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Title: CREDIBILITY AND DEFAMILIARIZATION IN STRATEGIC PLANS: A NARRATIVE ANALYSIS.

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Abstract: The article presents the study on strategic management which involves a narrative analysis. It discusses how the study was conducted which examined the strategic plan of microbreweries in Ukraine. The study reportedly aims to understand the credibility/defamiliarization dynamic to identify what makes a strategic plan legitimate for readers. The results revealed that the dynamics between credibility and defamiliarization that underlines the strategic plan's effectiveness is due to the set of basic tensions that supports the narrative storyline.

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CREDIBILITY AND DEFAMILIARIZATION IN STRATEGIC PLANS: A NARRATIVE ANALYSIS

INTRODUCTION

Strategic management is in some ways a matter of communication with different stakeholders inside and outside the organization (Abdallah & Langley, 2013; Spee & Jarzabkowski, 2011). Strategic plans constitute an important communication resource central to the managerial strategy work of top and middle managers when they are building the strategic capabilities of the firm. In recent years, a growing body of work has been devoted to the study of strategy texts as communication resources (Abdallah & Langley, 2013; Cornut, Giroux

& Langley, 2012; Daigle & Rouleau, 2010; Pälli, Vaara & Sorsa, 2009; Abdallah, 2007). Most of these works seek to better understand the "genre" of strategy texts by studying the situated dynamic by which they are produced, consumed and appropriated. But few authors have studied the strategic plan exclusively as a text in itself.

This paper is an answer to the invitation of Fenton and Langley (2011) to examine "the narrative form and content of strategy texts to appreciate how narrative elements contribute to their persuasiveness and legitimacy" (p. 1183). More specifically, it proposes a narrative analysis of a strategic plan, and shows how the plan can appear legitimate for its readers by being both credible and defamiliarizing at the same time, as Barry and Elmes (1997) would say. In addition, by focusing on the text itself from a narrative perspective, we are looking at the larger context to which the text relates (Bathia, 2010; Vaara, Sorsa & Pälli, 2010), to produce credibility and defamiliarization for the reader. Our methodology attempts to take up the challenge of integrating a meticulous narrative examination of the plan with the study of the larger contextual discourse in which the plan was produced (Hardy & Phillips, 2004; Alvesson & Karreman, 2000; Fairclough, 1989; Cooren, 2006).

The strategic plan examined was produced by Québec microbrewers and is a case in point to better understand how this narrative dynamic operates. A few years ago, Québec's microbrewers, who had formed an association, initiated a strategic planning process with the aim to "triple their market share over a 10-year period." In a mature market, such an objective at first seemed to make no sense. Therefore, the challenge was to make this strategic discourse credible while proposing a renewed vision of the beer industry. Analysis of this strategic plan reveals three different tensions that structure the narrative dynamic of credibility and defamiliarization on which the plan is based and contribute to build its legitimacy. These tensions are: between proximity and distance, between real and virtual and between similarity and difference.

RESEARCH ON STRATEGIC PLANS

As part of the strategy-as-practice perspective, an increasing number of works have focused on the production, consumption and appropriation of strategic plans in order to better understand their "genre" (Abdallah & Langley, 2013; Giraudeau, 2008; Spee & Jarzabkowski, 2011; Daigle & Rouleau, 2010; MacCallum, 2008). The usual purpose of analyzing strategic plans is to identify the communicational features, or the genre, of this type of organizational discourse (Cornut, Giroux & Langley, 2012; Erickson & Lehtimäki, 2001; MacCallum, 2008; Pälli, Vaara & Sorsa, 2009; Vaara, Sorsa & Pälli, 2010; Wegner, 2004). Hence, there is a consensus on the content of strategic plans as well as on the communicational objectives that characterize them. Strategic plans generally include the following sections: Presentation; Vision and Mission; Strengths, Weaknesses, Threats and Opportunities; Objectives and Strategies (Hodge & Coronado, 2006; MacCallum, 2008; Kirsch, Goldfarb & Gera, 2009). Moreover, we know that strategic plans are generally directive and authoritarian (Erickson & Lehtimäki, 2001; Vaara, Sorsa & Pälli, 2010; MacCallum, 2008) as well as educational, future-oriented and generally optimistic (Cornut, Giroux & Langley, 2012; Pälli, Sorsa & Vaara, 2009; Wegner, 2004). They also contain a form of strategic ambiguity (Abdallah & Langley, 2013; MacCallum, 2008; Pälli, Sorsa & Vaara, 2009).

In this literature, two gaps need to be addressed. First, these works focus mostly on the process of strategizing through the production of the strategy text and its appropriation, thus placing weak emphasis on the text itself. Few authors emphasize the text, and when they do, the main objective is still to study the dynamic of appropriation and its consequences (Abdallah & Langley, 2013, Vaara, Sorsa & Pälli, 2010). Also, an increasing number of authors have demonstrated the capacity of texts to act, to have a concrete agency: to make a difference in a course of action (Cooren, 2004, 2010; Huet, 2010). Yet these authors explain how this is

possible by describing the insertion of the text in a chain of agency, saying that to act, a text must be "appropriated by or attributed to someone" (Cooren, 2004: 8). But to be appropriated by (or attributed to) someone, the content of the text must appear legitimate for the reader (Gabriel, 2004). Thus, to understand how a strategic plan can be appropriated to become an actant per se (Cooren, 2004) and make a difference in organizational life and in the fate of the organization itself, there is a need to better understand what are the intrinsic characteristics on which its legitimacy for the reader will rely. There is a need to go deeper in the analysis of the strategic plan itself. Focusing exclusively on the text will help to better understand strategy texts as a resource for the practice of strategy.

The second gap to be addressed concerns the nature of the context under scrutiny in the analysis. Studies on strategic plans generally propose a restrictive view of the context, leaving little room to the larger social context in which the plan was developed, as if strategic plans were not connected with the social context (Anderson, 2004; Abdallah & Langley, 2013). However, any discourse is anchored in a social context, and this larger context (social/sociological variables, sociopolitical and historical background) needs to be taken into consideration in the analysis of the text (Wodak, 2001: 67) Consequently, a strategic plan, like any other type of discourse or communication, is the product of a social context and is embedded in different levels of discourse (Bakhtin, 1981). It is the embeddedness of these discourses that reinforces the plausibility and the legitimacy of the strategic plan. This is what Fisher (1984) has called narrative fidelity, which we interpret as being the extent to which the story relates to one's life experience and larger context of meaning. Fisher explains the need for a relationship to a broader social/political/historical context in order for a narrative to be plausible and legitimate for the reader (Fisher, 1984: 16). Thus, we propose to focus the textual analysis of the strategic plan on this text-context relationship in order to understand how the foundation for its legitimacy is constructed in the text itself.

The study of this text-context relationship will allow us to shed light on what Barry and Elmes (1997) call the narrative dynamic of defamiliarization and credibility of a strategic plan. Barry and Elmes (1997) assert that in order to be effective regarding appropriation and implementation, strategic plans must seem both novel and credible. Indeed, the strategic plan must convince its audience that it generates a vision of the world that renews the company's discourse (that it is a text which can be appropriated and acted upon) and that it is credible in relation to a given context (that is legitimate and plausible, that has narrative fidelity). In this way, these authors evoke the existence of a narrative dynamic of defamiliarization/credibility that is typical of strategic plans. Again according to Barry and Elmes (1997), these two characteristics work in conjunction: extremely credible strategic plans are not necessarily motivating, while overly novel narratives tend to lack credibility.

Consequently, the goal of this paper is to better understand the credibility/ defamiliarization dynamic in order to fill the gaps previously identified, namely the lack of studies focusing on the text itself and its characteristics that foster appropriation and legitimacy, and the lack of studies addressing the reference to the larger socio-politico-historical context that gives the strategic plan narrative fidelity and plausibility. To address these gaps, we will respond to the recent calls to study strategy texts using a narrative approach (Brown & Thompson, 2013; Fenton & Langley, 2011). This will allow us to better understand what makes a strategic plan legitimate for its readers.

STRATEGIC PLANS AS NARRATIVES

In a recent paper, Fenton and Langley (2011) strongly demonstrated the potential of studying strategy texts as narratives, a position recently approved by Brown and Thompson (2013):

"narratives are a fundamental form of 'meaning making' most often preoccupied with 'human actions and events that affect human beings'. [...] in organizations we collectively make sense 'through jointly negotiated narratives' which 'make the unexpected expectable' and help us to 'predict future organizational behavior'. This is particularly evident in times of strategic change, where good stories are treasured means of preserving plausibility and coherence." (1147)

Indeed, Fenton and Langley stress that "The study of the rhetorical and narrative structure of strategy texts can clearly be valuable in itself to understand their persuasive effects" (2011: 1182), and also that "...formal strategic plans, [...] help to construct prospective narratives that both constrain and enable actors in their future activity" (2011: 1186). As many authors have studied the practices associated with the production, consumption and appropriation of strategic plans, we focus on the text in itself as well as the social context in which the plan is embedded, meaning the context to which it refers (building credibility) and that it serves to redefine (building defamiliarization).

To understand how the narrative dynamic of credibility/defamiliarization is inscribed in a strategic plan, we propose to examine it according to three "contextual levels" that we can assign to the text and that allow us to study it as a narrative in relation to a larger context. These contextual levels are: the enunciation context, the internal context, and the intertextual context.

These three contexts are inferred from our readings and appropriation of important literary analysts (Eco, 1979; Greimas, 1989; Genette, 1988; Angenot, 2004). Eco, in particular, argues that to be understood and appropriated, every text (that he conceives as narratives), must be "read" according to different "contexts" inferred by the reader (Eco, 1979). The enunciation context concerns the narrative's relation to the reader, the "reading contract" between the narrator and the author (Eco, 1979). For this level of analysis we use interpretive semiotic analysis (Genette, 1988). The internal context refers to the narrative's internal coherence with regard to the story; it concerns the meaning built by the structure of the narrative (Eco, 1979). For this level of analysis we rely on structural semiotic analysis (Greimas, 1989). Finally, the intertextual context concerns the narrative's relations with other discourses, such as the social, political and historical discourses, to which it refers and from which it draws (called the "encyclopedia" by Eco, 1979). For this level of analysis we rely on sociocritical literary analysis (Angenot, 2004). See Figure 1 to understand the three levels of contexts that the reader must infer in order to understand and appropriate the text.

We demonstrate in this paper that through a narrative analysis consisting of a meticulous literary analysis applied to each level, we can explain how the strategic positioning is narratively legitimized through a set of tensions that allow the strategic plan to appear credible and novel at the same time.

METHODOLOGY

The plan analysed in this paper was produced by Québec microbrewers between 2005 and 2007. The microbrewers undertook a strategic planning process to position themselves in a hostile industry. To support their actions, the strategic discourse they proposed had to be credible and also propose a renewed vision of the beer industry. The goal was not only to document the consensuses that had been established during the planning, but also to present the strategy to future members and collaborators. In this way, the plan was used as an important resource to implement the strategy and as a promotional tool. The analysis of this plan is the basis for this paper.

To study the narrative dynamic of credibility/defamiliarization inscribed in the text, we apply our three levels of narrative analysis to the strategic plan produced by Québec's microbrewers. We also thoroughly scrutinize and analyze a large amount of specialized and general media texts as well as statistics and other relevant industry

documents to reconstruct the socio-politico-historical context from 2005 to 2007 and draw links with the strategic plan.

THE NARRATIVE DYNAMIC OF CREDIBILITY/DEFAMILIARIZATION AND ITS TENSIONS

The narrative analysis of the microbrewers' strategic plan reveals three narrative tensions that structure the credibility/defamiliarization dynamic (see Figure 2): a tension of distance and proximity that is implicit in the plan's reading contract; a tension between what is real and what is virtual that structures the storyline of the strategic narrative and the proposed representation of the brewing world; a tension of similarity and difference with the brewing industry's social discourse that is present in the plan. These tensions are intrinsically connected and strengthen one another.

CONCLUSION

The narrative analysis of the Québec microbrewers' strategic plan shows that the credibility/defamiliarization dynamic that underlies the narrative effectiveness of a strategic plan is the result of a set of fundamental tensions that structure the narrative storyline. It is the entanglement of these tensions in a coherent and balanced manner that allows the strategic plan to be potentially appropriated or attributed, to "act," to do things, as Cooren (2004) would say. Through this credibility/defamiliarization dynamic, the strategic plan narratively positions the microbrewers in the agri-food sector. The microbrewers' strategic plan does not just describe and analyze the situation, and then propose solutions. By presenting a strategic plan that respects the recognized discursive rules and the genre of the plan as it introduces discursive transgressions (Bakhtin, 1981), it proposes a legitimate discourse to rally potential readers and help these readers reach their goals.

CONTRIBUTIONS

This study makes many contributions. First, it enriches our knowledge of the narrative dynamic of credibility and defamiliarization (Berglund, Strannegard & Tillberg, 2004; Morrell, 2008; Page, 2005; Walter, 2004). Until now, this dynamic has been demonstrated mostly through the existence of hybrid terms that reshape paradoxes or through the use of new metaphors, analyzing the vocabulary or what is called the text's surface structure. By adopting a narrative approach, this study demonstrates how this dynamic is structurally written into the overall text, in its deep structure, in relation to a larger social context. Moreover, while we already know a lot about the way a text is made credible (by using the rhetoric of certainty, scientific language, technical expertise or numbers), the same cannot be said with regards to defamiliarization. This study innovates be looking at both of these dimensions and what connects them.

Then, this study helps advance the work on strategic plans in the strategy-as-practice perspective (Anderson, 2004; Bryson, Crosby & Bryson, 2009; Spee & Jarzabkowski, 2011; Giraudeau, 2008; MacCallum, 2008; Pälli, Vaara & Sorsa, 2009; Samra-Fredericks, 2003; Vaara, Sorsa & Pälli, 2010). On one hand, it analyzes the text itself in relation to a larger context rather than to its production or appropriation. Moreover, it goes beyond works on the genre of this type of discourse and examines what makes the narrative's legitimacy and effectiveness in regard to potential appropriation and implementation. This study also proposes an enriched vision of the context which goes beyond the organizational context as is generally the case for most current works. Moreover, it proposes a method for analyzing the social discourse contained in the strategic text.

Finally, this study contributes to the narrative analysis of strategic texts (public policies, hearings, documents and so forth) by integrating levels of narrative analysis which are not generally put together. By looking at the reading contract, the storyline and the social discourse contained in the text, this study allows for a better understanding of the narrative dynamics that are the basis for appropriation and dissemination. It is in this dynamic that the agency of an organizational text is located (Cooren, 2004).

Figure 1: Levels of Analysis of the Strategic Plan as Narrative

Figure 2: The Credibility/Defamiliarization Dynamic and Its Tensions

REFERENCES AVAILABLE FROM THE AUTHORS

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