectators (readers) or is it in-between tellers and spectators, in intertextuality?

The story you are able to spin or create resides in the mind of the other; reassembling (spinning) material that resides in someone else's head amounts to long-distance brain surgery. Stein anticipated my focus on "antenarrative story," by being flat-against confining story to just coherent narrative, a developmentally-plotted (linear) story with complete with beginning, middle, and end.

It is time to research story power, address story answerability and how story is consummated in storytelling organizations. It is too reductionist to focus on the positive narrative; storytelling is dialectic and dialogic. Story is crafted in war rooms.

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ⁱ Wal-Mart 2005 Annual Report accessed August 9, 2005
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ⁱⁱ Don’t let Wal-Mart’s consultants fool you, Paul Johnson, Nashua

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