Hyperion Commentary, Tamara Organizing: Reply to Krizanc

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ABSTRACT

This is a reply to an essay that John Krizanc sent to me. Krizanc (1989) is also the author of the Tamara play. I have applied Tamara to organizing (Boje, 1995). Here I want to look at some of the consequences of interactive organizing that is theorized as a postmodern narrative.

Producers and consumers meet in the narrative space we call 'organizing.' As Roland Barthes (1970) put it, "the goal of a literary work is to make the reader no longer a consumer but a producer of the text" (S/Z). In questioning the position of the narrative in relation to the producer and consumer of organizing, this essay challenges the role of consumer sovereignty that makes consumers the sole authors of organizing.

This is what we have done to organizations; made the consumer the producer of the organizing, which is then consumed in a more pluralistic organization. In Barthe's (1970: 11-12) terms, "plural text." The consequence is that we as producers, must develop a flexible organizing, one that anticipates the options the consumer will choose at each point in the production process. We have made the consumer the author of production. We provide the consumer with a participative experience in the production process. In this way the narrative space of organizing makes the author (producer) subservient to the anticipated choice matrix of each consumer. It also moves us from a linear to a non-linear and polyphonic narrative space that is a "hermaphrodite." A hermaphrodite is a type of perfect beauty because it contains the greatest amount of variety within a unified whole. Producers now facilitate the experience and interaction of consumer with production in a co-evolving narrative, where beauty is defined by choice-complexity.

The consequence of hermaphrodite organizing is that each word of the story, each element of organizing has meaning. The consumer and producer co-generate meaning through each word choice in the story. The meaning of organizing is not a linear beginning-middle-end linearity, but rises like the mist from each element of choice as the organizing unfolds. Meaning becomes a nimbus, a rain-producing cloud that surrounds organizing, and we assume the bright aura of this cloud is a beautiful halo surrounding the goddess organizing. Meaning is not the story's conclusion, nor its design, but it is how everything signifies something to the consumer who now is a co-producer.

The idea that organizing could move from linear narrative to co-produced consumer narrative inspired the flexible organizing of the last several decades. Instead of the consumer passively following a linear sequence imposed by a producer (author), the way organizing must be in bureaucratic organizing; the consumer began to make supplementary choices, facilitated by the narrator, to the main options (car is black, car is red, car is green). By the 1990s the drug of interactivity was just too tempting a fiction for authors of organizing to resist. The consumer was allowed to mess with the sequence of production without a co-producing narrator. This made organizing like a hypertext novel (choose the color, interior, model, tires, etc. in an order you like).

In the co-producer model, consumers could produce subtle variations, in the company of a helpful narrator. The narrator reveals what will happen if the consumer chooses over-size tires, a small engine, and a sporty frame. The consumer could be told the same story by the narrator, from multiple points of view (Durrell's Alexandria), or be left alone to push the "random sequence" option (Cortazar's Hopscotch). In both the " co-producer with narrator companion" and the "random button" model, the consumer eventually arrives at some satisfactory choice.

In the full interactive model of organizing, the consumer can stumble through the production process, the narrative labyrinth, alone (no narrator). Instead of producer organizing, we come to the postmodern condition of consumer organizing. The organization becomes a "Tamara" where consumers choose which characters to follow, and which rooms to enter in a real mansion. "Since they can physically only follow one scene at a time, the choice they make determines the play they see." In effect, the consumers write their own play.

Consumers may not reflect upon what the choices they make about the production process they write/author indicates about themselves. The consumer can elect to keep the price so low, that the cost of labor turns every factory into a sweatshop, and every ecosystem into a toxic site of waste and pollution. The growing cadre of postmodern organizing gurus who wax poetic about the interactive organization, suggest that consumer involvement democratizes the organizing process. Interactivity is seen as a vehicle for the enfranchisement of the creatively challenged consumer. Finally Valley Bart Simpson can co-produce with Henry Ford. But beneath this seductive promise of a new business Eden there's some serious hierarchical-patriarchal butt-kicking going on (paraphrasing Krizanc).

Consumer sovereignty over the production process means issues that should properly be decided in a political economy arena of stakeholder debate are reduced to consumer choice making. Cries for inclusion in the production process by workers of the Third world are met with indifference; voices go unheard. Fatigued with the real battle of exploitation, organization theorists following the consumer model have retreated into the aesthetics of the art of organizing. We have confused the distinction between the world of production life and the word; they attack the hierarchy of organizing by a producing author, as if it mirrored some political hierarchy. The consequence of the interactive consumer turned producer model is more oppressive work conditions.

Making consumer into hermaphrodite, for the perfect beauty of organizing, increased the variety of choice, but has not improved the quality of work life or ecology. The greatest amount of consumer choice gives a sense of consumer belonging, but chains producing talent to the crack house of interactivity; there shall no organizing Gods above consumer.

In the new quantum mechanics paradigm of organizing, we are told to forget narrative trajectory of Newton with its linear beginning, middle, and end; linearity is fascist organizing. Organizers must surrender to interactivity, and free the consumer from the tyranny of the producer/author. The tyrannical producer forces the consumer to ploddingly follow the plot. Only the consumers' entreaties matter. Since the consumer cares not about wage or ecology, then none shall care. However, it is more complex than that.

Factions of consumers are organizing to plead with producers to earnestly organize in eco-sustainable ways that gives workers living wages. A system that only gives voice to the consumer keeps workers and ecology disenfranchised. The fantasy persists that by giving the consumer more

choice in organizing the production process; there will be more effective organizations, ones with higher quality, lower cost, and more sustainability.

In the interactive consumer model, with a virtual click of the cursor the consumer renders the totalitarian bureaucracy into a democracy. In virtual organizing, each consumer can decide how much is paid to workers, the stock options of executives, where a component is produced, how much quality to incorporate into the final product, when to disobey environmental laws.

In the virtual interactive organizing fiction, the consumer does not encounter real life. Consumers are so busy clicking buttons, making choices about design options; they think they are participating in something real. "But choice alone, is not freedom." You do not get to sustainable ecology, living wage, or control of executive (over) compensation by clicking the remote control. The consumer is still a passive participant in the fictional world of global commerce. The consumer is preoccupied with choices of color, fabric, memory capacity, and has no idea who makes the components, under what conditions, and with what environmental consequences. In this way the consumer model is no better than the producer model of organizing; the business of raping and pillaging continues.

The consumer has adopted the same methods at his oppressor. It is possibly worse. The producer in the interactive-consumer model, is condemned to be the victim of the insatiable choice-appetite of the consumer, who demands options in every aspect of the plot. This means the producers and managers must write not one but a hundred plots, anticipating whatever the consumer made decide. The sheer volume of organizing subroutines necessary to satiate the whims of the interactive consumer

If we move to the next level of virtual organizing, where neither consumer nor producer controls choices, where both consumer and producers become dead authors and the digital program takes over, the consequences get direr. In Barthe's (1986: 52-53) essay "The Death of the Author", he writes, text "consists not of a line of words, releasing a single 'theological' meaning (a communication from the Author/God), but of a multidimensional space in which are married and contested several writings, none of which is original: the text is a fabric of quotations, resulting from a thousand sources of culture."

It becomes more difficult to trace who is in control of the narrative, who programs the plot twists and turns. The organizing narrative becomes self-designing and self-articulating, divorced from producer, programmer, and consumer. The process has so many choice points, it is so complex, heterogeneous, and convoluted in design options that it is a living organic thing that no map can represent. The narrative plot is divorced from both producer and consumer.

The virtual author of the organizing narrative has been removed from accountability. Producers and consumers meet in organizing spaces where representations of class, gender, and ethnicity, moral, or ecological values have no trace. Consumers and producers read these digital spaces, and make organizing decisions that exclude stakeholders who suffer the consequences of their exclusion. The experience of a teenager in Thailand, making Disney toys will be very different from a gleeful consumer who purchases Big Mac with Mickey Mouse plaything. Stakeholders in the global supply and distribution chain read the virtual spaces differently than the interactive consumer intended. They read them from their socially constructed experience of organizing and producing.

Consumers and producers do not see through the digital façade to what are the material conditions of production. The organizing construct, its mapped representations are always incomplete. The

maps are simplified to appeal to consumers who live a quick paced life, in a rhythm where speed counts for more than dialogic investigation; who has time to include all the stakeholders? A dialogic investigation would trace the physical conditions and networks beneath the surface of the virtual representation. Globalization would attain a social and ecological context, where overlapping layers are explored using the high-power interactive interface of human and digital world.

The organizing narrative would unfold as a result of multiple stakeholder participation. This would mean that neither consumer nor producer would be sovereign. The programmers would need to address problems of transparency and opacity. The screens would need to illustrate the consequences of choices. Cybermalls and virtual workplaces would need to include the voice of the voiceless. The happy and tidy digital images would need to give way to the reality of city pollution, traffic, and chaos.

This puts an incredible burden on the organizers of production and consumption. The author must now write hundreds, but thousands of plats, anticipate consequences of choices, provide interactive spaces for stakeholders to dialog, and create ports of access to the voiceless. Even if such a system existed, when list serves and chat rooms get larger than a few participants, people quit the process. It is too time consuming; there are too many messages; take me off this list. I hove noticed in web-linked-texts the reader does not enjoy being presented with too many alternatives. Yet, in the Barthe model, every word has a multiplicity of meanings, and presents an intertextual transport point to other worlds.

Organizing is caught between the limits of linearity and overload. Ironically, both linearity and complexity (interactive stakeholder dialog) leads us to common humanity, to a view of the real. Too much

choice destroys the author's ability to create empathy for characters whose worldviews do not correspond to their own. With consumer sovereignty, the post-producer clicks a button, and poof, the character is reimagined as compatible in worldview to the consumer. The reader sees himself reflected in the narrative that appears on the screen.

Defenders might argue that the consumer ultimately writes the whole organizing text. The consumer is the market. They say the producer's task is only to design a labyrinth of multiple plots the consumer will enjoy. It the consumer does not like one labyrinth of organizing they will choose another -- the market rules. Starbuck, for example, provides a labyrinth where one choice brings you organic latte, another from the most oppressive plantations of Brazil. Interactivity turns Starbuck into the fiction of a sustainable and responsible corporate citizen (you don't like to oppress the peasant, then choose this type of coffee). Interactivity exposes the producer as huckster. The organization is desperate to cling to the legs of every passing consumer, begging them to stay.

In our battle to purge corporations of their impurities, we have turned first to consumer sovereignty, then expanded interactivity to include all possible stakeholders. The new hybrid firms such as Starbuck offer both exploitation and humane coffee. Consumers struggle to pierce the façade of public image management to find out just how organic and humane that coffee really is. Faced with the proliferation of choices and network options for plot involvement, consumers find the processes overwhelming. Firms are experimenting with new ways consumers and producers can participate in ways that is not overwhelming.

Social construction theories of organizing can no longer be content with a cognitive model. Rather, the maps must include material conditions. New ways of organizing

must evolve to deal with deteriorating ecology, without jettisoning the consumer by overflowing them with choice points and intertext demands. Consumers will need to become more savvy to ways they can deconstruct corporate PR, and find ways to lobby their concerns.

Storytelling is no longer a single author telling stories around the campfire; storytelling in global commerce is a corporate media event, where PR agents are the new tricksters. The cyber-myth is that through greater interactivity in computers space, consumers and producers will access the virtual library of knowledge-texts and be empowered by democratic dialog. Barthe defined myth as depoliticized speech. The information revolution of globalization is more illusion than democratic accomplishment. In the 1970s globalization became the buzz word, the way for Fordist production systems to meet the niche needs of differentiated consumer markets. Never mind national sovereignty or labor organizing, the transnational corporations had figured a way to do mass business while offering consumers product choices. The post-Fordist economy was shored up with NAFTA, WTO, IMF, and World Bank. The Internet revolution of the 1980s and 1990s led to the myth that when the computer married flexible production processes, a virtual utopia was being born. Consumers and producers would utilize virtual communication to bring the utopia organizing into being. Each year we have developed more ways to adapt production to consumer preference.

It is not utopia. Virtual organizing is not accessible to everyone. When it is accessible, we buy equipment and software that has to be debugged by consumers who are told to make adjustments or install patches to prefect the product. Combining tasks, such as making quality a job of the assembler, eliminates jobs. AT&T owns the largest cable television firm Media One. General Electric owns NBC, Viacom owns CBS, Disney owns ABC, AOL-Time Warner owns Turner Broadcasting. Bertelsmann owns Random House publishing and Vivendi, the French telecommunications firm (merged with Seagram of Canada and Sony movies.

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