

Title: The issue of social construction in and through organizations texts: a case in point.

William J Fear

Cardiff Business School

Cardiff University

Aberconway Building

Colum Drive

Cardiff

CF10 3EU

Email: fearwj@cf.ac.uk

Tel: +44(0)29 2087 5079

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Abstract

This paper provides an attempt to: 1) bring some of the more quantitative approaches to the analysis of bodies of written text into the field of Organizational Discourse Analysis (ODA) without losing the important qualitative aspects; and 2) to re-extend the relationship between text and context. The point in relation to the theme of the conference is that this throws up examples of dramaturgical constructions of identity/ies-in-text that occur during mundane, routine activities (meetings).

Quantitative approaches to the analysis of text – retaining the qualitative

ODA is concerned with the analysis of texts in relation to organizational concerns – institutionalism, power, identity, and so on (Hardy, and Phillips, 1999; Hardy, and Phillips, 2004; Hardy, Lawrence, & Grant, 2005). Written texts are but one form of text, and written texts can take many different forms (e.g., Parker, 1999). Developments in a parallel field, text mining, have made substantial advances in recent years.

Text mining refers to the quantitative analysis of large bodies of text based on key terms and related terms (Miller, 2005). Terms may range from a single word to sentences and phrases. Automated analytic tools (computer software) iterate through the texts to develop networks of relations between objects. Thus text mining can be used, for example, to identify culture, social networks and conceptual maps purely from texts (e.g. Carley, 1994; Diesner and Carley, 2004; Carley, 1997).

What I suggest is that the same methods can be used to identify discourses, perhaps especially those unanticipated, emergent, and more difficult to identify discourses. The application of a quantitative method becomes problematic due to assumed and actual ontological and epistemological differences. Notably, the requirement to take account of context. However, with some necessary caveats the methods and approaches of text mining can be readily translated for use in the field of ODA.

Re-extending the context

I was fortunate in my current work to come across a set of organizational texts, in the public domain, that provide a comprehensive account of the discursive activity of organizational elites; the minutes of board meetings of Local Health Boards in Wales. The texts range from around 15-20 pages per meeting, indicate which actors are talking, refer to existing organizational and institutional discourses, and refer to other texts either presented to the boards or impacting on the organizations. The area of interest is the texts themselves, the minutes, and what they construct and reveal (e.g. Bruner, 1991; Chalaby, 1996; Cooren, 2004), not how these texts came into being. For example, a social network analysis of actors could be readily undertaken in relation to different discourses present in the texts – which network of actors engage and construct which discourses and so on.

What is of interest is how the discourses develop and the implications of these discourses as they are re-presented in the texts. That is, we can identify a discourse in the text (e.g. Boje, Oswick, and Ford, 2004; Keenoy, Oswick, and Grant, 1997), and then follow the journey of that discourse through subsequent texts (e.g. Heracleous, and Barrett, 2001). At the same time we can identify the emerging relations between the first discourse and other discourses and how they interact (e.g. Alvesson and Karreman, (2000; 2011; Heracleous, 2006). We can extend this beyond the minutes of the meetings as further texts and discourses are identified and can be mapped out in further texts – either those additional texts presented to the meetings or texts in the wider context.

The re-extension of the context, in the example presented here, comes, in part, from the nature of the minutes. The minutes created from meeting at time t are re-presented in the meeting at time $t+1$ and agreed as a proper reflection of what took place and what was agreed at time t . Whether or not this represents some sort of ‘reality’ is moot as the board has overtly agreed that the minutes accurately reflect a social reality. They, the board, have knowingly participated in the social construction of reality through the medium of a written text. Surely we couldn’t ask for a more concrete example of the social construction of reality through text. As this process continues the board – which we will need to ‘black box’ at some point – effectively

re-constructs itself as an institution in keeping with the discursive and text-based processes articulated by Phillips, Lawrence and Hardy (2004), and Selsky, Spicer, and Teicher (2003).

The textualization of Institutionalization, identity, and dramaturgy.

During this study I was able to observe, in the text, how actors, from individuals through to institutions, came to be re-presented in the texts. These actors, both knowingly and unknowingly, have their dramaturgical presentations captured in the texts. Thus, for example, the Director of Nursing (DN) in the case of City Board has a consistent and readily observable dramaturgical re-presentation in the texts along with an associated discourse. This re-presentation is reinforced within subsequent texts creating a strong sense of identity (of the DN) for the observer (the reader of the texts). Whether or not this identity is 'true', or 'real', or 'intended', is not the point. The point is that this identity, this dramaturgical presentation, and associated discourse, is being continually re-presented and effectively 'just is' to the reader of the text. Thus it exists in the text regardless. This same observation carries for other actors, sometimes with institutions being dramaturgically re-presented in the text by actors. For example, when Chief Executives state that either the Minister for Health expects..., or the Welsh Government needs us to... These are not actual quotes but similar examples are present in the texts.

Empirical notes

In this presentation I will provide empirical data from the manual analysis of the minutes of seven Local Health Boards over a period of c. 14 months. This corpus runs to several thousand pages of text. The full corpus of the boards, with associated reports and presentations, runs to tens of thousands of pages of text and it is unrealistic to attempt a wider analysis in the absence of methods and tools such as those used for text mining. The focus of the original analysis was the role of these texts, the minutes, in the institutionalization process of the boards – that is, the role of the texts in boards both becoming institutions and institutionalizing practices, beliefs, norms, and so on.

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