

# THE HARRY POTTER PHENOMENON AS AN ORGANISATIONAL ACTOR-WORLD

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## Organisation/Literature: Beyond Equivalence and Antinomy

The aim of this paper will be to examine the relationship between works of fiction, and in particular the Harry Potter fiction, and Organisation. Traditionally, fictional literature has been excluded from the realm of Organisation Studies – a position owing largely to the strict modernist divide between fact and fiction. However, more recently some scholars began to draw on fictional literature in organisational analysis. It has been argued that fictional literature is much better than traditional academic texts at expressing the richness of organisational life (Knights and Willmott 1999), that literary devices can be successfully applied to uncover the hidden aspects of organisation (Czarniawska 1997, 1999), and that fiction can even be employed as a style within academic writing (Rhodes 1997). In these various ways attempts have been made to include fictional literature into the study of organisations. I would like to use Actor-Network Theory to probe this inclusivity a little bit further by referring in particular to the Harry Potter phenomenon.

There are various reasons for bringing Harry Potter to the attention of the scholars of Organisation. The wizard schoolboy is a real craze of the moment. This craze has come to be referred to as ‘the Harry Potter phenomenon’ (see, for instance, Montan 2001) and ‘the Potter Magic’ (Lynch 2001), and has enchanted children and adults alike all around the globe. In all respects, “*management metafads and scholarly denial notwithstanding, an academician would need to be pretty obdurate not to have noticed Harry Potter*” (Brown 2002). To emphasize the geographical spread of the hysteria, suffice it to say that Harry Potter books are already available in 40 different languages, including Zulu, and are soon to be translated into Latin, ancient Greek and Welsh (Capell and Prasso 2001). Yet Harry Potter phenomenon is about much more than just the books. Like any really successful contemporary literature it does not stop at itself, but rather supersedes itself by spinning its own truly impressive organisational actor-network. This industrious industrial entanglement provides a new dimension for talking about the relationship between the works of fiction and Organisation. It does not allow literature to stand on its own in analysis but challenges its boundaries and its very concept.

ANT can serve as a means of travelling the tangled web of relationships that constitute the Harry Potter/Organisation actor-network. The purpose of the journey is not to attempt a disentanglement of that web, but rather to attempt an experience of it. The idea is to provide a way of analysis that would imitate the heterogeneous complexity that is constituted by the linkages between Organisation and the popular culture.

By referring to the Harry Potter phenomenon I would like to demonstrate that these linkages could be experienced as manifesting themselves in three interrelated and transmuting ways or dimensions. The first two of these three dimensions are constituted by the two-way reproductive relationship between the contents of the works of fiction and the 'factual' organisation. It is a relationship in which, on the one hand, Organisation reproduces itself in the contents of the works of fiction, and, on the other hand, in which the contents of a work of fiction reproduce themselves in the contents of 'real' organisational fields of meaning (Hassard and Holliday 1998, eds). The former form of manifestation can take the shape of both a more or less direct transference of aspects of organisational life into the story, and of the more obscure, darker, hidden, symbolic representations of that life. In the same way, it may speak of both the readily visible organisational realities and of the realities that are suspected, expected, feared and imagined (Corbett 1998, Burrell 1997). Organisation therefore reproduces both the apparent and the repressed aspects of itself in the works of fiction. I will briefly examine the most striking instances of this aspect of organisational reproduction in the contents of Harry Potter stories. On the other hand, the latter form of manifestation – that of the works of fiction reproducing themselves in 'real' organisations – happens through the enrolment of actual and potential organisational actors into particular moral codes and modes of organisational behaviour and expectation. It works by means of translation that occurs at actor's encounter with the story. In this line of argument the fictional stories of the past, especially where children's literature is concerned, have influenced the 'real' organisations of today (Grey 1998), and the stories of today – stories like Harry Potter – will to some extent influence organisations of the future. Organisations of today have enrolled popular literature of the past into their actor-networks having themselves been enrolled into the actor-networks of the past literature. Organisational actor-networks of tomorrow will repeat this reproductive cycle.

In the evolution of the micro-transmutations of the factual and the fictional, which are the mundane mechanics of the mutual reproductive relationship between the works of fiction and Organisation, the third kind of relational manifestation becomes established. It is the organisational actor-network of the work of fiction itself, as it stands in the present, in which the distinction between fact and fiction is unsustainable.

To examine this third dimension of relationship we therefore need to step outside the pure contents of fiction and organisational fields of meaning, and turn to works of fiction as organisational phenomena. Such phenomena are particularly important because of the way they challenge the institutionalised order of knowledge. The illusion of the conceptual distance and the division of practices between Organisation and phenomena like Harry Potter hinges on the initial normalised distinction between the factual and the fictional, and on the power relations that sustain and are sustained by that distinction. One could argue that the authority of modern Science to a large degree rests on the distinctiveness of the concept of fact, and on the distinctiveness of the scientific practices of fact production (Latour 1987). In the end it is the fact-based knowledge that is institutionalised as legitimate – in the modern society in general and in contemporary organisations and Organisation Studies in particular (Brown 1992). Phenomena like Harry Potter, however, problematise and undermine this base of legitimacy. The practices that constitute great organisational actor-networks of the works of fiction are in direct conflict with the scientific practices of separating out

fact from fiction. The Harry Potter phenomenon is a threatening chimera that is produced by the ongoing work of mediation (Latour 1993); its very success depends on the possibility of the factual and the fictional to be brought together and merged into one; it is dependent on the organisational ability to utilise their synergy. This synergy is magic in its own right. Through its work the magical characters of a magical world, fantasy and whims of imagination are produced in tangible shapes and form. Magic is realised in the films, in the actors' play, in the Harry Potter merchandise, in Lego products etc. Behind this embodiment that has substantial commercial effect stands equally substantial organising. The Harry Potter actor-network encompasses actors as diverse as paper, J.K.Rowling, publishers, critics, film and film-makers, bookshops, typographies, marketing companies, merchandise producers, logistics companies, translators, international agents, computers, Internet, journals, Lego, Coca-Cola, Disneyland etc. Its characters, Hogwarts and its magical artefacts are equally actors and in need of organising, just as is the consuming public around the world. And all this is just a very partial listing of the Harry Potter army of allies!

One should conclude that the sheer span and spin of the Harry Potter army of allies force a re-conceptualisation of traditional divides. Conceptually, at a closer etymological investigation, the notions of 'fact' and 'fiction' do not hold an opposition. Their defining boundaries are blurred and interchangeable. The divide between fact and fiction is ultimately impossible, and organising is home to both of these inseparable notions; organisational actor-worlds routinely encompass transmutations of the factual and the fictional. One of the implications is that it no longer makes sense to attribute the label 'factual' to the realm of organisational discourses and practices and the label 'fictional' to the realm of popular culture. Their transmutations are mundane and should be seen as ongoing reproductive work that occurs in organisational past, present and future. In this work of reproduction the factual and the fictional are dependent on each other for survival. Organisational dependence on what is customary referred to as 'fiction' is embedded in minute practices through which organisational actor-networks stabilise and maintain themselves over time; it is embedded in the ways in which organisations talk themselves forward.

Actor-Network Theory makes it not only possible but also desirable to reconcile Organisation and Harry Potter within the same discourse. In this discourse Harry Potter books speak of Organisation, Organisation talks Harry Potter into being, and Harry Potter is itself an Organisational phenomenon. It is the combination of these three dimensions that lifts the relationship between popular literature and organisation to a level that is beyond pure equivalence and antinomy.

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