Chapter 11

Stories of Material Storytelling¹

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ABSTRACT

Material storytelling is used here to denote a material-discursive understanding of technology, and how technology works in organizations in terms of story performance. The idea is that technology configures organizations in spatial, temporal and material terms. We are inspired by Karen Barad's work in quantum physics in developing the term material storytelling, which relies on a material-discursive understanding of storytelling. By introducing material storytelling we resituate the hegemonic relationship of discourse and language over matter. As such technology regains a central space in both understanding and managing organizations. It implies that attention is relocated to the petty and lowly everyday routines, techniques and material artifacts, which are implicit in what we do in everyday life but govern the agential possibilities for acting in this world. We frame the chapter as a story of material storytelling of a change project in a bank. We experiment with the writing style by going back and forth between two different layers of text. The first layer tells the stories of material storytelling, while the other draws out the theoretical/methodological implications of this approach in terms understanding and managing technology.

INTRODUCTION

Material storytelling (Strand, 2010) denotes a material-discursive understanding of technol-

ogy and how technology works in organizations in terms of story performance. The idea implied here is that technology configures organizations in spatial, temporal, and material terms. As such, no distinction exists between organization and technology in the sense that organizations

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are technologies that configure the world. As a material-discursive configuration, organizations are apparatuses of storytelling; apparatus is a term used by Karen Barad (2007), a theorist inspired by quantum physics. Material storytelling, viewed as a material-discursive understanding of storytelling, is developed here from Barad's work.

Material storytelling implies a fundamentally different understanding of technology to what has been prevalent in the literature to date. Dominant understandings of technology place humans in the center of organizations and as having the upper hand in terms of controlling technology. This is the case for traditional, modern, and humanist conceptions of technology where this is presumed to be 'in the hands' of humans. Such humans are equipped with universal qualities like rationality and are, therefore, able to both design and use technology progressively for the common good of the people concerned (e.g. Wolfe, 2010, p. 45).

Social constructionist understandings of technology located within post-humanism also place humans in control of technology. These approaches assume that "...the decentering of the human by its imbrication in technical, medical, informatics and economic networks is increasingly impossible to ignore" (Wolfe, 2010, p. 99). They, however, still view technology as a humanist social construct in the sense that technology is viewed as a discursive construction where discourse, language and culture are presumed to have the upper hand in constructing technology with the importance of matter and materiality simply left unattended or ignored.

By introducing the term 'material storytelling' in this chapter, we aim to re-situate this hegemonic relationship of discourse and language over matter. This demands that technology regains a central space in both understanding and managing organizations. Instead of granting too much perceived power to human agents, power is relocated to the seemingly insignificant, petty and lowly everyday routines, techniques and material artifacts which are implicit in what we do in everyday life but

none-the-less govern the agential possibilities for acting in this world. It follows, from this perspective, that technologies and their effects are deemed to be the results of the entanglement of human and non-human agencies.

We can now state that we understand technology as iterative material-discursive intra-action through which space, time, and matter are continuously reconfigured. The term intra-action is also appropriated from Karen Barad's work; it denotes that phenomena never exist in themselves but are always relationally entangled and constituted. Entanglement does not refer to being intertwined with one another but "... to lack an independent, self-contained existence" (Barad, 2007, p. ix).

Intra-action is used instead of terms like interconnection or interaction because they presume the existence of separate entities. Material storytelling denotes the central role of materiality as well as discourse in constructing organizational life. More specifically, material storytelling denotes "... the iterative (re)materialization of the relations of production; and the agential possibilities and responsibilities for reconfiguring the material relations of the world" (Barad, 2007, p. 224).

In this chapter, we also draw on Benjamin's (1999) and Derrida's (2004) works on storytelling and story as something very different from narrative. We twist it into material storytelling by combining it with Karen Barad's work on agential realism. Barad elaborates on Bohr's work on apparatuses into a conception of practice as material-discursive, where apparatuses are seen as active constituents of the world. They are part of the intra-activity of the world, are open-ended practices and are material configurations and (re) configurings of the world, and they produce and reconfigure spatiality and temporality (Barad, 2007, p. 146).

Our thesis is that resituating the relationship between language and materiality opens new spaces for marginalized other(s) voices, and creates a different kind of awareness of how power relations work in the workplace; hence providing

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