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On the Quality and Legitimacy of Green Narratives in Business: A Framework for Evaluation

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ABSTRACT

Narrative is increasingly being recognised as an important tool both to manage and understand organisations. In particular, narrative is recognised to have an important influence on the perception of environmental issues in business, a particularly contested area of modern management. Management literature is, however, only beginning to develop a framework for evaluating the quality and legitimacy of narratives. Due to the highly fluid nature of narratives, the traditional notion of truth as reflecting 'objective reality' is not useful here. In this paper, an alternative approach that evaluates a narrative in two stages is developed. First, a horizontal reading investigates the surface of the narrative, its textual features, instrumental devices and its integrity as a text, to assess the quality of a narrative. Secondly, a more philosophical or vertical reading makes explicit the underlying value assumptions that author and reader bring to the writing and reading of the narrative to assess the narrative's claim to legitimacy. The framework is then tested against a narrative on the relationship between business and environment as espoused by a supply chain manager of a UK-based manufacturing company.

Keywords: Management, Narrative, Environment

INTRODUCTION

Management theory today is no longer a stranger to analysing discourse and narrative. Over the last two decades scholars have increasingly become aware of the role language can play in the social construction of organisational phenomena. Language is not just a window to social reality, rather language, at least partly, constitutes social reality by shaping peoples' perceptions of the objects to which a discourse refers. The use of language is bound up with personal and institutional interests, yet at the same time it is situated in broader social relations of power and domination (Fairclough, 1995). Attention to the role of language in management theory and practice can not only help us better understand how organisations function, but also reveal the values that guide manager and employee action. It can do this by directing attention to how management language can influence peoples' perception of problems and, in turn, their actions, often in unconscious ways (Chia, 2000).

Originating in literary criticism, but also building on anthropological, philosophical and sociological traditions, the concept of a narrative has increasingly been applied in management studies. A narrative approach has been used to analyse working practices and management styles of organisations as disparate as media corporation Walt Disney (Boje, 1995), pharmaceutical company AstraZeneca (Hellgren et al, 2002) or a UK higher education institution (Humphreys and Brown, 2002). Narrative is increasingly being perceived as an important tool in organisational contexts. It can be used by strategic decision-makers to disguise the fictionality inherent in much strategic planning (Barry and Elmes, 1997; Vaara, 2002) or in the assigning of success or failure in major projects, such as the development of IT systems (Fincham, 2002). Narrative can also play a role in organisational culture, (Patriotta, 2003) and the

socialisation of new organisational members (Coupland, 2001). Narrative can furthermore generate a wider legitimacy for events, as one version of what happened becomes an accepted mainstream version (Czarniawska, 1997). This draws us beyond the organisation to consider the relationship between business, society and the natural environment. The role of narrative in highlighting the relationships between business and the environment is stressed in both conceptual and empirical literature. For example, narratives can generate commitment to environmental initiatives, contest the boundaries of corporate activities or help assert managerial autonomy and control in relation to environmental demands made by pressure groups (Fineman, 1996).

If narratives can play important roles in management, then management theory should be able to evaluate their contribution to the management process. This, however, is not an easy task. Studies like the above have unearthed the multi-layered nature of narrative in management practice (Czarniawska, 1997). At the same time, a narrative has a fluid structure (Barthes, 1983), which easily escapes evaluation by traditional criteria aiming at establishing 'objective reality'. Nonetheless, this article seeks to develop a framework for evaluating narratives. It aims to do so in the realm of narratives on the link between business and environmental sustainability, as this is particularly contested ground within management, ground that raises people's emotions. Here, narratives may be as much about legitimacy as about scientific truths (Livesey, 2001). So, perhaps more than anywhere else in management-related narrative, there is a need for an evaluative framework.

This article begins with a review of the literature on the role of narrative in the relationship between business and the natural environment. It then proceeds to develop criteria to judge the quality and legitimacy of narrative. Building on the work

of Barthes (1983) and Fairclough (2001, 2005) an evaluative framework is established that consists of two readings. A first, horizontal reading will look at the surface meaning of a narrative, where the analysis is concerned with the structural features of the narrative and its instrumental propensities in terms of promoting change through the use of rhetorical devices. Then a second, vertical, reading is conducted that sees the text as being embedded in social interaction. Such a reading allows us to appreciate the plural meanings of a narrative and consider how the underlying values of its authors and readers contribute to an evaluation of its legitimacy (Fairclough, 2001, 2003). The framework is then tested against a narrative by a supply chain manager on his company's relationship with the natural environment.

NARRATIVE IN A MANAGEMENT CONTEXT

There is little agreement on how a narrative should be defined. From a structuralist perspective, a narrative is seen as a temporal sequence of events, whereas a communication perspective focuses on readership and interpretation. A further complication arises from the "three-way product-act-object ambiguity" (Lamarque, 2004, p. 394), as the events and their relationships as described by the narrative (object), the telling of a narrative (act) and the resulting written or spoken text (product) all have been called narrative. Moreover, narratives can be carried by an enormous variety of substances, from spoken and written language through images to gestures. Narrative is thus present "in every age, in every place, in every society … [it] is international, transhistorical, transcultural: it is simply there, like life itself" (Barthes, 1983: 251f.)

Nonetheless, there are some generally accepted requirements of narrative (Barthes, 1983;) and these can function here in lieu of a definition. Most obviously, a narrative must be told, it cannot merely be found (Lamarque, 2004). Secondly, it has to have a plot; the narrative needs to consist of at least two events which must have some loose temporal or causal relation. The plot is often abbreviated, where the hearer is required to fill in parts of the events and their implications (Boje, 1991). Thirdly, the plot is not intrinsic to the events but imposed by the author in a particular context (Czarniawska, 1997). Narratives often have no agreed text but are highly dynamic; different versions emerge, depending on the context in which they are told. Finally, in a narrative, story-telling and identity-building processes can become intertwined. The truth of a narrative thus lays not in 'the facts' but in the meaning they convey to their recipients (Gabriel, 2000).

Furthermore, narratives themselves seem to exist in a hierarchical relationship to each other (see Figure 1): Macro-level narratives are grand narratives that seek to explain, more or less, the totality of (human) life, such as the debate between anthropocentric, ecocentric and sustainability-centric environmental narratives. Meso-level narratives exist at the organisational level and shape its culture and character, while micro-level narratives exist at the level of the individual and can help construct and communicate identities and relationships. It would seem that narratives do not directly reach from one level to another and that they need to be translated (Czarniawska, 1997); or in the terminology of O'Connor (2002) story traffic needs to be managed. At the meso-level, an organisation is subject to numerous different macro-level narratives, economic, political, social, as well as environmental ones. Which ones out of this potential myriad are received and potentially acted upon depends on successful translation. Such a translation needs "appropriate conceptual hooks [as] unfamiliar narratives

simply may get ignored" (Starkey and Crane, 2003, p. 227). In other words, macro-level narratives are not necessarily directly applicable to organisations, in the same fashion as organisational narratives need not influence organisation members.
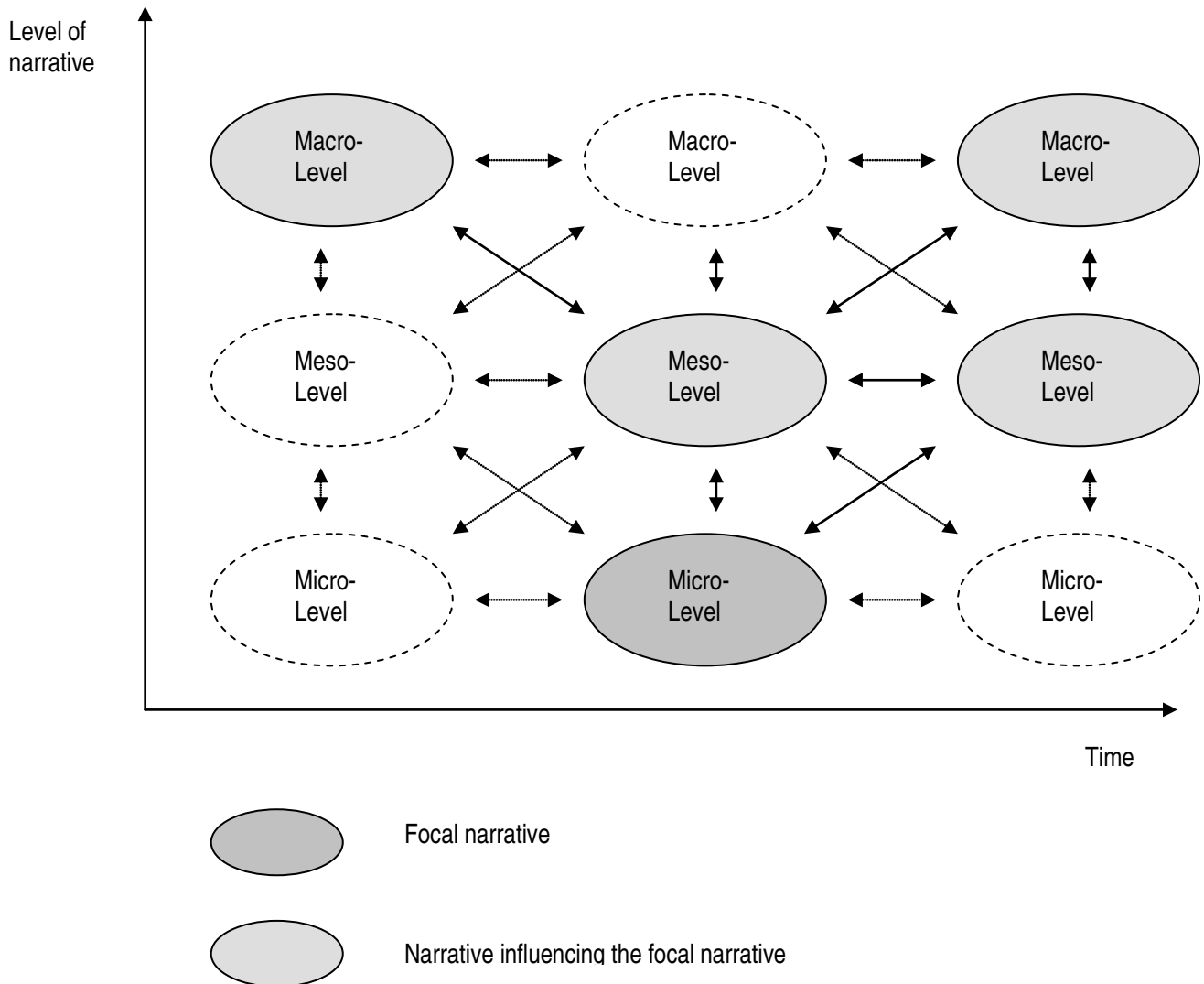

Figure 1: Hierarchies of narratives and translation between levels

Although narratives can play important roles in translating ideas, not every narrative is of great quality. Narratives can be boring, disorganised, lack coherence or deal with subjects of little interest. The quality of a narrative rests "on criteria internal to

narrative practices. What makes a historical narrative valuable is determined by factors governing the ends and expectations of history. What makes a work of literature valuable is defined by the norms of literary criticism" (Lamarque, 2004: 401). By analogy, what makes a narrative valuable in a management context is determined by the contribution the narrative can make to the actual management of organisations – narrative as a tool to help manage the organisation – as well as to the understanding of organisational life and the theoretical elaboration of it, which would include a focus on the way in which narrative might subvert, or otherwise impact on, managerial intentions.

In organisational life narratives can fulfil a number of objectives. First, they can provide a guide for interpreting 'reality' and for making sense of the myriad of signals that humans receive (Boje, 1991). A narrative imposes a logical structure on otherwise isolated events by denoting a beginning, middle and an end, a process Ricoeur (1984) calls emplotment. From a managerial point of view, a narrative can help stabilise specific organisational objectives and thus support the organisation in moving towards meeting these (Fincham, 2002; Vaara, et al., 2004). Second, a narrative can also help in problem solving. It can help people to make sense of equivocal situations by simplifying the world and providing cognitive devices to guide action (Weick, 1995). By acting as repositories of organisational knowledge (Boje, 1991) and tacit knowledge that easily escapes codification, they can provide templates to which current cases can be linked (Patriotta 2003). Similarly, it can promote understanding that helps people navigate the conflicting demands found in organisations (Czarniawska, 1997).

Narratives can, thirdly, play a disciplining role (Boje, 1995). In the context of contested meaning, "narratives deal with the politics of meaning, i.e. how meanings are selected, legitimized, encoded, and institutionalized at the organizational level" (Patriotta, 2003, p. 351). They legitimise some interests in contrast to others or may play down organisational conflict. At a managerial level, this is evident in the often self-serving attribution of success and failure. For example, Patriotta (2003) noted a role of narrative in getting shop floor employees to accept blame for faulty products and hence of the organisational hierarchy.

Conversely, narratives can play a, fourth, empowering role too. In particular, they can give a voice to otherwise disenfranchised organisational members. By framing some events in a narrative rather than others, individuals can support very different meanings (Gabriel, 2000). Since narratives persuade less by reference to 'the facts' and more by the meaning they create in the recipient, narratives can thus present alternative stories and even create alternative 'realities'. Narratives can then make the political nature of organisational behaviour visible, and draw attention to who is marginalized (Boje 1995) or, as Gabriel (2000) argues, provide an unmanaged space where opposition to organisational aims is voiced and support given to disenchanted organisational members.

NARRATIVES, BUSINESS AND THE NATURAL ENVIRONMENT

Research into what role narratives can play in the relationship between business and the natural environment is still somewhat limited. Some authors comment on the unsuitability of anthropocentric macro-level narratives for sustainable economic

activity (e.g. Shrivastava, 1995) and lament that alternative ecocentric or sustainability-centric macro-level narratives are not reflected in managerial theory and practice. Other authors have started to explore the link between green narratives of business and environmentally based action. Starkey and Crane (2003) examine the role of the evolutionary narrative in fostering a closer connection between management, organisations and the natural environment, while Dawson (2005) argues that narratives could be used to promote environmental virtues to managers and shareholders.

Empirical studies provide further insights into the role of environmental narratives in organisations. Fineman (1996) reports results of a qualitative study into greening in UK supermarkets, particularly concerning the role of emotional meanings key actors attribute to the protection of the natural environment. Members of the greenest organisations displayed a confident enthusiasm about their company's pro-environmental stance. At the same time, green challenges were enjoyed not so much because they were about the environment, but more because they tested and stretched professional skills. In less green companies, environmental demands were seen as unwelcome incursions into managerial control and autonomy. Managers reacted with anger and frustration to environmental pressure groups, as they generally saw their demands as detracting them form 'proper' urgencies. They also sought to de-emotionalise the issue by re-framing their company's activities as commitment to providing the customer with products that provide value for money.

Such results tally with Crane's (2000) study of the application of environmental narrative in a range of private sector organisations. He found that respondents showed a reluctance to couch the environment in moral terms. Championing environmental

protection was accepted to a point, but this needed to be separate – and perceived as being separate – from any personal moral agenda. Under such circumstances, environmental narratives got attached to existing narratives – such as a drive for quality and innovation or organisational excellence. Hence the environmental narrative does not serve as a tool for moral development; a process Crane (2000) calls the amoralisation of corporate greening. At an industry level, Alkon (2004) discusses how Californian vine grape growers responded to a visible and controversial incident of soil erosion. Making use of a dominant local heritage narrative that foregrounded values of cooperation and harmony, the vine growers' organisation was able to set up an education commission that offers non-binding advice to farmers.

As far as narratives in individual organisations are concerned, the Royal Dutch/Shell Group is probably the most studied organisation (Tsoukas, 1999; Livesey, 2001; Coupland and Brown, 2004). This is as much a result of the controversies it generated over the proposed sinking of the Brent Spar platform in the North Sea and its operations in Nigeria, as it is a consequence of the subsequent position of transparency and dialogue the company adopted. Livesey (2001) interprets the conflict between Shell and Greenpeace as discursive struggle between a narrowly economic narrative of progress, based on such seemingly neutral categories as efficiency or cost-benefit analysis and backed up by the competence of scientific experts, and a wider discourse centring around sustainable development and democratic control, which demands that a company should take account not only of the goods and services it offers, but also of the risks it creates.

Beyond the management literature in a narrow sense, there is a wider literature in anthropology, environmental studies, 'green' literary criticism and sociology that is

less concerned with how environmental narratives work (or don't work) in a business context. Rather it focuses on the experiences of other organisational stakeholders, such as members of a local community, and hence it does deserve brief inclusion here. For example, narratives on salmon fishing enable native Indians of British Columbia to construct an individual and group identity that is different from Euro-Canadian society (Schreiber, 2003). In a different context, narratives surrounding the Chernobyl nuclear accident enabled communities to challenge official stories of technological progress (Harper 2001). Overall, research into narrative on the link between management and the environment is somewhat scarce. Nevertheless, the potential of narrative as a tool for analysing and attempting to change the behaviour of people in organisations towards the environment has been shown.

DEVELOPING AN EVALUATIVE FRAMEWORK FOR NARRATIVES

As already noted, a narrative is not an exact record of what happened (Gabriel, 2000). Hence the prevailing concept of verification and the procedures that are used in natural and social sciences for establishing validity are not directly transferable to narrative. The aim here is to develop an alternative approach to judging the quality and, ultimately, the legitimacy of narratives about business and the environment. This is particularly important because, in the context of an uncertain environmental future, pressure is mounting on business to rethink the way it manages natural resources. Narratives about business and the environment can provide direction for such a change in organisational strategy. Good narratives, as already mentioned, can promote changes in attitudes towards the environment; its is hence important to evaluate their potential in this respect.

So what constitutes a narrative of good quality, and when are narratives accepted as legitimate? A good quality narrative is determined by the construction of the text (Barthes, 1983) but equally by the potential for that text to change the opinion and eventually perhaps the behaviour of the reader (Fairclough, 2001). Some authors are better at constructing narratives that grab our attention, stick in our memory, effect our emotions, make a serious point, and so on. It is these very narratives that are more likely to influence the way people act towards the environment. The better the author is at structuring narratives, employing entertaining material, using rhetoric devices, and so on the more potential they have to have an effect on others (Lamarque, 2004). Thus it is the text that convinces its readers of a particular point of view. When the authors are taken away form the analysis, the text still has its distinct features. The information, events, structure and presentation of a text exist as they are regardless of who wrote it or who may come to read it. Hence the text has to become the pivot on which the evaluation of quality rests.

Whereas in the evaluation of quality the emphasis is on author and text more than the reader, the emphasis shifts to the latter when the legitimacy of a narrative is considered. Whether a narrative is accepted as legitimate depends on whether the reader finds some resonance with its message (Eco, 1981). This means that when readers find a narrative to be legitimate, they do more than accept the narrative as a more or less accurate representation of a set of events; rather they develop a deeper sympathy for the perspective and values promoted by the narrative. This interpretation of the legitimacy of narrative means that accepting narrative as legitimate will depend on its fit with the readers' own particular experiences, personal perspective, and the wider tradition they belong to (Iser, 1989). So, it is the way the author and text present

themselves to the reader, and the match of perspectives that become important when assessing for legitimacy.

The reader will be influenced as much as the author by the wider genre or tradition to which they belong (Eco, 1981). The scientist will write with accuracy so that others can replicate their results, the software technical author to guide people through the processes of operating software, the inspirational trainer to motivate. At the same time, readers with preferences for these genres will expect the same. The reader is by no means a passive recipient of the text; rather the reader negotiates the meaning of the text (Eco, 1981; Fairclough, 2001). Other than through the story presented and their skills of narration, the author has little influence over how the text is received. This becomes important where the reader may interpret well-meaning texts with cynicism (see, for example, the content analysis of the Shell Forum by Coupland and Brown, 2004). Hence the reader's role in constructing a narrative has to be considered too. To what extent is it their experiences, backgrounds and traditions (Czarniawska 1997, MacIntyre 1988) that lead them to a particular view of a text?

Separating the evaluation of quality and legitimacy like this suggests that the reading of a narrative cannot be undertaken from a single viewpoint alone. Following Barthes (1983) a narrative can be analysed at different levels, from a phonetic through a grammatical to a contextual one. These levels exist in a hierarchical relationship to each other, in that they all have their own units and relations between them, but no level can produce meaning on its own. Hence he distinguishes between a horizontal reading – which considers the logical linearity, or absence thereof, between elements at one level – and a vertical reading – which considers the meaning (re-)created by a

higher level, not unlike an organigramme that (re-)creates meaning, at the organisational level, of otherwise disparate organisational tasks.

As Barthes was concerned with structural analysis of narratives alone, the application of the horizontal and vertical reading by Fairclough (2001; similarly Monin et al., 2003) is more appropriate for our purposes of studying narrative in its social setting. According to Fairclough the horizontal analysis considers the surface of the text. Here the structural features of a narrative are analysed, as are its ability to promote change and the integrity of the text. The vertical reading, by contrast, examines the plural meanings of the text and thus takes a more philosophical approach to the analysis. Monin et al. (2003) argue that the reader can toggle or move between the two levels as they proceed through the analysis. That is, the reader's focus can move from structure to meaning and back to structure again. This mode of reading can be easily adapted to encompass the move between quality and legitimacy.

Horizontal reading

The horizontal reading, the reading for quality, is concerned with the development of criteria that focus on the surface of the text. That is, first, the structural and technical features that enable the text to communicate a point of view clearly and help convince people that the text can be relied on and second that people should change their behaviour on the basis of what it says. Three groups of criteria are of interest here: structural features, instrumental criteria and criteria related to the integrity of the text.

A good starting point for the evaluation of narratives are structural features, the choices in terms of vocabulary, grammar and textual structure its authors made

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(Barthes, 1983). Are key words repeated, and does such repetition aid any particular party or side of an argument? Does the narrative use words that are ideologically contested. Are examples selected at random, if not what criteria were used for their selection? Another structural feature concerns grammatical structures, such as the voice of the narrative: is the narrative told in active or in passive voice or by referring to an impersonal narrator? A third structural feature concerns textual structures (Czarniawska 1997). What is the sequencing of information? Is discomforming information, for example, 'buried' in the middle of the narrative rather than being highlighted at the beginning? A central question in evaluating narrative – and one that impacts on the quality of a narrative, then, concerns the way in which its structure aids or hampers a particular argument or voice getting heard (Fairclough, 2001). This requires attention to the vocabulary selected, to the grammatical structure of a narrative as well as its textual structure.

Evaluating narrative needs to include an instrumental perspective, which sees the value of a narrative in its achievements. Rather, a successful narrative "stands out from other organizational stories, is persuasive and invokes retelling" (Barry and Elmes, 1997, p. 433). From an instrumental point of view, the use of rhetorical and extra-linguistic devices is important. For example, what use is made of irony, suspense, anachrony (where the narrative does not reflect the temporal order of events), figuration, allusion or double entendre (Lamarque, 2004). One such rhetoric devise is a normalising technique, which presents a company or industry as being just one example of many (Coupland and Brown, 2004). The implication is that we are merely dealing with an organisation or industry that is facing ordinary problems which should not be blown out of proportion.

A different type of challenge in getting the message of a narrative heard arises out of the fact that narratives exist at several levels and hence need to be translated into a different level (Czarniawska 1997). In the debate on the sustainability-centric paradigm for management, the view is often presented that managers take no account of such calls and that management theory and practice are heading towards crisis point (Shrivastava, 1995; Gladwin, Kennelly and Krause 1995). That ecocentric macro-level narratives are not heard in private sector organisations may, however, not necessarily be a case of managerial ill will. It may be a case of inefficient translation, as the macro-level sustainability-centric narrative may simply be crowded out by a multitude of other narratives. A second important element in evaluating the quality of a narrative is thus the ability it has to bring about change in the listener or reader. Being persuasive and getting others to act on a narrative is an indicator of quality, as a narrative could not invoke retelling without first having generated acceptance and approval. The instrumental quality of a narrative includes both the use of rhetoric devices and the successful translation between different levels (Czarniawska 1997).

An instrumental approach to evaluation is necessary, but it is not sufficient to evaluate a narrative as being of good quality. Clearly, an approach of 'anything goes as long as it works' is not satisfactory for evaluating narratives. The traditional criterion for judging a text – particularly in the context of academic research – used to be the notion of truth, asking whether a text corresponds with an 'objective reality'. However, determining what is true is fraught with difficulty. Humans would find it difficult to function as social agents if we only acted on what we could verify as being true (Fairweather 2001). Rather, we are likely to base our acts on what we can justify. As Winter (2002: 145) suggests, perhaps the question to ask is:

Not 'Is this narrative 'true'?' but 'Is this narrative shaped and moulded in such a way that we feel it is trustworthy, i.e. does it *persuade us* that we might helpfully rely on the insights it presents about that particular situation to guide our thinking about other situations?

The quality of a narrative can thus be said to be determined by its plausibility. Taking account of the postmodernist turn, a trustworthy narrative needs to be reflexive; it should not attempt to create an illusion of objective reality. The narrator should acknowledge their role as "the subjective presenter of a *plural* text, which is frankly constituted as a still non-unified assemblage of disparate realities" (Winter, 2002: 151). Rorty (1989) suggests that a narrative is trustworthy insofar as, while expressing an explicitly defended value basis, it also acknowledges the contingency of that basis and the possibility of alternative views. A legitimate narrative, then, should reflect a plurality of perspectives and needs to be self-questioning.

Trustworthiness also requires a certain degree of completeness, as the audible (or observable) story is only one part of the narrative; other parts may not be said, yet are shared (Boje, 1991). The narrative needs to display consistency between its individual parts. Hence judging the quality of narrative needs to consider the question of what it discusses and what is left out (Dawson, 2005). The narrative should also be seen in its context. This concerns both the telling of a narrative, e.g. how a story is introduced, how listeners react to it (Stern, 1989; Monin et al., 2003), how it affects subsequent communication, as well as whether the narrative is grounded in the context in which people live. A narrative of good quality, then, is trustworthy, in the sense that it is well grounded and supportable. It is reflexive, it makes its value basis explicit, it is self-questioning and open to alternative views. A quality narrative is also complete, at

least the listener should be made aware of what is left out, and it is grounded in context.

Vertical reading

The vertical reading of a narrative, the reading for legitimacy, draws away from the functional aspects in providing a deeper reading, it is concerned with meaning as established in its social context (Eco, 1981; MacIntyre, 1985). The vertical reading becomes more philosophical in nature: what does the reader make of the narrative, how does it link to their understanding of the world (Fairclough, 2001). This is an important point when considering the way narratives interact. Building on the insight developed by reader-response theory in literary criticism that readers create their own texts (Abrams, 1989; Iser, 1989) it is argued that people from different traditions, with different perspectives on the particular phenomena that they approach, will develop their own views on what constitutes a legitimate narrative. The tradition they work in will dictate what they see and don't see as important (second-named author, 2005).

The legitimacy of a narrative is hence revealed by a subjective resonance that occurs between the reader's experience of the world and the author's rendition of it (Tsoukas and Hatch, 2001). Similarly, scholars conducting their evaluation will use criteria that follow their particular perspective, make clear their values and reaffirm their tradition. So, when evaluating a narrative, consciously or unconsciously, both the reader and the scholar look at how the narrative fits with their tradition's view or how it can be used to modify the view to make it stronger (MacIntyre 1988).

However, whilst the vertical reading may reflect a particular philosophical perspective, associated foci and structures of analysis, it also needs to be firmly connected with the phenomena at hand (Fairclough, 2001, 2005). In the case of green narrative, this means that the reading must engage directly with business and management practices and their interaction with the environment. Business approaches to the natural environment cover an entire spectrum: from doing nothing and resisting legislative and NGO pressure, through a position of enlightened self-interest that aims to reduce cost or generate differentiation benefits from being greener, to a deep ecology position that ascribes intrinsic value to non-human nature, hence calling for limits to economic activity (Gladwin et al., 1995).

The vertical reading of a narrative inevitably comes from a particular point of view, but it is important for the purposes of evaluating a narrative that these perspectives are made explicit (Rorty, 1989). This means that a vertical analysis of the text needs to refer to criteria that come from particular perspectives. Using the examples highlighted above of enlightened self-interest and a deep ecology perspective it can be seen that each perspective emphasises particular traits, dispositions and excellences when it comes to the environment. An enlightened self-interest perspective sees societal pressure for environmental protection as broadly legitimate, but also tries to link environmental protection initiatives with what is good for the company.

Extending Michael Porter's (1985) strategic management model of cost leadership and differentiation strategies to environmental management, such a company could aim the use the environment to reduce costs or to differentiate itself from competitors. A green cost reduction strategy could aim to decrease the number of components in a product, increase their recyclability or generate savings from lower energy

consumption or waste creation. A green differentiation strategy aims to improve the perception customers (and regulators) have of the company by establishing sound environmental management, demonstrating transparency in the communication of company activities or showing commitment to local causes (Welford, 2000; Preuss, 2005). Thus, from an enlightened self-interest perspective, the criteria of regard for customer concerns, technical competence in the light of legislation, cost cutting and prudent management of resources for sustainability emerge as aspects that a legitimate narrative should propagate.

A deep ecology approach to the relationship between business and nature is prefaced on the intrinsic value of nature. Hence it calls for a halt to economic growth in quantitative terms. Any improvement of living conditions in developing countries, for example, is to be compensated for by a reduction of consumption in the developed world. Such an approach also stresses the social dimension of development, especially a greater recognition for work outside formal employment relationships and an emphasis on small communities and grass roots movements (Naess, 1997). The examination of a narrative from a deep ecology point of view could focus on what Aldo Leopold saw as excellences in his 1949 essay the *Land Ethic*, the most important of which are respect for ecosystems, prudence, patience, persistence and practical wisdom characterised by judgement (see also Shaw, 1997; Cafaro, 2001).

Prudence, patience, eagerness, persistence and good judgement are also the hallmark of good managers. What makes them different in this context are the attitudes and resultant objectives that they convey in relation to the environment. The demand for respect of ecosystems puts environmental concerns at least equal to human needs. From this perspective, businesses needs to put equal effort into considering their

impact on ecosystems and human concerns. Businesses need to act with caution when acting in the environment, but also display persistence in their efforts to understand the nature of their impacts in the environment. Overall, they need to act with good judgement in relation to their decisions in respect to environmental issues.

Horizontal Reading

Structural features:	Choice of vocabulary; Grammar; Textual structures	
Instrumental features:	Transformational propensity; Rhetoric devices; Translation	
Integrity of the text:	Trustworthiness; Self-reflection; Completeness; Consistency	

- -

Fit with particular philosophical perspective, e.g.

Vertical Reading

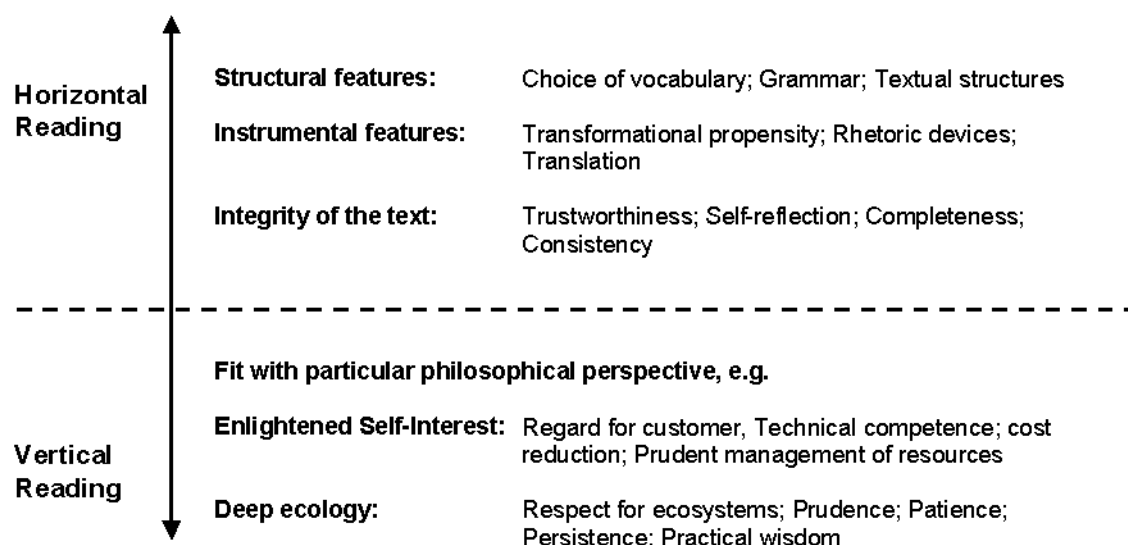|	
Enlightened Self-Interest:	Regard for customer, Technical competence; cost reduction; Prudent management of resources
Deep ecology:	Respect for ecosystems; Prudence; Patience; Persistence; Practical wisdom

Figure 2: A framework for evaluating narrative

In summing up, the combination of a horizontal and a vertical reading allows an analysis of the quality and legitimacy of a narrative. The horizontal reading takes a close look at the surface meaning of the text by examining its structure in terms of vocabulary and grammatical choices and textual features, its instrumental characteristics in the use of rhetorical devices as well as the integrity of the narrative in terms of trustworthiness, completeness, self-reflection and consistency. Then the vertical reading requires an evaluation of the text from the perspective of a particular tradition the reader is coming from. This is important in making explicit the value

assumptions behind writing/telling and reading/interpreting a narrative. The framework with its two positions, an enlightened self-interest and a deep ecology perspective, shall now be applied.

APPLICATION OF THE FRAMEWORK

The framework with its two exemplary positions, an enlightened self-interest and a deep ecology perspective, shall now be applied to an extended narrative by a purchasing manager who works for a Sports and Utility Vehicles Division of a large multinational car manufacturer (interview with one of the authors, July 2004). The perspective of a supply chain manager is particularly relevant to corporate environmental protection initiatives, as the function is not only enjoying a metamorphosis from a clerical into an increasingly strategic role but it also occupies an important gatekeeper position in any organisation (Lamming and Hampson, 2000; Burt et al., 2003; Preuss, 2005).

1I think it is an issue of social obligation in terms of we are part of the
2community, we are integrated into the community and therefore what we make
3or the environment in which our people work or the products we produce need
4to be sensitive to the social responsibility, including specifically the
5environment, passenger safety, pedestrian safety, etc. etc. And health and
6safety at work is a big issue for us, environmental attitudes within our own
7plant and approaches to environmental certification, and in our suppliers. So I
8think when you have enterprises that are as big and important to certain areas
9of the country you have to have an element of what we would call sustainable

10development within the corporate principles and corporate strategy. You can't

11operate in a vacuum away from all that stuff. … To a certain extent it gives

12you financial benefits from the point of view of cost avoidance … but I also

13think being socially responsible in the kind of business we're in is something

14that is a prerequisite. If you look at a car today, say a [brand name] which

15some people would accuse of being a gas guzzling environmental smoker, the

16emissions now are about 99% less than any car ten years ago in terms of what

17comes out of the exhaust pipe, interestingly enough. So, cars are incredibly

18cleaner in comparison to where they were ten years ago. And a lot of people

19choose to drive those kinds of vehicles and use their money to do that. So,

20when you are involved in that kind of industry with that kind of green issues

21related to it, it is absolutely inevitable that you are going to have to respond to

22it. … To a certain extent it is around avoidance of risk associated with not

23being environmentally responsible and actually spending money to meet

24regulation – or in our case normally to beat regulation requirements – in order

25to sell as best as possible an environmentally friendly product, although we are

26in a business which traditionally has been labelled as not being a friend of the

27environment. … We are very conscious and sensitive about having to be as

28socially responsible and responsive as possible, given the business we are in.

Horizontal reading of the motor industry narrative

As noted earlier, the horizontal reading of the text considers structural, instrumental and integrity-based features in the text. Starting the analysis with the structural features of the motor industry narrative, the choice of vocabulary is noteworthy. The narrative repeatedly refers to "social obligation" (line 1), being "socially responsible and responsive" (line 27). Repetition is also noticeable where the manager wants to emphasise his company's links to the community: "we are part of the community, we are integrated into the community" (lines 1-2). Repetition of topics throughout the text is thus used to create emphasis. The theme of social responsibility is repeated, as are legislative issues, albeit on a smaller scale.

The structure of the text also reinforces the importance of these topics. The narrative begins with an extensive list of issues the company has to address nowadays (lines 4-6), followed by an equally comprehensive catalogue of reasons for addressing these challenges. The narrative then moves on through legislative requirements and, finally, returns to the importance of being socially responsive. References to social responsibility thus frame the text and ensure a dominance of the responsibility theme. In contrast, financial benefits of environmental measures, such as cost avoidance or a marketing advantage, appear almost buried in the middle of the text.

In terms of instrumental features of the text, the interviewee does not seem too concerned with changing 'reader' behaviour towards the environment or his company's products. When dealing with most issues a matter-of-fact style dominates. Still, a certain transformational propensity is observable in the text, which aims to convince the reader that the interviewee, his company and the industry take social responsibilities seriously. "We are…" (lines 1, 25,

26 and 28) for example, emphasises that the individual, the company and the industry all pull in the same direction and hence serve to reassure the reader.

Rhetorical devises are also used to further this cause. The statement that today "cars are incredibly cleaner" (line 17) than they were ten years ago and that it is "absolutely inevitable" (line 20) that the company takes notice of these challenges, are examples of such devices designed to convince the reader of this view. Moreover, by referring to a reduction of pollution levels by "99%" in ten years (line 15) the interviewee uses hyperbole to the same ends. The addition of "interestingly enough" to the "99%" pollution reduction once more serves to reassure the reader of the company's commitment to the environment.

The interviewee also attempts to create a common identity with the reader by using a normalising approach. He refers to "some people", hence presenting a situation where author and reader are jointly outside this circle. In this way, he can claim an alliance with the reader in the hope that this may evoke trust. The use of the odd colloquialism, such as "all that stuff" (line 11) or "a gas guzzling environmental smoker" (line 14-15), also attempts to generate trust through the creation of a common identity. So, there is a concerted, if low key, effort made to influence the reader.

Turning to the integrity of the text, the overall trustworthiness of the text must be considered. Does it show evidence of self-reflection, completeness and consistency? The description of a journey from past to present does indeed testify of a degree of self-reflection, even though this is likely to be caused, at least partly, by societal pressure on business. A degree of reflection is also visible in comments like "we are in a business which traditionally has been labelled as not being a friend of the environment" (lines 25-26). The interviewee is clearly

aware that there are questions that need to be answered about the environmental credentials of the motor industry.

A degree of completeness supplements this self-reflection. The text alludes to the challenges that environmental issues pose, as well as the potential benefits to the organisation. It makes no secret that legislation and cost are drivers of the environmental agenda in the company, as well as a need to meet its social responsibilities. Although the text makes use of language and structure to highlight certain issues, openness and self-reflection also run through the text. A consistent representation is also achieved. Hence, there is plenty of evidence to support the trustworthiness of the text.

Overall, the horizontal reading supports a view that the author is technically proficient in the use of low-key linguistic and structural devices when trying to get his point across. The narrative displays a high degree of trustworthiness, while the text shows a variety of features that focus the reader on the role of corporate social responsibility, cost control, and legislation, in that order.

Vertical reading of the motor industry narrative

How does the motor industry narrative reflect the excellences expressed by the enlightened self-interest and deep ecology positions? It was argued above that an enlightened self-interest perspective would show regard for customer concerns, technical competence in light of legislation, cost cutting and prudent management of resources for sustainability.

There is evidence for regard for customer concerns. Implicitly this theme runs throughout the text using the medium of social obligation, but the link to the customer is also made explicit when the interviewee notes that "a lot of people choose to drive those kinds of vehicles and use their money to do that" (lines 18-19). Technical competence in the light of legislation is shown in two ways. First, it is expressed at a technical level in terms of the advances made, where "the emissions now are about 99% less than any car ten years ago" (line 15). Second, the link to legislation is made clear through the use of phrases such as "it is around avoidance of risk… to meet regulation" (lines 21-23). The discussion of regulation is furthermore related to cost. Not only does meeting environmental legislation allow the company to sell more vehicles, it can also help avoid costly fines. The exact nature of these savings is not spelled out, but they clearly are a factor that is considered.

Where the text is perhaps weakest from the enlightened self-interest perspective is in terms of prudent management of resources for sustainability. The only mention of sustainability is very brief and in the context of corporate strategy: "you have to have an element of what we would call sustainable development within the corporate principles and corporate strategy." (lines 9). Emission reduction is also discussed, but other consequences of product use, most notably petrol consumption and road building, are not addressed. Overall, however, the narrative warrants a positive evaluation when read from the enlightened self-interest perspective.

To what extent are the excellences based in deep ecology apparent in the motor industry narrative? Earlier a range of such excellences was identified, the most important of which are respect for ecosystems, prudence (Shaw 1997), patience and persistence (Cafaro 2001) and practical wisdom characterised by judgement. The motor industry text does meet some of

these criteria although, in general, it has more qualifications and is less explicit in the points made than was the case for the enlightened self-interest perspective. The limits or qualifications applied in the text are apparent when the text is examined for evidence of respect for ecosystems. It seems that the interviewee has some regard for ecosystems, but only indirectly through respect for human communities and their long-term needs. The manager states that his company is "integrated into the community and therefore what we make or the environment in which our people work or the products we produce need to be sensitive to the social responsibility" (lines 2-4). An anthropocentric view of environmental responsibility clearly dominates. The concerns expressed in the narrative address some of the issue raised by Leopold's (1949) work, but they are hardly motivated by an intrinsic love of the beauty of nature.

The implicit nature of the claims made is furthermore demonstrated when the motor industry text is checked for prudence. Prudence is promoted by an awareness that the industry has a high risk of creating damage: "We are very conscious and sensitive about having to be as socially responsible and responsive as possible, given the business we are in." (lines 26-28). This concern is amplified by the legislative requirements discussed above. But in neither case is there a clear and explicit statement that the business is prudent when developing its products.

The presence of persistence is even more implicit. Phrases including "very conscious" (line 26) and as "responsive as possible" (line 27) show a level of awareness that might underpin action. However, it is also noteworthy that this awareness and drive to act is underpinned by an element of compulsion, phrases including "you have to" (line 8) and "it is absolutely inevitable" (line 20) being used frequently. Thus, a number of the excellences are not present

in the motor industry text. Most importantly from a deep ecology point of view, respect for ecosystems is only expressed in an instrumental fashion, through its use to humans and human society.

Overall, the automotive narrative emphasises the social responsibility of the company, together with legislative pressure that is accepted as legitimate. The narrator uses low key linguistic and structural devices to generate trust in the reader/listener of his personal work, his company's and the industry's approach to the natural environment. A degree of self-reflection and comprehensiveness make this a trustworthy narrative. In those respects, it goes some way to meeting the criteria for good quality narratives. The narrative also shows the excellences pertinent to an enlightened self-interest perspective on the natural environment. It does, however, fall short of meeting the excellences required for a deep ecology perspective. Some of these are present, such as prudence, but the instrumental approach to nature clashes with the intrinsic value ascribed to nature by the deep ecology approach. As such, the narrative is likely to be seen as legitimate by those allied to the enlightened self interest perspective. Those who believe that real progress in addressing the environmental impacts of business needs to take heed of the deep ecologists' perspective will find the narrative lacking and be critical of its potential to create meaningful change.

By highlighting that the car industry manager's narrative reflects most of the aspects of the self-enlightened but few aspects of the deep ecology perspective the framework is also able to illustrate social change. Industry today is under immense pressure to take account of the external effects its activities have and managers seem to have internalise at least some aspects of these concerns. By tracking the degree of overlap with the various positions on the role of business in the process of moving towards sustainable development the framework could –

not dissimilar to a litmus test – indicate to what extent the demands of these positions have been met and plot the direction in which industry as a whole, individual companies or individual managers are moving.

CONCLUSIONS

Narrative is increasingly being recognised as an important tool for managing organisations. Narratives, however, have a fluid character, as they can get changed, and even challenged, every time they are re-told. In particular, narratives can express opposition to organisational goals and represent unmanaged space within the organisation (Gabriel, 2000). Correspondingly, management scholars have begun to research the role of narrative in organisational life. What is now needed, however, are tools for evaluating narrative in the light of the contribution they can make to the managing of organisations as well as to our understanding of these management processes.

To this end, a framework for evaluating the quality and legitimacy of a narrative was developed. Building on the work of Barthes (1983) and Fairclough (2001), the framework encompasses two readings, a horizontal and a vertical reading. The horizontal reading analyses a narrative in terms of its structural features, it instrumental propensity and its integrity as a text and aims at an assessment of its quality. The vertical reading judges the narrative in terms of its fit with a particular philosophical, ethical, religious, political or other tradition and is concerned with the assessment of its legitimacy.

The usefulness of the framework has been established by evaluating a narrative on environmental management in the motor industry. In this case the framework showed that the narrative has many of the characteristics associated with good quality on account of its use of its linguistic and structural devices as well as its self-reflective and comprehensive nature. The analysis was also able to draw out value systems underlying the narrative. The narrative meets the excellences associated with an enlightened self-interest approach to the natural environment with a focus on reducing costs, limiting risks and meeting customer expectations. However, little evidence was found to support the excellences that a deep ecology perspective would require.

The framework can also be used to illustrate social change. By identifying a good fit of the automotive narrative with the enlightened self-interest perspective the framework showed that, despite wide-spread cynicism regarding the commitment of business to environmental protection, at least some managers produce narratives that support environmental credentials. At the same time, social pressure over environmental performance is likely to stay with us for the foreseeable future as a gap remains between the values expressed in the narrative and excellences of the deep ecology perspective.

The main contributions of the paper lies in providing a framework that can indicate both the quality and the legitimacy of a narrative in a business context. At the same time the framework can serve as a litmus test for societal change. Nonetheless a number of limitations of the framework must be stated. The confines of a single paper allow little more than presenting the framework itself, which needs testing against a larger number and a greater range of narratives on business and the environment. These could also include longitudinal studies on the way in which narratives within an organisational setting change over time.

Despite these limitations, it is hoped that the paper can make a contribution to management study and practice by leading to a better understanding of the construction of 'reality' by different actors, most importantly management and environmental pressure groups, in such a contested area as the relationship between business and the natural environment.

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