Digital Organizational Storytelling on YouTube: Constructing Plausibility through Network Protocols of Amateurism, Affinity and Authenticity

Journal:	*Journal of Management Inquiry*
Manuscript ID	JMI-15-0125-NT.R1
Manuscript Type:	Non-Traditional Research
Keyword:	Communication, Social Networks, Technology
Abstract:	In this article we focus on 'digital organizational storytelling' as a communicative practice that relies on technologies enabled by the Internet. The article explores the dialogical potential of digital organizational storytelling and considers how this affects the relationship between online storytellers and audiences. We highlight the importance of network protocols in shaping how stories are understood. Our analysis is based on a case study of an organization which produces online animated videos critical of corporate practices that impact negatively on society. It highlights the network protocols of amateurism, affinity, and authenticity on which the plausibility of digital organizational storytelling relies. Through demonstrating what happens when network protocols are breached, the article contributes towards understanding digital organizational storytelling as a dialogical practice that opens up spaces for oppositional meaning making and can be used to challenge the power of corporations.

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<u>Digital Organizational Storytelling on YouTube:</u>

<u>Constructing Plausibility through Network Protocols of Amateurism, Affinity and</u>

<u>Authenticity</u>

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Introduction

Organizational storytelling is a powerful vehicle for constructing meaning that relies on

conventions of plot and characterization, combined with the narrative skill of the storyteller,

to 'entertain, persuade, and win over' (Gabriel, 2000, p.22). Research enabled by the

narrative turn in organizational studies (Czarniawska, 2004) has demonstrated the importance

of storytelling as a 'central part of organizational life' (James & Minnis, 2004, p.23). This has

led to exploration of the role of organizational storytelling in shaping emotions, imagination

and experiences and informing moral judgements (Brown et al, 2009; Gabriel, 2000; Gabriel

& Connell, 2010; Rosile et al, 2013). Storytelling creates and sustains organizational identity

(Czarniawska, 1998; Boje, 2011), is used to make sense of power relations (Smith & Keyton,

2001), and helps to generate organizational community through shared memories (Boje,

1991). However, much organizational storytelling research continues to focus on spoken or

written communication (Rhodes & Pullen, 2009), despite the transformations in

communication enabled by developments in digital technologies (Castells, 1996; Thrift,

2005). As a consequence, limited attention has been paid to investigating whether, and how,

organizational storytelling practices enabled by the Internet differ from other types of

organizational storytelling.

The growth of Internet enabled technologically-mediated communication opens up important

issues for organizational storytelling researchers. This arises because the Internet acts as a

'socialized communication realm' (Castells, 2009, p.53) which is constructed around local-

global networks. This enables individuals, as well as organizations, to distribute and

exchange self-generated, multimodal content, comprising visual images as well as words, and

interact with each other across geographical, spatial and temporal borders. Castells (2009)

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argues that this has led to a shift from mass communication to 'mass self-communication',

where 'the production of the message is self-generated, the definition of the potential

receiver(s) is self-directed, and the retrieval of specific messages or content from the World

Wide Web and electronic communication networks is self-selected' (p.55). This has resulted

in more 'participatory' (Jenkins, 2006) or 'vernacular' cultures (Burgess & Green, 2009) that

change the relationship between message producers and audiences as the distinctions between

these two categories become increasingly fluid (Jenkins, 2006; Burgess & Green, 2009). The

notion of the 'creative audience' implies that message senders and recipients are 'collectively

the same subject' (Castells, 2009, p.130), with the capacity to form their own communicative

codes and participate interactively in the construction of meaning. These communicative

structures have implications for message production, including the types of narratives that are

told and the voices represented within them. The primary purpose of this article is therefore

to explore to explore the *dialogical* potential of Internet communication technologies in

enabling the inclusion of more diverse voices, styles, logics, cultural influences and spatio-

temporalities than in traditional organizational storytelling (Boje 2008).

A further aim of the article is to analyse the effects of these communicative network

structures on the relationship between organizational storytellers and storytelling audiences.

As consciously created, goal directed networks have come to replace formal, vertically

integrated organizations as the primary institutional form in Western societies (Castells,

1996), networks have emerged not only as a primary basis for communication, but also as a

source of power (Castells, 2009). Networks made up of interconnecting nodes are comprised

of 'consciously created groups of three or more autonomous but interdependent organizations

that strive to achieve a common goal and jointly produce an output' (Raab & Kenis, 2009, p.

198). These socialized forms of communication rely on shared protocols of communication

that govern relationships between actors in the network and regulate the flow of messages. This communicative structure has the potential to lead to new forms of conflict, as networked social actors compete to reach their target audiences and shape discourses that frame human action: 'power in the network society is communication power' (Castells, 2009, p.53). We suggest that communicative network power has important implications for organizational storytelling, including for corporate actors who seek to represent brands through stories that they tell (Mumby, 2016), as well as for individuals and social movements who tell stories that challenge the inevitability and orientation of corporate globalization (Castells, 2009).

In this article we present the notion of 'digital organizational storytelling', defined as an organizational storytelling practice that relies on communication technologies enabled by the Internet. We highlight the importance of digital storytelling conventions, or 'network protocols' (Castells, 2009) in shaping how a story is understood. To identify and illustrate the importance of these protocols, we focus on what happens when digital organizational storytellers with divergent power interests come into conflict. Our analysis of the dialogical potential of digital organizational storytelling focuses on the video uploading and sharing website, YouTube. We draw on a case study of a US-based organization, Free Range Studios (FRS), which produces online animated videos that focus on negative effects of corporate practice on societies. In addition to media sharing platforms such as YouTube, FRS make use of social media applications such as Facebook and Twitter to disseminate their stories to diverse, global audiences. The key research question that the article addresses is: how does the dialogical potential of digital organizational storytelling affect the relationship between online storytellers and audiences? In addressing this question, we begin by identifying the features of digital storytelling that distinguish it from other kinds of organizational storytelling practice. By analysing what happens when digital organizational storytellers with

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divergent power interests come into conflict, we show that digital organizational storytelling

relies on particular conventions, or network protocols, that storytelling audiences apply as the

basis for determining plausibility. We conclude by discussing how digital organizational

storytelling has affected the ability of organizations to make and control meaning.

The dialogical potential of digital organizational storytelling

Organizational research suggests that stories offer a means of disseminating a vision or

message (Gabriel, 2000; Shamir & Eilam, 2005), encouraging critical reflection on

management (Gherardi & Poggio, 2007; Watson, 2007), and sharing knowledge and

sensemaking (Gabriel & Connell, 2010). In addition to stories that are told *in* organizations,

stories are frequently told *about* organizations – including how they impact on society –

through narratives found in popular culture. This includes novels (De Cock & Land, 2006),

television (Rhodes, 2001; Buzzanell & D'Enbeau, 2014), and films (Hassard & Holliday,

1998; Buchanan & Huczynski, 2004). These fictional stories about organizations have the

potential to reach global audiences (Parker, 2002). They enable the expression of emotional

as well as intellectual aspects of organizational life, including humorous, violent or

sexualised dynamics that are generally hidden from view (Bell, 2008). Popular cultural

narratives can provide a 'safe' way of learning about organizations in different historical and

cultural contexts (Czarniawska-Joerges & Guillet de Monthoux, 1994). The success of a

cultural narrative depends on whether it is plausible to an audience (Phillips, 1995;

Czarniawska, 1999), through resonating with their everyday lived experience of the

phenomenon explored (Buzzanell & D'Enbeau, 2013). While fictional organizational stories

do not correspond directly to the 'real' world (Czarniawska, 1999), they are inherently

theory-laden, encoding 'pattern and explanation, suggesting hypotheses and establishing

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causality' (Buchanan & Huczynski, 2004, p.709). Through this they offer a mythic structure

through which we can achieve insight into our condition and place in the world (Panayiotou,

2010). They also shape how organizations are understood in society by providing a critical

commentary on collective anxieties and concerns about the negative effects of organizations

on society (Parker, 2002). However, existing organizational storytelling research tends to

focus on highly monological storytelling forms that offer a linear, one-way method of

communication, where a storyteller communicates experience, ideas and emotions to an

audience (Boje, 2001).

The purpose of this paper is to explore *digital* organizational storytelling, which we suggest is

inherently more dialogical. The type of digital organizational story on which we focus are

short, online videos distributed via the video uploading and sharing platform, YouTube.

Since 2005, YouTube has been consistently placed in the top ten most visited websites

globally and is argued to be the largest mass communication medium in the world. It is

suggested to be a potentially 'revolutionary' form of mass self-communication, bringing

individuals and organizations, including corporations, together to 'defend their interests, and

to assert their values' (Castells, 2009, p.57). However, sites like YouTube have also given

rise to new sources of potential organizational domination, including from global multimedia

business networks that seek to recommodify Internet communication. These sites therefore

constitute a key location within which to observe unfolding power relations between digital

organizational storytellers and storytelling audiences.

Digital organizational storytelling shares similarities with other popular cultural storytelling

forms, while also manifesting important differences. Like other types of filmmaking

(Goodman, 2004), the power of digital organizational storytelling arises from the ability to

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create a rich multimedia experience. Sites like YouTube provide a platform for *multimodal* storytelling, using film, graphics, photographs and audio recording in combination. Each of these communicative modes can be used to realise a different communicative purpose, but together they constitute an integrated whole (Meyer, Höllerer, Jancsary & Van Leeuwen, 2013). In contrast to monological mass media organizational storytelling, digital organizational storytelling involves stories being co-created by multiple participants. Stories may be created simultaneously and in different variants, as people interact and add new elements to the narrative. Digital storytelling can therefore be understood as more dialogical because it involves more diverse voices, styles, logics, cultural influences and spatio-temporalities than traditional storytelling. Boje (2008: 2) refers to dialogical stories as 'polypi', to denote the dynamic, complex nature of their construction.

Like other types of organizational story, digital organizational storytelling relies on the construction of 'regimes of verisimilitude' (Neale, 2000), a system of expectations accepted by audiences that form the basis for determining what they consider to be truthful or real. The concept of affordances (Hutchby, 2001) is important in drawing attention to the constraining and enabling potential of social technologies, and the interrelationship between technological artefacts and the social contexts of their use. The particular affordances of the Internet mean that digital stories are inherently unstable, and plausibility is continually under threat from counter-stories, online 'comments' and 'play' (Beer and Burrows, 2013, p.51), as storytellers generate and create new narratives. Yet the success of alternative stories is also constrained by the ability to conform to the network protocols on which plausibility relies. We suggest, therefore, that the continual changeability of meaning making afforded through digital storytelling challenges both traditional, monological understandings of organizational storytelling and storyteller-audience relationships. Digital organizational stories can therefore

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be understood as more 'writerly' texts (Barthes, 1977) than other kinds of organizational

storytelling, particularly those produced for mass consumption by large audiences like feature

films. In contrast to 'readerly' texts, which encourage audiences to remain passive in

accepting the meaning and the message the storyteller intended (Barthes, 1977), digital

organizational storytelling encourages writerly texts which invite a more active, dynamic

engagement with the story, and are open to continual (re)construction and (re)interpretation

(Shirky, 2008; Boje, 2008).

The online environment also offers a different and wider range of resources for

organizational storytelling. This includes greater ease and facility of production, increased

flexibility in choice and use of semiotic resources, and enhanced audience visibility

(Domingo et al, 2014). Digital storytelling is an inexpensive yet powerful way of sharing

stories about individual lives and personal experiences via social networks across the globe

(Lundby, 2008; Robin, 2008; Lambert, 2013), a 'bottom-up' activity whereby people of all

social backgrounds are able to represent themselves (Lundby 2008). Digital storytelling also

has great democratic potential by giving voice to people and subjects that are conventionally

overlooked or silenced. These practices rely on an ethos of 'prosumption' - a combination of

production and consumption that conforms to the democratic ideals of citizen participation

and sharing that are central to the use of contemporary digital media (Lupton, 2015).

Interaction often relies on intertextuality, as users draw on popular culture, including

mainstream media texts and commercial films, appropriating them and re-circulating them in

the co-construction of a new story (Jenkins, 2006). Digital organizational storytelling

audiences can comment positively or negatively on content, suggest ideas, post clips or

engage in 'redaction' (Hartley, 2009), engaging in the production of new material through

editing existing content.

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Digital organizational storytelling thus forms part of a new and more complex circuit of

communication (Hall, 1980) involving the storyteller, the story and the audience who may

interpret the story or edit the text in a way that diverges from the original storyteller's

intended meaning. While this dialogism can also arise in other types of organizational

storytelling, the greater plasticity of digital organizational stories means that the distinction

between audience and storyteller is more blurred, and the ability of audiences to

communicate their rejection of a story is intensified. An example that illustrates this

dialogical potential concerns car manufacturer, Chevrolet, which used YouTube to invite

audiences to use animated clips of a new sports utility vehicle to create their own

commercial. YouTube users deliberately parodied the vehicle's design features to tell a story

about its negative environmental impact.[i] This was an oppositional reading (Hall, 1980) to

the storytelling message that the organization had intended to communicate.

However, not all digital organizational storytellers have equal status within the cultural

circuits of capital (Thrift, 2005) enabled by Internet communication. Internet sites like

YouTube are characterised by tensions between content generated by amateurs, including

non-profit and community organizations, and professionals driven by institutional and

commercial interests (Consalvo, 2003; Kim, 2012). Digital organizational storytelling takes

place in a context where amateur, grassroots and corporate storytellers 'converge' and

intersect (Jenkins, 2006). Some scholars are critical of 'celebratory' (Fuchs, 2014, p.65)

accounts that position Internet audiences as democratically engaged and continually resisting

(Dean, 2009), as this tends to overlook the importance of capitalist interests that rely on the

creation of shareholder value through exploitation (Terranova, 2000; Fuchs, 2014).

In addition to these characteristics, we argue that digital organizational storytelling can be distinguished from other types of organizational story through its reliance on particular communicative codes, or 'network protocols' (Castells, 2009), that make shared meaning possible. The first of these we term *amateurism*. Stories on YouTube that have a home-made or unprofessional character are more highly valued than those which display professional, corporate characteristics (Burgess & Green, 2009). This arises from YouTube's reputation as a place for displaying and sharing images that represent mundane experiences of ordinary people (Kim, 2012). A further protocol that characterises digital storytelling and connects storytellers to others in the network is the value of *affinity*, which we suggest involves 'feelings of membership in a social network, and feelings of attraction to people, things or ideas' (Lange, 2009, p.71). The construction of affinity relies on establishment of communicative connections between people and can involve large organizational networks operating alongside smaller, personal ones. Establishing and maintaining affinity requires continuous attention to ensure that connections and relationships are captured and kept. This is achieved by encouraging 'viewers to whom the video is addressed' to respond in order to 'maintain a field of connection between creator and viewer' (Lange, 2009, p.73).

The third protocol which we suggest determines participation in the digital organizational storytelling network is *authenticity*. This involves evaluation of the 'reality' and sincerity of the story, as well as the intentions of the storyteller. Yet the authenticity of a digital organizational story can be extremely difficult to ascertain. The creative affordances associated with digital Internet communication result in frequent contestation of authenticity (Kaare & Lundby, 2008). In a hybrid physical-virtual space like YouTube it can be difficult to ascertain the verisimilitude of user-generated content. Violations of authenticity may arise from the ease with which digital identities and images can be manipulated. Trying to

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establish whether content is authentic, including whether it is produced 'bottom up' by

amateurs or 'top down' by corporate interests, has thus become part of the participatory

cultural repertoire of 'YouTuber's (Burgess & Green, 2009). Authenticity can be

demonstrated through individual self-expression, such as by using the technique of

'vlogging', delivering an autobiographical video diary straight-to-camera. Concerns about

inauthentic digital organizational storytelling can arise when corporations engage in digital

organizational storytelling in a way which obscures their identity as storytellers. This is

referred to as 'astroturfing', and involves the production of 'fake grassroots media content...

by commercial media companies and special interest groups' which is 'passed off as coming

from individual amateurs' (Jenkins, 2009, p.122). One prominent example of this involves

the YouTube video 'Al Gore's Penguin Army'[ii], a satirical parody of the popular

documentary film, *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006) which features former Democratic Vice

President of the United States, Al Gore, talking about the effects of climate change.

Originally thought to be the work of an amateur, 'Al Gore's Penguin Army' was posted on

YouTube in June 2006 and to date has generated over 600,000 views. The video was later

exposed as having been produced by public relations and lobbying firm the DCI Group

whose clients include ExxonMobil and General Motors,[iii] thereby undermining the

authenticity of both the storyteller and the story. Establishing authenticity thus relies on

assessment of the social authority of the storyteller, including whether or not they understand

and observe the protocols that determine inclusion within the network.

On the basis of this review, we suggest that while other forms of organizational storytelling

are *potentially* dialogical, the affordances of digital communication heighten this in

interesting and important ways. This results in stories where meaning is more pluralistic, in

terms of the voices that are heard, and open to question to a greater extent, in terms of the

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claims that are made. Yet, as we have argued, participation in digital organizational

storytelling relies on observing and respecting the network protocols that determine a social

actor's ability to influence the decisions of other social actors in the network in ways that

favour their own interests and values. This raises important questions about the nature of

organizational power relations, the patterns of social interaction between storytellers and

audiences, and the conventions that successful digital organizational storytellers co-construct.

In the section that follows, we introduce our empirical case before interpreting the data to

show how digital organizational storytelling affects the ability of corporations to make and

control meaning.

Studying a digital storytelling organization

FRS is a US-based branding and design company that, since 2003, has specialised in digital

organizational storytelling by producing online animated videos on behalf of non-profit third

sector organizations and small to medium-sized businesses. Most of the organizational

campaigns for which online videos are produced relate to environmental and social or

political issues, from the protection of endangered species to American healthcare reform.

Table 1 provides a summary of the two most popular animated online video series produced

by FRS. The organization describes its mission as being '*to sell revolutionary ideas and

products that build a more just and sustainable world*' and positions itself in contrast to

traditional creative branding or marketing agencies that '*just work to sell stuff*' (FRS website,

2011). Storytelling is seen by organization members as crucial in enabling effective

communication of complex issues in a context which is characterised by excessive noise and

information overload (Sachs, 2012). FRS has received national media attention in response

to its activities, from TV networks *Fox News* and *CNN* and newspapers such as the *New York*

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Times, *Washington Post* and *LA Times*. In 2008, FRS co-founder and CEO, Jonah Sachs,

was named by *Fast Company* magazine as one of 50 people who might save the planet, and

in 2010 a video produced by FRS was nominated for a National Design Award by the

Smithsonian Institution. FRS videos are also widely used as an educational resource in

schools and universities, including in business schools (Heaton, 2010).

[TABLE 1 HERE]

Our rationale for the focus on this case was instrumental (Stake, 2005), to examine a well-

known and successful digital storytelling organization in order to understand the dynamics of

its practice. It was also intrinsic (Stake, 2005), driven by a desire to understand digital

organizational storytelling theoretically through close engagement and rich description.

Access to the organization was negotiated via email and telephone, building on a successful

collaboration with a senior member of the organization to run a workshop at an academic

conference in 2010. Our dataset comprises semi-structured, one-hour interviews with five

senior members of the 24-member organization and two key informants from a client

organization.

The interviews were conducted using Skype. Online interviewing represents a new

'methodological frontier' (Deakin and Wakefield, 2014, p.605) enabling interviews to be

conducted over large geographical distances without travel, and in a way which

accommodates busy schedules and different time zones (Hanna, 2012). It was a naturalistic

method for respondents who were already comfortable using Skype and other digital

platforms in their working lives. Questions focused on the communication strategies used to

engage with audiences and the networked relationships between FRS, commissioning clients

and digital storytelling audiences. Interviews were carried out over a nine-month period and were recorded and professionally transcribed verbatim[iv].

A second data source involved downloading and watching all FRS videos, and making detailed notes on the narratives, semiotic resources and emergent themes. A third aspect of the dataset comprised 'user-generated data' (Hardey, 2011) in the form of online posts and comments in response to the videos which we collected by regularly visiting organizational websites, Facebook pages, blogs and Twitter feeds. As Amit (2000) argues, the vastness of online space means that the fieldwork site must be 'constructed rather than 'discovered'. We visited these online platforms once a month for nine months to monitor form (design) and content (changing narratives). This data was multimodal, including words (captions, headings, paragraphs), images (icons, videos, photographs) and customized web platform resources. Our dialogical interest in multiple voices and styles meant that we approached the data not as static textual artefacts, but as cultural resources that bloggers shape (Domingo et al, 2014). The construction of this innovative dataset enabled investigation of online cultures of organizational storytelling which have tended to be overlooked by social science researchers (Beer and Burrows, 2007). Finally, we engaged in qualitative textual analysis of two single-authored books (Leonard, 2010; Sachs, 2012) and a co-authored book chapter (Sachs & Finkelpearl, 2010) written by founding members of the organization. This generated additional insight into how digital organizational storytellers present their activities to external audiences.

Rather than focusing solely on the content of the stories, our interest extends to the processes and practices of digital organizational storytelling and the relations between storytellers and audiences that enable story production and circulation. We therefore analysed the accounts

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of storytellers, including how they made sense of storytelling activities and the cultural

context in which stories were told. This enabled us to explore the affordances of YouTube as

a site of meaning, and to understand how certain stories come to be seen as plausible in this

context, while also considering the process through which other stories are perceived as

lacking in verisimilitude. We began by reading all the transcripts carefully and identifying

recurrent terms in the interview accounts. As interpretive, qualitative researchers (Yanow &

Schwartz Shea, 2012), we looked for accounts of specific incidents and descriptions of

relationships between members of the organization, their clients and audiences, focussing

particularly on the language used. We then engaged in iterative cycles of analysis and

discussion, looking at the structure, content and context of the participants' narratives

(Mishler, 1986), searching for patterns in the interview, social media and documentary data

which formed the basis for development of analytical themes. These were informed by our

research objectives: to explore the dialogical potential of digital organizational storytelling

and consider how this affects the relationship between online storytellers and audiences; to

analyse what happens when digital organizational storytellers with divergent power interests

come into conflict; and to elucidate the network protocols that determine how a story is

understood. In the following section, we discuss how FRS conceptualise and employ digital

storytelling before exploring the responses that their stories have provoked.

<u>Moral stories of organizational change</u>

Storytelling as a medium was held in high regard by FRS, seen by members as a key resource

that can be used '*to change social behaviour... [and] drive a new set of values that would*

lead to the lifestyles and political changes necessary to confront today's ecological crises'

(Sachs & Finkelpearl, 2010, p.151). This apparent potential was viewed as arising from the

ability of stories to reach audiences at an emotional level. According to FRS, facts and

information alone are insufficient as a basis for stimulating social change, because '*humans*

tend not to be rational actors' (Sachs & Finkelpearl, 2010, p.154). Hence the purpose is not

simply to entertain audiences, but to pose a challenge to their current viewpoints and

practices by encouraging emotional investment in the characters and the story itself.

In spite of the contemporary nature of the digital technological medium used to tell their

stories, members of FRS describe their storytelling approach as reliant on '*ancient*

mythological formula' which has '*persisted in the human consciousness, across the world for*

millenia' (Sachs, 2012, p.4). A dominant plot is that of the '*hero's journey*', where a

character in pursuit of '*higher-level values*' meets a mentor who gives him/her courage to

enter an unfamiliar world in order to pursue a goal and eventually leave with the 'treasure'

that will '*heal her broken world*' (Sachs, 2012, p.163). This mode of storytelling typically

ends with communication of a moral purpose (Gabriel, 2000). A key feature of these stories

is their intertextuality: the use of iconic visual images from popular mainstream media which

are appropriated in vernacular style. This can be seen in one of FRS's earliest digital stories,

The Meatrix (2003), released pre-YouTube. *The Meatrix* draws on the cult science fiction

film *The Matrix* (1999), which in turn refers intertextually to earlier mythological narratives,

including the Judeo-Christian Messiah myth and Homerian epics to depict a battle between

machines and humans (Jenkins, 2006). These intertextual references form the basis of a

parody which is used to entertain audiences through critique (Kenny, 2009). *The Meatrix* is

an epic story that involves a struggle for victory involving a heroic but naive character, 'Leo

the pig', who is advised by a wise cow called 'Moopheus', who educates the former and

encourages him to exercise agency in facing adversity and maintaining the values he

promotes (Gabriel, 2000), by exposing the evils of factory farming and liberating its victims.

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The poetic trope of attribution of motive is used to construct the corporation as an evil villain, symbolically represented by men in black suits, a common visual metonym used to represent corporate interests (Bell, 2008), while the animals destined for slaughter are portrayed as defenceless victims. The story also contains a strongly moral dimension through this juxtaposition of good and evil (Gabriel, 2000).

The moral dimension of FRS's approach to, and use of, digital organizational storytelling is also evident in The Story of Stuff (TSOS). This video series features a single narrator, TSOS Project founder Annie Leonard, who speaks directly to the camera and is supported by simple black-and-white line drawn cartoon drawings to represent key protagonists. The mode of storytelling conforms to the documentary genre, through claiming to present factual information about the world beyond the story, and using visual aids to communicate evidence in support of an argument (Bell, 2008). The narrators' argument is that 'most environmental deterioration is a result of systemic failures of the capitalism that we have today... long-term solutions must seek transformative change' (Leonard, 2010, p.xxi) and that therefore 'business as usual is unsustainable' (Heaton, 2010, p.554). The story conforms to the rhetorical documentary form, by addressing the audience directly and 'trying to move them towards a particular intellectual position, emotional attitude, and/or action' that will affect their everyday life (Bell, 2008, p.189-190). The images act as fixed signifiers of corporations, government, employees and consumers. They also rely on juxtaposition of opposites, through which the qualities of each become exaggerated. The stories rely on attribution of unity, constructing corporations as an undifferentiated entity that is responsible for causing significant negative impact on society and the natural environment. This enables clear attribution of blame and credit, giving the storyteller, Annie, 'a means of determining right and wrong and assigning them to appropriate agents' (Gabriel, 2000, p.38). The poetic

tropes associated with traditional organizational storytelling are thus enhanced through the

use of visual symbolism which enables the clear attribution of agency, turning passive,

inanimate or conceptual categories (such as animals reared for human consumption or

corporations), into purposeful, conscious and characterful beings (see Table 2).

[TABLE 2 HERE]

For FRS, digitalization is a medium by which simple yet strongly moral stories about

organizational change can be disseminated to a global audience. The storytellers' aim is to

achieve a behavioural change in audiences through the moral critique of corporate practices

that have a negative impact on societies. However, as the next section argues, successful

digital organizational storytelling also relies on following and negotiating specific network

protocols on which these practices rely.

Network protocols of affinity, authenticity and amateurism

A key feature that distinguishes digital organizational storytelling is the reliance on electronic

networks that enable collaboration and co-construction between storytellers and audiences

across geographical boundaries, on a scale and at a speed greater than that enabled by

traditional storytelling methods. As we discussed above, this relies on building a network of

followers that shares an affinity. Networks of affinity enable rapid, purposeful distribution of

digital organizational stories in a way that does not rely on paid advertising or direct access to

mass broadcasting (Wolfe, 2009). Techniques used by FRS to cultivate communities of

affinity include multiple, related online activities (e.g. message boards and listservs, blogs,

email, Facebook and Twitter), and longer established offline technologies (video screenings,

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radio and journalistic features). These are used in combination to encourage audiences to

respond to stories and participate in conversation with the storytellers and with each other, as

this respondent explained:

> We have a very engaged audience. I mean we call them typically a community instead of an
>
> audience because they really do… You know, it was really interesting with this last Story of
>
> Citizens United film that we did. We had folks complete some survey questions for us and
>
> we had them watch a series of videos both for and against the decision and then give us some
>
> feedback around what messages were coming through... to try and get a sense from them in
>
> terms of like what information would be useful as we tried to tell the story. It's [also] a very
>
> diverse audience... it's very popular with Catholic nuns in the Mid-West and here in Oakland
>
> there's like a youth group of colour that has adopted Story of Stuff into like a hip-hop poetry
>
> dance...

Community building takes place offline as well as online, for example by encouraging

network members to meet face to face, or '*throw house parties*', following the launch of a

new online video:

> It was a way to publicise... people like to be given very clear things to do and ways to
>
> participate. So they said they were going to have a screening party on the launch date and we
>
> gave them directions to download the movie and gave like a discussion guide and then I
>
> created this Google form so that after people had had their parties they could give us
>
> information and it's actually geo-tagged which means it integrates with Google maps... So
>
> they could drop a little pin where they put their party, how many people attended and, you
>
> know, was there some funny story they wanted to share?

FRS deliberately cultivates a multiplicity and diversity of voices to interact with their stories. This encourages a blurring of the boundaries between storytellers and audiences by inviting audiences to actively participate in digital organizational storytelling. As a consequence, the origin of meaning migrates from the storyteller and the story to the audience who themselves become storytellers, rather than remaining simply audiences to whom stories are told. Through this, the story not only becomes polyphonic, but is dialogized with multi-stylistic expressions, diverse configurations of time and space, and multiple interplays with varied social and cultural discourses (Boje 2008). While Boje (2008:3) describes such stories as 'a rare and endangered species' in organizations, we suggest that in the context of digital organizational storytelling they are a relatively common feature. This arises as a result of the power that resides in networks, as communicative structures that rely on protocols of communication to process flows of messages (Castells, 2009).

A final protocol on which successful digital organizational storytelling depends is the evaluation of authenticity. Interviewees drew repeatedly on discourses of authenticity to describe their storytelling practices. When asked to explain further, one respondent associated authenticity with the moral purpose of storytelling in enabling distinction between right and wrong in the evaluation of corporate social responsibility:

> Authenticity to me means it's not just greenwashing. So you're not just slapping a sticker on something to make it appear as if it were more environmentally or people friendly, you know, as if it's more sustainable... if you're just slapping a sticker on a product or if you're just glossing over the yukky stuff and pulling out a few highlights that are good, then that's not authentic in my mind. Authentic is sincerely trying to have a product or a cause that is good for people, planet and profits... As more and more companies want to reach into this kind of authentic sustainability world space, then we have to decide whether or not we're going to be

willing to work for them and there's a wide range of opinions about Free Range about who

you work for and how authentic they have to be... It's really a slippery slope of authenticity.

The importance of evaluations of authenticity also encompasses audiences who are described

as '*agents of authenticity*' (Sachs, 2012) through their engagement with the negative impact

of corporate practices on society. This includes participating in conversations about the

authenticity of digital stories, as illustrated by these user generated comments on the FRS

website:

'The truth about the consumption system!'

'This is great! I believe in this message!'

'This is a great video that was homework in my financial literacy class. It is so true!!!!!!!

People should really watch this video!!!!'

Thought for food #ownmyidentity #authenticman #authenticearth

(http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gLBE5QAYXp8)

However, respondents were also aware of the writerly character of digital organizational

storytelling and the consequent instability of stories. An illustration of how this was used to

undermine authenticity involved online political activist Lee Doren who posted critiques of

TSOS on his online channel HowTheWorldWorks[v], where he accused Annie Leonard of

indoctrinating children through use of the TSOS videos in schools. The authenticity of her

story was also undermined through parodies of TSOS videos which include a mocking video

of Leonard dressed a Nazi uniform accompanied by music from the German national anthem.

Website comments were also used to refute authenticity:

> This video is nothing but propaganda - full of so many lies and half truths I can't even begin
>
> to address them all. Look past the cute little animations and the woman who speaks to you as
>
> if you were a kindergartener and it's nothing but a plea to bury the government tick even
>
> further into your flesh. The drive to control you never stops...
>
> (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gLBE5QAYXp8)

Thus the fluidity of meaning associated with digital organizational storytelling may be used

to undermine the storyteller's attempts to control how the story is interpreted. However,

conversely, writerly engagements that draw on communities of affinity can enhance the

perceived authenticity of the storyteller and the story, as this interviewee noted:

> One of the great things about the teenagers who are talking is that actually you can YouTube
>
> their response. I think it's hysterical, smart… they got on and they said "Hi, we're here to
>
> talk about The Story of Stuff. My name's Annie," and then they had people kind of pop out
>
> from the side that said "But Annie, what's a toxin?" and "What about this?" and "What about
>
> this?"... [they asked some] tough questions and that kind of ability... [to] respond and ask
>
> those is a totally different dialogue than just Free Range broadcasting something out... all of a
>
> sudden you're having one to many and many can come back to one, and many can go to each
>
> other and so it's a whole new game, which I think it's just really exciting from a creative
>
> standpoint.

A further protocol identified as crucial in maintaining authenticity in digital organizational storytelling is amateurism, as this respondent's explanation of the rationale for the TSOS videos illustrates:

> Annie had been working on these issues for a long time, but she had always kind of communicated it in a bit kind of nerdier way. You know, talking about parts per billion and toxics in the materials flow and she did a year-long workshop with a bunch of other activists and leaders and they just gave her a lot of really authentic feedback about how she could make her kind of rap, so to speak, more accessible and she really took it to heart...she was super frustrated by her inability to communicate the information in a way that resonated with people, so almost as a joke, when she was giving her presentation she started putting up these stick figures and these little kind of line drawings to tell her story and it immediately became apparent that that was such a better way to tell the story and she started getting invited places to go and give her talk using the stick figure drawings and everyone kept saying to her like "You should make a film of this!"

These network protocols of affinity, authenticity and amateurism are used by digital organizational storytellers to establish and maintain a successful storytelling tradition. The success of these digital organizational storytelling practices, and the importance of these protocols in maintaining them, is exposed by looking at what happens when these protocols are breached, as the following section illustrates.

Breaching the protocols of digital organizational storytelling

The *Story of Bottled Water* (2010) traces the environmental and social impacts associated with drinking bottled rather than tap water. Within weeks of its release the International

Bottled Water Association in association with Bottled Water Matters (IBWA)[vi] produced a

response in the form of an online video entitled *Conflicted Consumer* (2010)[vii] that

highlighted the consumer health and safety benefits associated with drinking bottled water

and promoted the industry's commitment to sustainability (e.g. in bottle recycling). This

online video tells the story of a day in the life of a bottled water consumer as she struggles

with her devilish doubts about drinking bottled water and eventually sides with the angel on

her shoulder in realising its benefits. However, the story 'boomeranged' (Lazarsfeld,

Berelson & Gaudet, 1968), as its meaning was turned around by audiences who read it in a

way that reversed the message intended by the storyteller, as illustrated by comments posted

on YouTube in response to the video:

> Wow... what an excellent video... It tells you exactly WHY you SHOULD NOT be drinking
>
> bottled water. How ironic that the angels is selfish - after having seen this, I too am going to
>
> continue polluting because my convenience is WAY more important than common good!!!
>
> (http://www.youtube.com/all_comments?v=eklg6j2G2pk)

The meaning of the story was turned around by audiences who read it in a way that was

contrary to the purpose of the initial storyteller. By '*trying to speak the language of a*

subculture' that it did not belong to, the storyteller '*set off the alarm bells of insincerity in the*

audience it most wanted to reach' (Sachs, 2012, p.44). Members of FRS, TSOS and their

communities of affinity saw this as an indication of their success as storytellers:

> You know a project is a success in the viral model, you know, if it starts being talked about
>
> and if it starts to create a bit of a [buzz]... if something initiates a debate or really sparks a
>
> conversation, you know, lots of good, heated conversation, we like that.

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That was such a funny video that they made, my goodness. So with the Story of Bottled

Water – kind of much as you would expect – we got some push-back from the industry and

they actually attempted to make their own video to kind of counter ours and talk about the

'real' story of bottled water and how bottled water's so good for you and blah, blah, blah, but

it was so tragically badly done that it really just made us look a lot better... On some level,

you know, we can wear it as a badge of honour that our work is meaningful enough and

powerful enough that... people are paying attention to it.

It was awful and it was hilariously bad... The production value was terrible. The message

was so transparently bad. It was… it was grasping at straws and anyone with half a brain

could see right through it... If we receive backlash on what we've done, then we've done our

job.

The industry coalition's failure to conform to the protocols of the digital storytelling network

resulted in the story being deemed inauthentic. To emphasise this, for several weeks FRS

included a link to *Conflicted Consumer* on its website. IBWM made several similar online

videos[viii] but their success never approached the *Story of Bottled Water*.[ix] While the IBWM

stories appeared to conform to the norms of digital organizational storytelling on YouTube, in

that they cultivated a home-made appearance, involved cultural redaction,[x] and contained an

element of playful humour rather than critical-rational debate, they failed to do so

convincingly. Such organizations and the corporations that fund them are caught in a double-

bind: if they reveal their storytelling identity, they risk transgressing the amateur identity of

the culture and alienating its members. Alternatively, if they produce stories that claim to be

vernacular, they risk being paradoxically positioned negatively as inauthentic and the

audience may choose read the story in ways that are oppositional to those intended by the

storyteller (Hall, 1980).

Discussion and Conclusion

This article has explored the dialogical potential of digital organizational storytelling through

analysis of the relationships between storytellers and storytelling audiences. It has focused on

what happens when digital organizational storytellers with divergent power interests come

into conflict. Based on case study analysis of an organization that produces online animated

videos to tell moral stories about corporate practices that impact negatively on society, the

article has identified the network protocols of affinity, authenticity and amateurism, that

frame how a story is understood, and whether or not it is deemed plausible. Through this, the

article has generated insight into the particular characteristics of digital organizational

storytelling. Our analysis suggests that storytelling practices on the Internet are more

dialogical than traditional linguistic, including oral and textual, forms of organizational

storytelling. It further suggests that digital organizational storytelling opens up the possibility

for oppositional practices of meaning making which challenge the power of corporations. We

conclude by summarising the conceptual implications of our analysis for organizational

storytelling researchers, and indicating directions for further study.

Digital storytelling is both similar to, and different from, traditional forms of organizational

storytelling. On the one hand, there are similarities in the way that stories are initially told. As

our analysis illustrates, FRS follows traditional storytelling conventions, relying on well-

established mythological or folkloric formulae such as simplicity of plot and symbolic

characters, to deliver a strong moral message (Gabriel, 2000). There are also similarities in

the purposes that stories serve, both as a means of interpreting the world as it is, and as a way

of articulating a desired future. As Küpers et al. (2013, p.96) argue, the power of stories lies

in their 'capacity to encompass thinking and feeling about issues and thereby to compel

people to take certain actions and avoid others'. The practices analysed here suggest that the

purpose of serving as a stimulus towards action is common to digital organizational

storytellers, as well as to storytellers in organizations. However, the plasticity of meaning

making afforded through digital storytelling challenges both traditional understandings of

organizational storytelling and the relationships between storytelling organizations and

storytelling audiences. Development of online digital technologies that enable and encourage

audiences to respond immediately and directly in communicating their acceptance or

rejection of a story has led to storytelling practices being enacted in the context of distributed,

networked power relations. Power in this context is less a pre-existing, stable or reified

quality and more of a fluid resource which is worked out through practice.

Digital organizational storytelling is also characterised by increased indeterminacy of

meaning. Hence, rather than using stories for 'the legitimization of dominant power

relationships' (Küpers et al, 2103, p.96), FRS and TSOS set out to deliberately encourage

dialogism, by opening up stories to multiple narrators and interpretations. Where contestation

emerged in online contexts, this took the form of increasing the plurality of voices, styles and

discourses. As a consequence, our analysis suggests that even if the plausibility of a digital

organizational story is limited, the potential for co-creation, in the form of ongoing story

development through wider distribution to digital storytelling audiences is greater than in

traditional oral and textual organizational storytelling contexts. This dialogical potential is

also greater than with other popular cultural storytelling forms, including film and television,

where communication is mainly one-way and top-down.

Digital organizational storytelling also makes it more difficult for organizations to control meaning making. There is greater unpredictability associated with digital stories and how they are interpreted, in comparison to the more monological character of mass media forms of storytelling enabled by film and television. There is therefore much greater opportunity for oppositional readings, i.e. interpretations that run counter to the message that the storyteller intended (Hall, 1980). This poses difficulties for organizational storytellers who attempt to shape and control meaning in relation to their brand (Mumby, 2016). The protocols of amateurism, affinity and authenticity define participation in digital storytelling networks. These protocols can also be invoked to undermine organizational meaning making. This generates spaces for critical, minority, grassroots, and individual voices that tend to be marginalised by corporate structures of communicative power (Mumby, 2016). Digital organizational storytelling thus enhances the possibility for 'polypi', or extreme dialogical stories, where meaning making remains fluid, thereby displacing narrative monologism.

As our analysis has highlighted, this opens up possibilities for digital organizational storytellers who are critical of the orientation of corporate globalization to engage in oppositional meaning making practices that challenge these established power interests. Conflicts are fought between networked digital organizational storytellers and storytelling audiences who engage in dialogical meaning making in order to assert their values. Network power has thereby created opportunities for new organizational storytelling actors to construct meaning through digital storytelling in ways that challenge the power of corporations to construct meaning in ways which promote and further their interests. We suggest therefore that there is a need to revisit the theoretical foundations of organizational storytelling in order to appreciate the significance of these communicative structures. Our analysis provides an exemplary illustration of the relational nature of power networks and the

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importance of network protocols in determining the success of stories. Further study of

organizational storytelling in online contexts is needed in order to appreciate the potential of

digital organizational storytelling, including those that rely on video diaries (Mason, 2012)

and blogs (Schoneboom, 2009, 2011).

However, it is important not to overstate the potential for democratization and social change

that is associated with new forms of organizational storytelling enabled by the Internet. The

practice of digital organizational storytelling can be critiqued as a form of 'slacktivism' or

'clicktivism' that has little or no political or social impact on the offline world (Gladwell,

2010). According to Dean (2009), online speech, opinion and participation can become

fetishized, arising from the participant's own belief that their contribution means something

and matters independently of whether it has any material or practical impact or efficacy. This

gives rise to a neoliberal fantasy in which political struggles in local and institutional settings

are displaced and 'doing is reduced to talking' (Dean, 2009, p.32), enduring political

solidarity being replaced by momentary spectacle. The challenge for digital organizational

storytellers like FRS and TSOS is to find ways of leveraging the meaning making potential

associated with stories in order to bring about 'real' world change by translating narratives

into action. For organizational storytelling researchers, the challenge is to find ways of

gaining access to these practices, and to begin to systematically explore digital organizational

storytelling as a dialogical practice that tacks between online and offline social worlds.

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[i] http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4oNedC3j0e4 (accessed 19/03/14). See also Mike Wesch's, Library of Congress lecture, *An Anthropology of YouTube*

[ii] http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IZSqXUSwHRI (accessed 19/03/14)

[iii] Regalado, A. and Searcey, D. 'Where Did That Video Spoofing Gore's Film Come From?', *Wall Street Journal*, August 3rd 2006, http://online.wsj.com/public/article/SB115457177198425388-0TpYE6bU6EGvfSqtP8_hHjJJ77I_20060810.html?mod=blogs (accessed 05/05/11)

[iv] Information about individual interviewees' such as their job roles, is not provided in the analysis since providing this information would compromise individual anonymity.

[v] http://www.youtube.com/user/HowTheWorldWorks (accessed 19/03/14)

[vi] See http://www.bottledwatermatters.org/ (accessed 19/03/14)

[vii] http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eklg6j2G2pk (accessed 19/03/14)

[viii] http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uL2VzMl0M0g (accessed 19/03/14)

[ix] 'Conflicted Consumer' currently shows 4,722 YouTube views (19/03/14).

[x] 'I am Bottled Water' is a reference to the 'I am Windows' marketing campaign. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lSkkZj5xFRw (accessed 19/03/14)

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Table 1: Digital organizational stories

Title	Release date and duration	Sequels and related titles	Commissioning client	Focus of story	Audience reception
The Meatrix	2003, 3.46 minutes	*Meatrix 2* (2006) and *Meatrix 2.5* (2006); *Grocery Store Wars* (2005)	Global Resource Centre for the Environment (GRACE Communications Foundation)	Factory farming; animal cruelty; unethical employment practices; pollution; poor food safety	Over 25 million views; translated into over 40 languages
The Story of Stuff	2007, 20 minutes	*The Story of Bottled Water* (2010); *The Story of Electronics* (2010); *The Story of Cosmetics* (2010); *The Story of Broke* (2011); *The Story of Citizens United v. FEC* (2011); *The Story of Change* (2012)	The Story of Stuff Project, Tides Foundation, Funders Workgroup for Sustainable Production and Consumption	Commodity culture, the materials economy; hyper-consumption; global supply chains; corporations	Over 15 million views for *The Story of Stuff*; follow-up in the form of a *New York Times* bestselling book (Leonard, 2010); 200,000 Facebook fans; shown in 1,500 classrooms; distributed across over 220 countries and territories; 2 million views for *The Story of Bottled Water*; reached number seven in the viral video chart http://viralvideochart.unrulymedia.com/ in March 2010

Table 2: Modes and tropes of digital organizational storytelling

Title	Key protagonists	Mode	Poetic tropes	Symbolic tropes and intertextual references
The Meatrix	Naive apprentice (Leo the pig); wise hero (Moopheus the cow); evil villain (Agri-Corp and agents of *The Meatrix*); hapless victims (the animals)	Epic story of a heroic character who exposes the illusion of family farming and seeks to 'liberate minds' so they know where their food comes from. Fights evil villain and saves animal victims from impending death.	*Attribution of motive:* the factory farming industry as responsible culprit *Attribution of emotion to central characters:* evil deeds committed by men in suits	Corporation represented by Agri-Corp a multi-limbed robot and agents of *The Meatrix* - men in black suits Release coincides with the final film in *The Matrix* trilogy (1999 - 2003); human enslavement to machines translated into animal enslavement to machines. A related narrative of good versus evil forces is used in *Grocery Store Wars* which draws on the *Star Wars* film franchise
The Story of Stuff	Narrator (Annie Leonard); evil villain (greedy, out-of-control corporations); other protagonists (the government; the Third World; factories; Big Box Mart; employees; consumers)	Documentary story (rhetorical form), a narrator tells the story simply but passionately and builds a persuasive argument. Story ends by proposing a solution to the issues raised.	*Attribution of motive:* corporation as responsible for unethical and destructive social, environmental and health effects; government responsible related to failure to control the corporation *Attribution of causal connections:* multiple incidents in narrative linked together in cause/effect relationship *Attribution of unity and fixed qualities:* corporation as an undifferentiated, unified category signified as having fixed characteristics (e.g. inherently greedy)	Hand-drawn, black and white stick figures denote childlike simplicity; Narrator, Annie Leonard, dressed plainly in shirt and slacks, is represented in front of a whiteboard, as though teaching; Inflated stick figure with dollar sign on body and top hat to represent the corporation; Pictorial arrows and flows used to indicate causality and attribute responsibility