Editing narratives of change. Identity and legitimacy in complex innovative infrastructure organizations

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This paper is based on two PhD projects on cultural change and innovation in complex infrastructural networks. The research projects focus on alternative ways in which particular narratives (and counter narratives) are transformed into organizational practice. Data collection is based on ethnographic reconstruction. In this paper we will argue that the acceptance, adoption and dissemination of narratives in innovation based contexts is closely linked to processes of identification and legitimation. We will introduce and analyze two cases in which different types of organizational enactment occur: the case of the Dutch Railways and the case of the ministry of Transport, Public Works and Water Management. We conclude that four types of change scripts (blind scripts, dynamic scripts, transformative scripts and direct scripts) are related to the discursive practices that occur in dynamic processes of organizational change. These change scripts lead us to a better understanding of innovation dynamics, especially regarding the ways narratives of change are transformed into praxis through processes of social editing.

Keywords: Narratives of change, editing, identity, legitimacy, railways, public works, water management

1. Introduction

Traditionally the provision of stable infrastructures has been the responsibility of the public sector. However, in the last decades, many tasks and services have been delegated and assigned to private organizations or semi-autonomous organizations that operate at the intersection between the public and private sector. Furthermore, there has been an increasing tendency towards the separation of management and exploitation of public services. At the same time, society has become increasingly dependent upon the stability and security of critical infrastructures and problems with regard to the quality of service delivery are subject to public scrutiny and receive wide attention from all sorts of media. The developments in the infrastructure sector are in line with developments in other arenas in the public sphere. In the last few decades, the discourse in the public sector has come to be dominated by the New Public Management (NPM) doctrine. The logic behind this doctrine seems clear. Improved accountability, performance measurements, competition and cost reduction should lead to more efficient, effective and customer oriented public organizations (e.g. [22,24,33]). This point of view is indicative of the discourses of homogenization that have traditionally dominated the field of public management and organization.

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studies, which basically assumed that successful organizational practices could be spread universally.

Today, most scholars in the field recognize the local variations and give credit to the micro particularities of organizational settings. As Thomas and Davies [44] and Veenwijk [47] among others argue, many innovations and (cultural) changes in public organizations indeed seem, from a ‘frontstage’ point of view, to be congruent with the NPM discourse, yet, the ‘backstage’ reality (or lived experience) of such change programs are much more ambiguous and complex. Whereas traditionally, the NPM principles were approached in a rather instrumental, deterministic and unidirectional way [44], scholars today are much more sensitive to the plurality, conflicts and resistance of organizational practices. An increasing number of studies focus on the actual backstage, or microcosm [31], processes of micro-resistance [44], local meanings, or sensemaking processes [47] that are involved with organizational change.

This paper illustrates how programs to reform or modernize public organizations lead to increased complexity, which arouses feelings of insecurity and uncertainty amongst the actors involved. Public and private organizations continuously need to reposition and redefine themselves in relation to each other, within the organizational field and within society. This leads to high levels of ambiguity and uncertainty for the organizations involved, as difficult processes of organizational change to solve the dilemmas and tensions that arise in sectors such as health care, education or infrastructure reveal. The actors involved (public organizations and the organizational members) no longer have a stable or coherent reference system from which to understand what the organizational activities are all about, to determine its direction or to define one’s position in the field: “Today, there is no distinct, widespread language giving meaning to the specific activities carried out in public organizations. Public organizations lack ways to make sense of or relate their experiences to well-known and widely-accepted meanings” [36, p. 76]. The increased complexity in the context of public organizations, the focus towards private businesses’ management practices, the lack of clear and stable meaning systems and reliable experiences of (new) organizational practices bring about feelings of insecurity and uncertainty and lead to a search for new identities.

We adopt a cultural approach towards organizations and organizational change in line with the interpretive stream of research (grounded in a social constructionist tradition). In this view, organizations are seen as cultural phenomena where the emphasis should not be on ‘organization’ as a noun, but rather on ‘organizing’ as a process [48]. In this approach, culture is perceived as an interpretive frame that guides behaviour and processes of sensemaking. These frames consist of dynamic (yet institutionalized) webs of meaning and significance that are embedded in the local context of those settings in which the frame operates [17,37]. In this perspective, actors are constantly involved in processes of sensemaking and the (re)construction of meaning through intersubjective interactions with other actors and with their
The process of sensemaking involves the creation of texts, which are subsequently reinforced in conversations and actions [42].

This approach is in line with a growing field of research into the role of language and discourse in organizational life. Within this broad organizational discourse stream, a substantial group of researchers specifically focus on the role of stories and narratives in organizations and organizational change (e.g. [1,2,8,13,14,16,28,30,43]. Conceptualizing organizational life as story making [10] or organizations as storytelling systems [3] attributes to our understanding of organizational change. It enables us to view organizational change as a socially constructed reality and to identify and analyze the various discourses that formulate and articulate organizational cultural changes [19,20]. Given that organizations consist of multiple discourses [3] or networks of conversations [13,14] it can be argued that organizational (cultural) change involves a process of negotiated meaning – a struggle between various positions within dominant and alternative discourses or counter narratives.

Since narratives and stories are important sensemaking devices [3,6,7,10,11,15,48] they provide an important insight into the everyday processes of negotiating meaning among organizational actors. A focus on the pluralistic and polyphonic character of organizations [23] allows us to be perceptive of the hegemonic character of discourse [3,6,7,23]. It facilitates the understanding of competing discourses, processes of marginalization and exclusion, and differentiating or fragmentizing forces that exist within organizations. Only by recognizing the existence of multiple discourses one is able to move beyond the dominant discourse and do justice to the micro-politics of resistance [44] and power struggles that take place between (groups of) organizational actors in a continuous search for legitimation of their actions. In other words, when we view organizations as webs of conversations through which meaning is negotiated, shared and contested [23], analyzing the “mechanisms used to legitimate and deligitimate particular ideas” [18, p. 370] is central to understanding organizational change processes.

Despite the increasing attention for the existence of multiple discourses and counter narratives, less is known about how particular narratives and counter narratives find their way into the organization: some narratives are adopted and disseminated throughout the organization or even beyond, while others may not prevail; some alternative interpretations and definitions of the situation become widely accepted, while others might never be recognised. By analyzing two cases of large-scale organizational change in the public sector of the Netherlands, we will try to gain an insight into the ways in which organizational actors strategically use them to cope with the uncertainties and ambiguities involved with organizational change. The data presented in this paper are taken from two ongoing studies in organizations connected to the Dutch Ministry of Transport, Public Works and Water Management. The first is a study at the former state-owned railway company (NS), which was denationalized in 1995 and has undergone a series of major changes since, and the second is a study at the Department of Public Works and Water Management (RWS), which recently (2006) changed into an agency (decentralized, but within the ministerial structure.
and responsibility). Both these organizations have undergone significant changes that have had far fetching implications for the actors involved.

2. Case illustration 1 – Dutch railways: ‘Circling around the church’

“Incomprehension and powerlessness. Those are the words that best describe the conflict about ‘circling around the church’ at the Dutch Railways. Strikes, barricades, death threats, and resigning top-managers. Personnel collectives, fighting union leaders, crying conductors, raging passengers and trains that fall to pieces on the tracks. For three years the conflict at NS was a dramatic stage of unprecedented proportion” [50, p. 7].

This fragment, from the preface of the book by a Dutch newspaper journalist, refers to the controversial plans of the Dutch former state railway company (NS) to simplify the duty roster of employees on the trains, which have become known under the label ‘circling around the church’ (rondje om de kerk). These plans, which involve fixed routes for most staff-members, were part of the reorganization plan ‘Destination: Customer’ (Bestemming: Klant). The plans were supposed to change the ruling procedures where drivers and conductors were travelling across the country to get to work, leading to accumulation of delays because trains and passengers had to wait for the personnel to arrive.

At the organizational level, ‘Destination: Customer’ was developed to reduce the extreme delays and poor service level, to prepare the way for the planned liberalization of the railway market, and to turn NS into the best railway company in Europe [50, p. 16]. These changes, however, are part of more broader transformations in the railway sectors across Europe, mainly involving the repositioning and restructuring of the railway sector, the most important development being the separation of the management and the exploitation of the infrastructure [51], as proposed by the 91/440/EEC directive [29, 34, 35]. In 1992 the UK was among the first Member States of the EU to follow this directive, leading the way to a liberalization of the European Railway area. In 1997 the privatization of the British Railways was finalized (e.g. [5, 27, 32, 39, 40]). The Dutch government was relatively quick to follow the example of the British railway sector, despite the growing signs of problems resulting from the privatization there, and Dutch Railway reforms started in the mid-1990s. The former State-owned railway company (NS) was denationalized and reorganized into a number of divisions, ultimately paving the way for the separation between the infrastructure manager (ProRail) and the operational part (NS Reizigers), which became an autonomous entity that has to survive without government subsidies. This meant that cost reduction and more effective and efficient operations were necessary, and furthermore NS Reizigers (NSR) would become accountable for the level of service they offer to their customers (invigorated by the prospect of having to compete with other companies). These developments motivated the internal reform
plans ‘Destination: Customer’, which were presented by the then general director Huisinga of NS at March 25 1999.

Immediately after the presentation of the plans, the staff working on the trains made it clear that they were opposed to ‘circling around the church’. According to the drivers, the plans would jeopardize the safety of their work because the monotony of driving the same trains over the same route everyday would increase the chances of so-called ‘driver’s fatigue’, lack of concentration, inattentiveness, and increased driving at the automatic pilot [52]. The conductors also raised strong objections to the plans because working on the same track everyday would increase the dangers of recognition by aggressive passengers outside the train. They claim that there have been incidents already where aggressive passengers tracked down the private address of conductors to pay them a visit [52].

The resistance by the train staff led to numerous strikes, which led to angry and incomprehensive passengers appealing for a response by the management of NS. At the same time, the top-managers of NS were in the middle of heated negotiations with the different Unions, personnel collectives and the Minister of Transport, Public Works and Water Management at the time (Netelenbos). Apart from the different interests and positions of the parties involved, these negotiations were further complicated because the different Unions were fighting among each other.

The tension between different actors soon rose to an extreme level and negotiations were going nowhere. Contradictory statements made by several NS officials (including general director Huisinga) [53] created the image that there was a secret agenda to the plans of the NS top. ‘Destination: Customer’ was initially presented as an answer to the low service quality and inefficiency of the railway network, but during the conflicts, it seemed as if the plans were not so much aimed at the customers as well as a means to create a higher level of control over the personnel [53]. It was also suggested by some opponents that the main reason for these plans was to guarantee a strong position for the NS in the market with the upcoming liberalization of the railway sector. The media and public opinion played an important role in this conflict. ‘Circling around the church’ became a well-known concept among all Dutchmen and virtually everybody had an opinion. Daily reports of strikes and furious passengers were paramount in the media. Newspapers were full of letters send in by NS employees and passengers and TV programs broadcasted daily on the subject.

The negotiations took almost three years. In 2001 an agreement was made, which was soon dissolved again because the members of the largest Unions did not accept the terms of the agreement. The original plans were implemented on June 10, 2001, but this was not the end of the conflicts and negotiations [54]. In 2002 things finally settled down, at least so it appeared. The privatization was postponed indefinitely and the new duty roster was adjusted considerably. However, this was not the end of ‘circling around the church’. The issue has become subject for conflict and debate on various occasions after 2002. The gap between the top-management and train staff is still a big problem within NS and it is clear that drivers and conductors have not yet forgotten the many blunders that were made by top-managers during the three-year
conflict. What is clear is that after this turbulent period, the image of NS is seriously blemished.

3. Case illustration 2 – Ministry of Transport, Public Works and Water Management ‘A new shelter for the civil engineering division’

“You probably don’t know who Janus is, since he is an ordinary man who doesn’t attract a lot of attention. Still Janus has an exceptional job. He is lion tamer in the Civil Engineer Circus! The circus exists over a long time. Due to its magnificent shows, the circus is famous and many people come to visit. But soon things will start to change. The boss of the circus, the director, will buy a new circus tent. A smaller tent . . .

Thus begins the story “A new circus tent for the Civil Corps of Engineering” written early January 2006 by an angry employee of the Dutch Civil Engineering Division (CED). The story, “which belongs to the genre of fiction, though it can’t be ruled out that characters from the story resemble real people”, is sent to all employees, including the director of the CED and the director-general of RWS. In this children’s story the employee expresses his hurt feelings and his inability to understand the current developments with regard to the reorganization of the department.

The Dutch Civil Corps of Engineering “develops, builds, maintains, advises and co-ordinates infrastructural and hydraulic engineering structures that are of social importance” [69] and is one of the specialist departments of the Dutch Directorate-General of Public Works and Water Management (RWS). RWS, responsible for the safety, reliability and accessibility of the main highway and waterway networks, is facing several challenges. The organization has to confront the growing threat of water, the almost insolvable problem of traffic congestion on the national motorway network and significant investments in (overdue) maintenance and in developing new infrastructure projects. Infrastructure organizations have been subject to discussion on fraud scandals [64] and on cost escalations in transport infrastructure (mega) projects [57,58]. In addition, long-established role divisions are shifting. Public infrastructure organizations’ traditional responsibilities in different parts of the engineering project (the design, construct, finance and maintenance phase) are changing: public engineers are increasingly involved in temporarily alliances through public-private partnerships and become supervisors (professional expert principals) of innovative contracts, while private organizations become responsible for the construction of infrastructures [9,53,59]. In other words, nowadays RWS resides in an “ambiguous area between government and private enterprise, since many tasks can be carried out by private companies” [26, p. 549].

The Ministry of Transport, Public Works and Water Management (V&W), as part of the wider ‘Modernising Government’ Action Plan [61] formulated the action plan ‘The change task of V&W: more quality with less people’ [62] with strong implications for RWS. On January 1st 2006 RWS has become an agency, a significant
point on its route towards a cost efficient, flexible, innovative, decisive and smaller organization. Focus is on developing customer-oriented network management, more market participation, and solving its personnel-mismatch by reducing over-capacity while ensuring knowledgeable and qualified people [63]. The reorganization plans envision the future of RWS as a networking organization. To an organization that has widely been recognized for its strong internal bureaucracy and competition (specialist and regional departments have been known to strive against one another for ownership over projects), and fragmentary, loosely coupled organizational structure this requires a drastic reorientation and repositioning of the actors involved.

The Corps of Engineers for instance, was generally depicted as an one-sidedly technical-rational organization, a ‘bastion’ (reflected in the corporate building) with a strong internal focus, mainly using its own logic when interacting with the environment. The organization was frequently characterized as ‘arrogant’, ‘intrusive’, ‘outdated’, and not in control of its financial and operational management. The annual struggles in achieving approved audit certificates are illustrative. The CED was one of the first departments within RWS to announce reorganization plans. Core elements of the reorganization, as stated in several organizational change reports, newsletters and intranet announcements were more market participation (Markt tenzij . . .), improved collaboration with other RWS departments and considerable changes in the organizational structure, working methods and staffing. The transformation into a ‘new CED’ not only involved redundancies and centralizing all regional units, but also fourteen new divisions with entirely new management and a ‘cultural change’. This led to a constant discussion among different groups in the organization trying to define what stood for ‘old’ and what would be ‘new’: between the ‘old CED’ versus the ‘new CED’, ‘old working methods’ versus ‘new working methods’ or even ‘old work’ versus ‘new work’. Some employees strongly refuted the strong distinction between old and new, claiming the (top) management’s view of the organization was outdated.

Employees using ‘old working methods’ and doing ‘old work’ would be out-placed in a temporarily division called ‘Shared Capacity’, that would cease to exist after three years. Shared Capacity was introduced to enable the transition between the old and the new organization and would give redundant employees the opportunity to continue carrying out the regular (‘old’) work while preparing oneself for a ‘new future’. To those people however, Shared Capacity was considered a barrel to dump loyal and competent employees. During a period of two months (end 2005), isolated from the rest of the organization, the new middle managers, together with HRM advisors, were assigned the task to conduct ‘placement interviews’ and decide upon (temporarily) placements of all 550 employees. The results turned the organization upside down; people were not only upset by the amount of people placed in Shared Capacity (170), but felt insulted by the lack of motivation and the intonation of the placement letters. In the reports some people had been characterized as ‘a risk for the organization’, ‘rude’, ‘blunt’ and ‘arrogant’ and these words buzzed through the organization and even beyond. Soon, the front-page of Cobouw, the
Dutch daily newspaper of the construction industry, publicly stated “CED offends employees” [64]. Top management and middle management were visiting all regional branches to apologize and to respond to all the questions in the hope to regain confidence by the employees. But even amongst the board of directors and the middle managers emotions ran high: the board of directors lost confidence in the communicative abilities of the new management. The managers on the other hand felt betrayed by their own board of directors, from whom they first received authority and were then reprimanded. Even after the new organization and Shared Capacity started to operate, there is still a continuous struggle between different groups of organizational members regarding the contours of the ‘New CED’ and uncertainty concerning the future directions of CED as an organization and the careers of those out-placed in Shared Capacity.

4. Analysis

In both cases as described above, a large-scale organizational change process has invoked strong reactions from different (groups of) actors. The ways in which these change plans were initially formulated have been interpreted and given meaning in different ways by different actors at different places, often leading to conflicts among (groups of) actors. Although meanings are seldom shared by all members within a group, groups generally develop a range of shared understandings and meanings that guide the behaviour of its members. This shared meaning “may appear as the intersection and/or overlap of several different perspectives co-existing within a group or as a dominant shared sense of meaning” [4, p. 109]. The development of patterns of meaning, manifested through narratives, takes place through a constant process of sensemaking, by which organizational actors attempt to create micro-stability in their interpretive frames and thereby in their frames of action [49]. By making sense of a situation (in these cases the proposed changes) actors try to align their perception of the new situation with their view of the old situation, thereby creating a narrative account of what is going on from their perspective. If we accept the view that organizations are networks of competing discourses [3,6,23,65], organizational change inherently involves a struggle over meaning. Consequently, organizational change processes will be manifested in multiple narratives and counter narratives, through which actors attempt to legitimate the frame of reference that best servers their interests in each particular situation [66]. Thus, organizational change entails a struggle over the acceptance, adoption and dissemination of alternative change narratives in order to legitimize or delegitimize the process of change. Legitimacy has been defined as the comprehensibility, desirability and appropriateness of the actions of an entity [41], as the level of cultural support to provide explanations for an organizations’ existence [38], or as the congruity (cultural conformity) between organizational actions and social values [12]. Including the notion of legitimacy into a cultural analysis of organizational change and continuity enables us to be
sensitive to power. Then organizational change is a “game of managing meaning, in which knowledgeable actors try to create legitimacy for their ideas, actions and demands and to deligitimize the demands of their opponents” ([18, p. 369], emphasis in original). When analyzing the change processes in our two cases, four alternative (ideal typical) types of scripts can be identified in which change oriented narratives are (re) constructed into a dynamic reality: (1) blind scripts, (2) direct scripts, (3) transformative scripts, and (4) dynamic scripts. These scripts emerge at various stages of the change process and are illustrative of the course that particular narratives and counter narratives can take when finding their way into the organization. Examples from the processes of change as in the cases of the Dutch Railways (NS) and the Department of Public Works and Water Management (RWS) are used to elaborate on the four alternative scripts.

4.1. Blind scripts

Brown [67] and Humphreys and Brown [18] argue that individuals tend to legitimize their work activities and the organizations in which they are involved due to identification processes: “In acknowledging the legitimacy of the groups and organizations with which they identify, individuals are tacitly reaffirming their sense of self” [67, p. 665]. Employees of the Civil Corps of Engineers generally refer to projects as their main drive; they strongly identify with products (‘art works’ as they are called by engineers). Project management and (technical) expertise are very much respected. To many employees outplacement in Shared Capacity does not do justice to who they are and to what they have been doing in the past: they do not recognize the ‘new’ organizational definition as relevant, nor do they have the capability to modify the story of shared services into an alternative direction. The reaction of employees to the introduction of Shared Capacity is an example of a blind script whereby the concept does not have any sense-giving capacity in itself. The management of Shared Capacity, when introducing the division to its potential occupants, urges them to look for opportunities in the future, rather than into the past:

“I know the culture of RWS and one of the striking elements to me, is your loyalty towards the organization (...) You possess skills which, although no longer included in the core tasks of the new CED, are still highly valued. And your craftsmanship is still indispensable in realising projects.”

Although presented as an opportunity for a new future or a new career outside RWS, to many employees, Shared Capacity is rather experienced as a ‘waste bin’, a ‘house of the deceased’ or (in Janus’ circus story) as a ‘Sucker Circus’. Shared Capacity lacks legitimacy and hence people are not able to identify with it. As such, Shared Capacity remains an empty box, designed by performance driven managers who are unable to attach to the daily life worlds of the technical engineers.
4.2. **Direct scripts**

Large-scale organizational change processes such as those in our cases tend to receive quite some attention from the media, especially when it concerns organizations with a strong public value. The media generally play an important role in the way organizational changes are constructed and reconstructed and hence legitimated or delegitimated. The media both is an arena for sensemaking [46], as well as a sensegiving device in that it also influences the way the audiences make sense of the events [21]. Even though the decisions about the change process are made within the organization, the media has a strong influence on the legitimation of the proposed changes. When we take a look at the case of NS, the media have played a crucial role in the conflicts. The media is not a neutral arena; they tend to present a simplified or objectified version of the complex dynamics of a change process. As such the media directly reproduce specific elements of the change narratives; they “promote particular versions of ‘reality’ and marginalize and exclude others” [21, p. 124]. During the ‘circling around the church’ conflicts, the opponents of the change plans were stronger represented in the media, thereby influencing the public debates. The voice of the proponents (other than the management team) was hardly heard and when it was heard the arguments were refuted as disregardful of the social consequences of the plans for the train personnel and/or the passengers. The dramatic images of angry passengers and desperate train personnel dominated the media coverage. As Vaara et al. [46] have indicated, media need dramatization for narration purposes. They will use discursive strategies to emphasize specific aspects of the events that support the story they want to tell [45]. For example, the contradictive statements and other ‘blunders’ made by Huisinga and his colleagues were factualized and amplified in the press in order to appeal to the audience’s emotions [21]. This invigorated the dominant discourse around this conflict, which was characterized by the dichotomy between ‘the villains’ (top management) and the ‘victims’ (train personnel and passengers).

4.3. **Transformative scripts**

During processes of change, as illustrated by the example above, specific actors try to depict certain actions as positive or understandable while others come to be presented as negative or incomprehensible [46]. Making action understandable and acceptable is central to the struggle for legitimation [18,46]. This “process of mobilizing and the ‘gaming with’ justifications” ([18, p. 369] emphasis in original) is subject to complex power interplays of managing or manipulating meanings and understandings [68] between individuals and groups outside as well as inside organizations. In the case of the Civil Corps of Engineers, there was an ongoing discussion between actors trying to define the old and the new situation in a transformative way. ‘Was/become lists’ were constructed on items such as market participation, cooperation with other departments, project management or culture. With regard to culture,
the was/become list stated for instance: “Errors are allowed, even if you make them 10 times – there are many safety nets” became “Errors are allowed, but not twice (you have to learn from mistakes) – there are no safety nets” [69, p. 21]. Similarly, the new management and HRM, responsible for placement of all employees in either the new organization or the Shared Capacity, had to decide upon acceptable criteria for placement. Rather than the often-heard criterion ‘man follows work’ (mens volgt werk), the PAC (Placement Advisory Committee’s) developed its own criteria. ‘Suitability for the new CED’ became a decisive factor with regard to placement, in addition to adequacy to task. Suitable were those employees ‘capable of contributing to transforming the CED’, measured by their ability to explain to the PAC what the organizational changes involved and their motivation and confidence in both the organizational changes and their individual development paths. However, after placement letters had been sent, the PAC were being criticized for over relying on the criteria of suitability, for not doing justice to people’s contributions in the past and for a lack of reasoning. The PAC justified their decision by continually portraying their actions as necessary or even inevitable in light of the often-proclaimed cultural change. Their frame of reference was the new organization and hence they argued that the past was less important. The chief director supported this view: “new tasks differ from old tasks (…) Many activities will continue, but the context has changed. Since our context changes, the past is less relevant” [?]. During the placement process the PAC members (some new to the organization) worked in a closed group, liberated from their regular managerial tasks and isolated from the rest of the organization in a separate part of the building. They transformed the change narrative into their own, without recognition of its original meaning and without establishing links to the dominant narratives in the organization’s history. To them, dividing between those suitable for the new organization and those who were not, was not only a strategy for cultural change, it also served as a discursive legitimation strategy for the new organization. Hereby old practices were delegitimated and therefore people resisted.

4.4. Dynamic scripts

In the case of NS, the different stakeholders involved attempt to legitimate specific parts of their perception of the proposed plans according to which narrative best serves them in a dynamic change process. For example, the board of directors initially present ‘Destination: Customer’ as the answer to the decreased punctuality and low service levels. Although the train personnel recognize the need to improve service levels, they view the plans as inadequate and counterproductive. In a report, written by representatives of the personnel collectives (which mainly consist of conductors and drivers) they argue that:

“by introducing the concept of ‘circling around the church’ the security risks for customers will only increase. An integrated rail network of passenger transportation in the Netherlands, which belongs to the best in the world, runs the risk of becoming a victim of profit maximization, entrance at the stock market, the
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separation of business units into different organizations, and unclear European regulations” [52, p. 10].

In this statement ‘circling around the church’ is taken to mean not only the process of simplification of duty rosters, but for the personnel collectives it clearly epitomizes a whole range of developments in the organization that they are unsatisfied with. The original concept was modified in a dynamic way since they use ‘the circle’ as the symbolization of the ‘mismanagement’ of the top management because this appeals to many (groups of) stakeholders and attracts a lot of media attention. In other words, a specific narrative account of what the reorganization means gets widely supported and becomes integrated in the dominant discourse about the change process. This support could only arise because different stakeholders recognized this view as compelling. Once the narrative becomes validated, it gets reified and thereby attains a symbolic meaning, which can be put to use in other instances without explicit justification [21]. This process touches upon the political dimension of discourse or narrative accounts [46]. Through the legitimation of the ‘circling around the church’ narrative, the owners of this narrative attain a certain degree of power; by using the narrative they can appeal to a wide audience for support on their position in whatever conflict. The image of the board of directors as ‘mismanagers’ is inextricably linked with this narrative. To illustrate: the ‘circling around the church’ narrative is, more than five years after the actual conflict, still used regularly in conflicts between the top and shop floor of NS.

5. Conclusion

In this paper we argued that the acceptance, adoption and dissemination of narratives and counter narratives of change is closely linked to processes of identification and legitimation. The cases show a large variety of emergent scripts in these processes, with alternative outcomes as a result. Four alternative (ideal typical) types of scripts have been identified in which change oriented narratives are (re) constructed into a dynamic reality: (1) blind scripts, (2) direct scripts, (3) transformative scripts, and (4) dynamic scripts (see Table 1: alternative types of scripts). The blind script emerges at the various stages of a change process: initiatives (often produced in the management domain), which are to support the change process, remain “backstage” and never actually reach the interaction arena. The groups to which they refer cannot interpret the discursive symbols and the initiatives are not recognized. The case of RWS is basically an example of internal transformation, initiated by top-managers who had a strong belief in the ‘shared capacity’ concept. Here we see fixation, but mainly because the Shared Capacity story is not recognized as legitimate to (out placed) Civil Engineers who have to make sense of the new situation. The blind script contrasts with the direct script: narratives are literally reproduced into multiple configurations without substantive modification. Direct scripts highlight or dramatize some aspects, while ignoring others, leading to the dominance of a particular
Table 1

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<th>Blind scripts</th>
<th>Dynamic scripts</th>
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<td>No recognition/no modification</td>
<td>Recognition/modification</td>
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<td>Backstage dominance</td>
<td>Front and backstage</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lack of interaction</td>
<td>Multiple interaction</td>
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<td>Closed narratives</td>
<td>Open narratives</td>
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Transformative scripts

| No recognition/modification   | Recognition/no modification      |
| Frontstage                    | Frontstage dominance             |
| Multiple interaction          | Linear interaction               |
| Open narratives               | Closed narratives                |

Narrative, out of a range of alternative narratives. We often see this in situations in which media-actors play a central role. In such cases press releases with regard to the change process are channelled via all sorts of media: television, newspapers etcetera, thereby presenting a certain (one-sided) picture of the situation. This is illustrated by the case of NS, wherein external actors—especially media (newspapers, television etc)—take a central role in the ‘direct’ reproduction of the ‘circling around the church’ discourse. This makes the change process vulnerable: there is a strong fixation on the ‘closed’ media reality and no space for alternative stories. The dynamic and transformative scripts are both about modifying the original narratives into a new reality, or perspective. Often these types of scripts have a strong strategic component and are used as counter-narratives in the sensemaking arena. With the dynamic script, the original story is recognized and intentionally adapted for personal advantage or for one’s own self-interest (e.g. in rhetorical strategies), whereas in transformative scripts the original narrative is not recognized or understood and is therefore modified in a way that best fits the actors’ frame of reference. In both organizations modification occurs. Employees of the NS are conscious of the original change narrative, which they intentionally and dynamically change for their own interest, whereas the management of the Corps of Civil Engineers transforms the original change narrative, without recognition or alignment to the dynamic organizational reality.

Scripting is essential in understanding the organizational dynamics related to change and innovation. However, organizational praxis is more than the outcome of ‘filtering’ through scripts. Narratives of change are deliberately and strategically translated to local contexts for steering purposes. In order to maximize the ‘travels of ideas’ so called editors act as interpreters, translators or brokers between producers and consumers of (counter) narratives. In both cases, editors have played important roles in the different stages of the change processes. In the case of NS, the central management introduced Destination: Customer as an operational programme to influence the orientation of NS organizational members at multiple levels of the organization. The programme was implemented through a broad spectre of communication instruments: official announcements, magazine interviews and oral presentations. The editing process, which was coordinated through the communications department failed because it was strongly associated with the controversial
‘founding father’ of the programme, Huisinga. This partially counts for the second case. The chief Director of the Civil corps of engineers organized an editing programme in which the shared capacity concept was situated as a logic, rational vehicle for organizational innovation. A group of ‘hired’ editors (a consultant, a communication expert and an independent writer) developed a ‘down to earth’ interactive communications strategy in order to present the ‘central message’. This strategy consisted of ‘several round table’ meetings, ‘road shows’ and ‘open space’ discussion sessions. The accent on ‘common sense’ turned on to be a bridge too far. Many organizational members joined the meetings, but questioned the legitimacy of the sessions. The change programme was defined in terms of ‘hidden’ power play (“the outcome has already been defined”) and ‘covered’ top-down steering of the chief-director.

Editing can play a decisive role in change processes. In these cases, the efforts to edit the change narrative(s) were not very successful. The lack of legitimacy concerning the quality as well as the people who represented the narrative, resulted in a reinforcement of (several) counter narratives.

We can conclude that in both cases, groups and individuals within the organizations seek legitimacy to successfully establish, reinforce, maintain or secure personal reputations, privileged power relations, credibility or individual career prospects (see also [7]). In this sense, (lack of) legitimacy seems to be the starting point and the outcome of discursive change process at the same time.

References


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