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Book Review

A Timely Addition in the Study of Narrative

Sandford Borins and Beth Herst. 2018. *Negotiating Business Narratives: Fables of the Information Technology, Automobile Manufacturing, and Financial Trading Industries*. Cham, Switzerland: Springer. 78 pp.

Sandford Borins and Beth Herst's new book, *Negotiating Business Narratives: Fables of Information Technology, Automobile Manufacturing and Financial Trading Industries*, systematically distills the contemporary narratives associated with the three business sectors identified in the title of the book. In contrast to the historically dominant interpretive narrative approaches to public administration and policy (e.g., Dodge, Ospina, and Foldy 2005), the approach in this research is rooted in classical structural narratology. Such an approach situates this text very much within recent trends in the study of narrative in public policy (e.g., Jones 2018). Structural approaches to narrative are explicitly deductive and theory driven and thus seek to identify narrative within different social, political, and institutional contexts toward the end of generalizable theory. As such, this research is focused narrowly on business industries, but the broader aim of the authors is to develop generalizable conceptions of narrative that are portable to different contexts. My read of this short text (78 pages) is that the authors have most certainly been successful on the first front and have taken the field another valuable step toward the second.

Working from the structural premise of narratology, Borins and Herst efficiently detail their definition of private sector narratives in their opening chapter. Tapping much of the literature you would expect to see in this type of discussion (e.g., Bruner 1990; Propp 1968) the authors leverage and slightly modify Borins' previous work (Borins 2011), which focused on public-sector narratives. The business industry operationalization of Borins' previous work identifies three salient aspects of narrative: the protagonist of the narrative, society, and the corporate entity, where each is understood as either winning or losing. The winning and losing binary allows for each aspect to be understood as an independent narrative dimension. Intersecting the three dimensions produces an eight-cell analytic matrix—or what might just as easily be understood as eight archetypal business industry narratives ranging from corporate nirvana where all three aspects are winners to corporate nightmare where everyone losses. Using this deductive three-dimensional coding scheme, the authors then proceed to describe their data.

In terms of which narrative patterns the authors are interested in, they focus on three business industries: information technologies, automobile manufacturing, and the financial trade industry. Across those three industries, they examine 35 years of US films, TV series, books, and similar narrative texts. To be selected for inclusion a text must have clearly identified a protagonist, focused on the protagonist's experience with an organization or industry, and needed to have a "significant cultural profile" (p. 10). This sifting process produced a total of 63 texts across the three business industries (a full list, by industry, is provided in an appendix). The next three chapters of the book focus on the dominant narrative patterns identified for each of the three industries.

Chapter 2 details the authors' findings related to the information technology (IT) business industry. Most readers should be at least vaguely familiar with some of the narratives captured in the individual films, books, and the like that were coded for this chapter of the book. These stories include the rise of Apple and Microsoft, with the central roles of Bill Gates and Steve Jobs, as well as their relationship to one another. The chapter also captures the rise of more recent tech companies including Amazon, Google, Facebook, Twitter, and Uber. Borins and Herst find that the nirvana fable is the dominant narrative in the IT industry. The generic arc of this story is that there is an incredible idea proffered by a protagonist who flaunts normal business conventions, the idea gets noticed and garners support from investors, and consumers benefit from having access to the idea. In this story everyone wins. This chapter also identifies two recessive narratives including the thrown-over partner and the nightmare of the failed IT startup.

Chapter 3 focuses on narrative findings related to the auto industry. Their findings here show that the narratives about the auto industry do not neatly cluster predominantly in one of the eight cells. Despite the lack of a dominant narrative, Borins and Herst identify a common thread throughout the coded narratives. They observe that regardless of which cell a narrative was coded into there is a common thread among most that made the CEO of the auto company a focal point of the narrative. While there are several references to the importance of auto industry CEOs within the chapter, several characters receive more attention than others, including Lee Iaocca's turnaround at Chrysler, Alan Mulally's success at Ford, GM Roger Smith's dubious depiction by Michael Moore in *Roger and Me*, and Elon Musk's characteristically positive depiction with Tesla.

Chapter 4 details the narrative findings of the finance industry. For this collection of narrative data, the dominant narratives are overwhelmingly about "corporate wrong doing" (p. 38). Much of the data for this industry were familiar to me as I suspect they will be for many who read this book—including high profile documentaries such as *Inside Job* and films such as *The Big Short*, *Margin Call*, and the *Wolf of Wall Street*. Categorizing these stories into the eight cells, Borins and Herst observe tales of corporate rip-offs, inside jobs, and, most frequently, the corporate nightmare. The authors identify only two finance industry narratives that show favorably. The authors generalize about their findings observing that "…in their own way each of these narratives manifests tensions between individual agency, systemic failure (corruption and dysfunction), and complexity" (p.44).

The concluding chapter of the book, Chapter 5, is a brief summary of the chapters that also preemptively speaks to potential criticisms such as noting that their study does not seek to "prove the social impact of the narratives it analyzes" (p.59). The authors conclude by arguing that their approach is broadly applicable, beyond that of the three business industries examined here.

The research presented by Borins and Herst is conveyed in a well-written fashion and notable in its brevity. Indeed, the individual chapters are presented in an engaging style of prose that help their research findings glow with a slight aura of entertainment, which no doubt is assisted by the popularity of their subject matter. The brevity is also a strength, as it is uncharacteristic of narrative research more generally to tell short stories about stories. There is, however, one issue to which I would like to draw the reader's attention.

By the time I finished reading the book, I found myself wanting more information about how the data were coded, as the lack of clarity can at times undercut the thrust of some of the findings. For example, in chapter 3 the authors draw a distinction between the CEO of the auto industry (e.g., Lee Iacocca) as the "center who changes everything" (p. 25) and the process-focused IT stories, where these industries are found to have less central CEO type characters, yet they too also seem to feature incredibly central personalities such as Bill Gates and Steve Jobs. This is a distinction used by the authors to characterize the main difference between the IT and auto industry's meta-stories, but without clearly harkening back to the coding that brought the distinction about, the difference between the two is less compelling than it could have been. There are similar issues elsewhere; however, given the wide range of acceptable narrative coding techniques that exist, I could hardly label this a fatal flaw. I think of it more as a niggling hindrance that slightly enervates the overall potency of the findings.

Despite the issue mentioned above, I think this book has much to recommend. Analyzing popular culture narratives, this research effectively describes the narratives of three business industries. It does this quite well. The research also aspires to being generalizable to other contexts. Borins' earlier work (Borins 2011) certainly helps make the case for generalizability, yet there is probably not enough specifically within this work to indicate the approach is truly generalizable. Still, there is quite enough to entice a potential narrative researcher to give it a try. The theoretical approach is clear and would no doubt be easy enough to replicate. While it never aspires to answer questions addressing the actual influence of narratives, on whom, by whom, or how individuals might come to accept or reject those narratives, it does tantalizingly provoke such questions and at least intimates how one might go about trying to answer them. In this sense, this research should garner the most attention from public administration and policy scholars with general interest in the study of narrative and, more narrowly, by those interested in the narrative intersection of the public sector and business. The former makes it a keeper for my bookshelf. The latter likely only applies to a niche audience of JPART's readership, but, given a national and global circumstance characterized by almost instant information flows and increasingly complex interactions between business and government, I suspect interest in the narrative intersection between business and the public sector will only increase.

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