

The Communicational Basis of the  
Organizational Text as Macroactor:  
A Case Study of Multilevel Marketing Discourse

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## Introduction

The nature of the relationship between discourse and organization has generated considerable scholarship in the field of organizational communication (Putnam & Fairhurst, 2001). In the context of this pre-conference, the most interesting relationship is the equivalency or “flatland<sup>1</sup>” perspective, which treats discourse processes (in the form of conversations or texts) and organizing processes as the same, or equivalent (Taylor & Van Every, 2000). That is, both organizing and communicating are simultaneous accomplishments or achievements (Taylor, 1999; Putnam and Fairhurst, 2001). Fairhurst & Putnam (1999) argue that the work of James Taylor and colleagues has offered the field a promising start in theorizing this equivalent relationship between organizing and communicating. One of the challenges these authors noted, however, is to “provide a methodology consistent with their theoretical underpinnings” (p. 14).

The purpose of this essay is to pick up on one strand of Taylor and Van Every’s (2000) theorizing concerning how an organization exercises agency as a macroactor through its production of texts (Callon & Latour, 1981) and offer a methodological analysis that is consistent with this line of theorizing. I will offer an empirical example of an organizational text to illustrate such an analysis: a letter to the editor written by a multilevel marketing company contesting the accuracy of an article published in *Forbes* magazine. The analysis will attend to four issues: 1) the features of the text that make it a particular kind of text (in this case, a letter to the editor and not, for example, a press release or a news story or some other kind of text); 2) the issue of authorship and its authorizing function; 3) the presuppositions<sup>2</sup> that, though absent, are necessary for the text to “make sense” to its audience (Levinson, 1983); and 4) how the text is constructed to orient to these presuppositions and to build up and undermine rhetorical versions of

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<sup>1</sup> The idea of a “flatland” perspective (supported by Taylor & Van Every, 2000) should not be read as a claim that organizations are flat (as in limited hierarchy), but rather suggests a *critique* of the common micro-macro distinction between interaction (micro) and the organization (macro).

<sup>2</sup> According to Levinson (1983), there are two components to all messages: that which it explicitly asserts (its focus) and that which it takes for granted (its presuppositions).

the world (Potter, 1996; in this case, to impute motives to *Forbes* magazine as a way to undermine its account of the multilevel marketing company).

### Objects, Agency, Actants, and (Macro)Actors

To lay the conceptual groundwork for the analysis to follow, it is important to understand the relationship between humans, objects, and agency according to the work of Taylor and Van Every (2000) and Latour (1996). Suppose a person (Agent 1) wants to communicate an idea, or rhetorically build up a version of events. On her own, Agent 1 is unable to do this, until she can mobilize the assistance of an object, in this case language (Agent 2). Together, the person (Agent 1) and language (Agent 2) form speech or text (which we can call Agent 1+2, and what Latour calls a “hybrid”). The speech or text is what accomplishes the action (the expression of an idea, or construction of a version of events), rather than just the person or just the language. To forget that the hybrid is the effective agent is to commit what Latour calls “purification.”

There are a few important aspects to note here. First, the purpose of Agent 1 is accomplished, but the speech or text does its job imperfectly because communication relies on the communal typifications of language (Schutz, 1967). Second, the purpose of Agent 2 is also realized in that language, and its attendant presuppositions, has perpetuated itself. Third, language is not a neutral object, but is an object that simultaneously enables and constrains. Language enables the communication of an idea, but because of the typifying character of language, it constrains the complete representation of an experience. Fourth, rather than equating actor with agency, since the “actor” is not solely a subject or an object, Latour would use the term “actant” to refer to that which acts. Thus, in the example of Agent 1+2, the production of speech or text would be the actant.

According to Latour, agency is not located in the subject or the object, but in the space between. Humans can use a variety of objects or technologies to achieve their goals (language being one such

object)<sup>3</sup>. But once the object (or technology) is mobilized, it can act independently of the human actor(s) who originally mobilized it. An example that Latour discussed is a speed bump. Someone (or more likely some group) placed the speed bump on the road in order to slow down traffic, but after its installation, the speed bump continues to slow down traffic without human intervention<sup>4</sup>. This point has implications for organizational communication in general, and this paper in particular, because textual documents, such as a press release, a policy manual, or a letter to the editor, can continue exercising agency without the presence of the subjects and objects involved in their production (Taylor & Van Every, 2000).

There is one more point to discuss before getting to the analysis of the empirical example and that has to do with the concept of agency vis-à-vis the macroactor. As Taylor & Van Every (2000, p. 230) note, there are two meanings for agency. The first designates a person or an object that acts, while a second meaning emphasizes how a person acts for, or on behalf of, another person or collective. When a person speaks on behalf of another, greater authority is generally accorded to that person<sup>5</sup>. A macroactor, according to Latour, is one who is empowered, or takes that power for him or herself, to speak on behalf of a large number of people or society at large. By virtue of speaking on behalf of a large number of others, this person is seen to exercise a great deal of authority. The power of an actor, however, is not a property of the actor, “but of the network of those who have authorized him or her to speak in their name” (Taylor & Van Every, 2000, p. 160). Thus, it is not just the actor who is acting, but the whole network of people who communicate through the agency of the macroactor (what Latour calls the “actor-network”). An implication of this is that the actor is not the one doing the acting, but the acting is accomplished by

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<sup>3</sup> Of course, it can equally be said that objects or technologies can use humans to achieve their goals (for example, of language perpetuating itself).

<sup>4</sup> Taylor & Van Every (2000) cite Latour’s example of the speed bump to illustrate how an object can act out the intentions of the people who put it there without their presence. And though they don’t mention this, though I think they would agree, it is important to add that the speed bump could also be “appropriated” for other purposes besides the original design, such as serving as a ramp for bicycle jumping (Hebdige, 1979).

<sup>5</sup> Consider the popular constructions “Well, speaking for myself...,” or “I don’t want to speak for everyone when I say this...” These constructions tend to minimize, rather than magnify, the “weight” with which one speaks.

what is represented by the actor. And, as mentioned above, that which is represented does not have to be human, but could be a textual document such as a press release or a policy manual.

Taylor and Van Every (2000) argue that the macroactor plays a crucial role in an organization. It is worth quoting them at length on this point:

that organization is a system of collective action, which develops subsymbolic knowledge whose formulation in a conventional language of symbols is the motivation for the emergence of organizational macroactors. These actors speak in the name of the group as a whole and thus represent it, both by giving it a voice and by interpreting back to it in symbolic form what it collectively knows, at the subsymbolic level of cognition. (pp. 140-141)

Thus, according to these authors, it is in this power to enunciate the collective knowledge of the organization that authority lies.

### Organizational Text as Macroactor

Given this conceptual grounding of organizational text as macroactor, let's now turn our attention to an empirical illustration. The organizational document we will look at is a letter addressed to the editor of *Forbes* magazine from the e-commerce multilevel marketing organization, Quixtar, in response to an article to appear in *Forbe's* June 25<sup>th</sup> issue of the "Best of the Web." For those who are unfamiliar with the multilevel marketing industry, and the emergence of the internet in its historical development, it might be helpful to provide a brief summary.

#### Brief History of the Multilevel Marketing (MLM) Industry<sup>6</sup>

Since their inception in the 1940s<sup>7</sup> multilevel, or network, marketing organizations (such as Amway Corporation, Mary Kay Cosmetics, etc.) have dealt with various social and legal challenges regarding the legitimacy of their business practices. Much of this controversy concerns the pyramid

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<sup>6</sup> This brief historical section has been reproduced in part from the author's dissertation (Carl, 2001).

<sup>7</sup> Biggart (1989) argued that network marketing organizations are an outgrowth of direct selling organizations. She traced the history of direct selling back to colonial times, through industry organization in the 1900s, the emergence of network direct selling organizations in the 1940s, and then post-World War II era to the 1980s.

organizational structure. MLM companies rely on networks of individual distributors and sales representatives who promote and sell products through face-to-face interactions. The distributors or salespeople are not actually employees of the larger company, but are independent contractors (in the case of salespeople) or engage in a legal franchising relationship with the MLM company (in the case of distributors). Both salespeople and distributors earn their income by buying products wholesale from the company and then selling them at retail prices to the customer (income can also be earned through certain performance bonuses offered by the company). Additionally, distributors and sales people can also sponsor other people to become involved in the business. In sponsoring others, individual distributors or sales representatives earn credit for the sales revenue, or business volume, generated by those in their "network" (Biggart, 1989). While the pyramid or multilevel organizational structure was declared legal by the Federal Trade Commission in 1979<sup>8</sup>, many social concerns, such as the use of evangelical discourse (Hopfl & Maddrell, 1996) and exploiting personal relationships for financial gain (Fitzpatrick & Reynolds, 1997), remained about whether participation in a MLM business is legitimate.

The MLM industry generates billions of dollars in revenues each year (Biggart, 1989). After years of revenue growth (and some cyclical decline) after World War II, multilevel marketing companies saw a significant drop in their revenues during the 1990s. For example, Amway, one of the major players, saw its 1998 sales revenue fall 18 percent to \$5.7 billion ("Direct Sellers," 1999). As a way to stimulate revenue growth, many MLM organizations launched web-based businesses to capitalize on the emergence of e-commerce (the founding families of the Amway Corporation, for example, launched Quixtar.com; Mary Kay Cosmetics launched MaryKay.com, etc.).

According to certain industry watchers (Berman, 1999; Byrnes, 2000), the emergence of the internet has transformed the way MLM companies do business. For example, MLM companies have set up "virtual malls" that link their company's products with other companies' products, thus allowing the

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<sup>8</sup> The FTC was concerned that the network structure was too similar to a "Ponzi" scheme, which was based on the "use of paper profits to continue speculation in a chain of transactions" without the sale of goods or services (Biggart, 1989, p. 46). In short, as long as the company paid bonuses to its independent sales force (or distributors) based on goods sold, rather than just people recruited into the business, then the pyramid structure was declared legal by the FTC.

distributors to "surf and earn," or buy products over the internet while generating business volume (a process similar to accumulating frequent flyer miles; Buechner, 1999). Further, the individual distributor is no longer responsible for placing the order for the customer and spending hours dealing with the paperwork, since this can all be handled electronically. Thus, the traditional "bricks and mortar" business model is replaced, or transformed, into "bricks and clicks" businesses (Buechner, 1999).

The MLM e-business that will be the focus of this paper is called Quixtar (<http://www.quixtar.com>). Quixtar was "launched" September 1, 1999 as a separate, "sister" company to Amway. In fall 2000, Amway restructured so that both Amway and Quixtar, as well as a third company, Access Business Group, fell under the "parent"<sup>9</sup> company Alticor (<http://www.alticor.com>). The relationship between Amway and Quixtar is a controversial issue that is taken up in the article and letter to the editor discussed below.

#### Summary of *Forbes* Article and Quixtar's Letter to the Editor

Given this brief historical background, let's now look at the letter addressed to the editor of *Forbes* magazine from the Quixtar corporation in response to an article to appear in *Forbe's* June 25<sup>th</sup> issue of the "Best of the Web." After a summary of both documents (which can be read in their entirety in the Appendix), I will offer an analysis of the discursive features of the Quixtar letter to the editor.

The title of the *Forbes* article, written by Karen J. Bannan, was "Amway.com" and the heading reads "Forget VC funding or killer applications. According to Quixtar, all you need is a PC, a modem and 5 to 15 hours a week to run a thriving Web business" (Bannan, 2001). The article goes on to describe the launch of the Quixtar web site, how the presenters of this business claim that selling products via the web is easy, and that this is a fortuitous time for multilevel marketing businesses because of the downturn

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<sup>9</sup> The use of "sister" company and "parent" company invoke a family metaphor (that many other corporate entities also employ) and suggest an anthropomorphic relationship for organizations that fall under a larger corporate structure. An effect of this metaphor usage is that corporations are seen to have human, relational qualities and can take on similar characteristics (such as exercising agency).

in the economy and corporate layoffs. After discussing similarities in the business model between Quixtar and Amway, describing the experience of shopping on the site, and comparing Quixtar to competitors in online sales, the author cautions the reader that most people in multilevel marketing organizations “spend more time recruiting than selling” and may in fact lose money rather than make money.

The response to this article, signed by Ken McDonald, Managing Director of Quixtar, Inc., took issue with most of the comments made by Bannan. The letter claims that the article “did not provide an accurate picture of the company,” citing an inaccurate understanding of the corporate relationship among Amway, Quixtar, and Alticor, unfair representations of Quixtar business meetings as “cult-like,” and only publishing accounts from dissatisfied “Independent Business Owners<sup>10</sup>.” The letter concludes by suggesting that what is worse than the *Forbes* reporter painting an inaccurate picture of Quixtar is that *Forbes* can no longer be trusted as a “reliable source of accurate business information” (McDonald, 2001).

### Analysis of Organizational Text

In the following analysis, I want to attend to how the textual document accomplishes both organizational and communication processes. To do this, I will take up four issues: 1) the features of the text that make it a letter to the editor and not, for example, a press release or a news story or some other kind of text; 2) the issue of authorship and its authorizing function; 3) the presuppositions that, though absent, are necessary for the text to “make sense” to its audience (Levinson, 1983); and 4) how the text is constructed to orient to these presuppositions and to build up a rhetorical case imputing motive to *Forbes* magazine (Potter, 1996). We will start with the features of the text that make it recognizable as a particular kind of text. There are a number of features that make this document recognizable as a letter to

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<sup>10</sup> Independent Business Owner, IBO, is the new name for a person affiliated with Quixtar, while the older name for those associated with Amway was “distributor.” The label IBO suggests greater independence, entrepreneurialism, and less emphasis on selling or distributing (see Carl, 2001).

the editor, including company letterhead and logo, a date (June 11, 2001)<sup>11</sup>, mailing address (of Letters Editor for *Forbes* magazine), salutation (Dear Editor), body (seven paragraphs totaling just over 500 words<sup>12</sup>; to be analyzed in more detail below), valediction (Sincerely), signature (authorizing the document), name of author (Ken McDonald), job title marking an institutional identity (Managing Director), and company name that marks an organizational affiliation (Quixtar Inc.).

While it may seem somewhat banal to note these features, it is precisely the iterability, or the repetition, of these features that allow us to recognize this document as a letter to the editor, and not another type of document (Derrida, 1988). But it is also important to mention these features because this letter, to this author's knowledge, was never published by *Forbes*. Instead, this "letter" was accessible to the general public only as an Adobe PDF<sup>13</sup> file in the "Press Room" area of the Quixtar web site (<http://www.quixtar.com/>)<sup>14</sup>. While there may be no reason to be skeptical that there actually was a hardcopy, signed letter that was mailed to the Letters Editor of *Forbes* (perhaps because we see all those features identified above), we should keep in mind that this document was only made available to a broader audience as a PDF file for a limited time on Quixtar's web site<sup>15</sup>.

A second issue to note about this textual document is that of authorship. The signature that appears at the end of the letter appears as Ken McDonald. As readers of the letter, we do not know if Mr. McDonald wrote this letter on his own, if members of his communications team wrote this for him, or a combination of the two. What is important is that the signature authorizes this document as a bona fide

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<sup>11</sup> The letter is dated 6/11/01 while the article to which this letter responds appears in the 6/25/01 issue. This suggests that a version of the article was available to Quixtar prior to its publication.

<sup>12</sup> Common advice for writing a letter to the editor is that the length be about 250 words and four paragraphs, so this letter may be a bit longer than is generally accepted in the industry.

<sup>13</sup> PDF stands for Portable Document Format and is a standard method of on-line electronic distribution of documents.

<sup>14</sup> For whatever reason, the link to the file is no longer available on the Quixtar web site as the time of this writing (Fall 2002), despite other news releases being available that go back to the site's launch date in the Fall of 1999.

<sup>15</sup> It appears to be common practice for company websites to have a "Press" or "Media" section where they post press releases or links to significant articles. From a quick scan of a few random companies' web sites, it was rare to see a letter to the editor posted, although Apple Computer has two links for letters to the editor on their web site from 1997 (<http://www.apple.com/pr/library/1997/january.html>).

representation of Quixtar, Inc<sup>16</sup>. The presence of the signature, the fact that the letter appears with the corporate logo (or letterhead), and that it was posted on the official Quixtar web site, all authorize this document as representing the corporation as a whole. Thus, the document achieves status as a macroactor, and can go on acting in the absence of its author(s). Indeed, what constitutes this network as “the Quixtar corporation” is precisely the power of a macroactor to enunciate the collective knowledge and understandings of this network (Taylor & Van Every, 2000).

A third issue is the presuppositions that are not explicitly stated, but nevertheless must be taken-for-granted by the readers for this text to make sense. As you read through the letter, you may be struck by the recurring theme of accuracy and objectivity that the letter constructs; the issue of accuracy or objectivity is oriented to seven times in the letter. For example, the letter states “The resulting [*Forbes*] article, however, did not provide an accurate portrait of the company” and “The article wasn’t an examination of Quixtar’s success. It was more likely an expression of opinions that normally would have appeared in an editorial, rather than an article based on objective reporting.” From these two excerpts we can surmise that a primary presupposition is that an accurate and objective representation of the world is 1) possible, and 2) an ideal a reporter, at least, should strive towards. As Pollner (1987) suggests in his study of “mundane reason,” humans treat each other as having “at least potential access to the same underlying reality. Any neutral, competent observer, placed in the same position, will see the same thing” (Potter, 1996, p. 53).

However, the constraints on being accurate or objective are differentially relevant based on one’s institutional identity. This is suggested by the letter’s statement “It was more likely an expression of opinions that normally would have appeared in an editorial, rather than an article based on objective reporting.” Thus, the category “reporter” carries with it certain obligations of providing a fair, accurate, and objective representation of the world (a daunting task, to be sure!); these same textual obligations do not necessarily apply to someone who is writing an “opinion” piece or an editorial column.

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<sup>16</sup> In fact, it is the editorial policy of most newspapers and magazines to not consider publishing any letter to the editor without a signature authorizing the discourse.

To conclude this analysis, let's look very briefly at a fourth aspect: how rhetorical versions of events are built up and undermined, and how presuppositions are made relevant in the process (Potter, 1996). Specifically, we will look at how the identity category of "reporter" is deployed in the letter, as well as how a motive is constructed to undermine the account of Quixtar provided by the *Forbes* reporter. The first point to note is how the body of the letter begins: "We looked forward to an article..." This construction suggests that there was no pre-conceived ill intent towards the article and that they were expecting a fair treatment. The use of "we" suggests that it is not just one individual, but the whole organization for which the author speaks. Further, this construction sets up an expectation, or a slot, to perform "being surprised" (the fulfillment of this surprise will be deferred, however, for two more sentences).

The next sentence "Since last November, Karen Bannan interviewed numerous subjects for the story and great efforts were made by Quixtar staff to provide accurate and timely information." This sentence also provides evidence that they have been looking forward to the article and that the reporter had plenty of time to collect necessary data. Further, this construction suggests that the reporter had all the resources available to her, but perhaps chose not to use them (we begin to see the ascription of a possible motivation). An important point here is the use of the identity category "reporter" in the first sentence. The use of "reporter" suggests a category entitlement and attendant obligations (Potter, 1996). That is, certain categories of people are treated as knowledgeable about certain matters in certain contexts, and also have certain responsibilities to fulfill. The reporter identity makes relevant the presuppositions about accuracy, fairness, and objectivity. If the letter had solely used "Karen Bannan," these attendant obligations and entitlements would not have been made explicitly relevant (since a person, "Karen Bannan," does not have the same obligations as a "reporter" does).

The start of the second paragraph completes the "doing" of surprise that was set up in the first sentence: "The resulting article, however, did not provide an accurate portrait of the company." In addition to completing the surprise, it also makes the inaccuracy of the report an accountable matter (after all, reporters should report "accurately," according to the presuppositions made relevant). The letter then

offers candidate reasons for what might account for the “inaccurate portrait.” Three reasons are provided. First, this could be the result of inaccurate reporting (which suggests the reporter is to blame). Second, this could be the result of not fact checking by *Forbes* (which suggests that the magazine as a whole is implicated and has not done its homework). Third, this could be the result of a bias against Quixtar’s business model in the editorial department<sup>17</sup> (here there is an explicit imputing of motive). The imputation of “bias” was third in the list, suggesting that this is a sensitive matter.

### Conclusion

The purpose of this essay was to offer a methodological analysis of an organizational text that would be consistent with Taylor & Van Every’s (2000) discussion of the organizational macroactor, in particular, and the equivalency, or flatland, model of organizational communication, in general. While there are many more features of the letter and article that could be looked at (for example, how the letter is constructed as a response to the magazine article and the presuppositions this implies), this should give a flavor for the type of methodological analysis I am proposing. In summary, the four issues that should be emphasized to capture the flavor of the conversational-text relationship, and constitution of a macroactor, that Taylor and colleagues theorize include: 1) the features of the communication that make it recognizable as a distinct kind of text or conversational interaction<sup>18</sup>; 2) the issue of authorship and its authorizing function, which is essential to the constitution of the organizational macroactor; 3) the presuppositions that, though absent, are necessary for the text to “make sense” to its audiences; and 4) how the text is constructed to orient to these presuppositions, to construct rhetorical versions of the world and potentially undermine others, and to accomplish a range of social actions.

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<sup>17</sup> Interestingly, the editorial department is treated here as being a macroactor for *Forbes*.

<sup>18</sup> While there was not space to discuss conversational interaction, one could look at what makes “x” discourse a “business presentation” rather than “patient-doctor interaction” or a “meeting,” etc. (Drew & Heritage, 1992; Boden, 1994).

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## Appendix

Bannan, K. (2001, June 25). Amway.com. Forbes.com: Best of the Web, p. 40.

McDonald, K. (2001, June 11). Letter to the Editor of *Forbes* magazine [Adobe Acrobat PDF File]. Available: <http://www.quixtar.com>.