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Performativity as ongoing journeys: Implications for strategy, entrepreneurship, and innovation

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ABSTRACT

For the most part, strategy, entrepreneurship, and innovation have been researched and practiced from a representational position. In this paper, we make a case for taking a performative turn. Strategists, entrepreneurs, and intrapreneurs are embedded-embodied actors who engage in material-discursive practices in their attempts at constituting phenomena. Overflows, which are inevitable given dispersion of agency, give rise to matters of concern for multiple stakeholder groups. Settlements between stakeholders are temporary, as phenomena will be de-constituted when constitutive arrangements change. Consequently, the projects and initiatives that strategists, entrepreneurs, and intrapreneurs undertake are best seen as ongoing journeys.

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> This is a day I've been looking forward to for two-and-a-half years. Every once in a while, a revolutionary product comes along that changes everything. And… Apple has been very fortunate. It's been able to introduce a few of these into the world. In 1984, we introduced the Macintosh. It didn't just change Apple, it changed the whole computer industry. In 2001, we introduced the first iPod, and it didn't just change the way we all listen to music, it changed the entire music industry. Well, today, we're introducing *three* revolutionary products of this class. The first one is a widescreen iPod with touch controls. The second is a revolutionary mobile phone. And the third is a breakthrough Internet communications device. So, three things: a widescreen iPod with touch controls; a revolutionary mobile phone; and a breakthrough Internet communications device. An iPod, a phone, and an Internet communicator. An iPod, a phone—*are you getting it*? These are not three separate devices, this is one device, and we are calling it iPhone. Today, Apple is going to reinvent the phone, and here it is. (transcript of Jobs, 2007)

In this keynote delivered at Macworld 2007, Steve Jobs collapsed three industry categories—digital music, mobile telephony and Internet communications—into one. One might consider Jobs' presentation as an example of a performative speech act "in which to *say* something is to *do* something" (Austin, 1962: 12, emphasis in original). According to Austin (1962: 6), these are statements where "the issuing of the utterance is the performing of an action." For instance, when a bride and groom say 'I do,' they are not describing or reporting on a state of affairs, but actively bringing it about. In particular, Austin conceptualized such performatives as *illocutionary*, because the act of speaking is enough to bring about the named effect (e.g., ordering, warning, promising). Similarly, we might conceptualize Jobs as constituting a new reality through his keynote at the Macworld 2007 event.

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Some might critique the possibility of constituting new realities through speech acts as an overreach. How can we give so much power to words, they might ask? In this regard, Barad's clarifications are useful:

> To think of discourse as mere spoken or written words forming descriptive statements is to enact the mistake of representationalist thinking. Discourse is not what is said; it is that which constrains and enables what can be said. Discursive practices define what counts as meaningful statements. (Barad, 2003: 819)

Indeed, Jobs must have chosen his speech acts with great care, keeping in mind the products that Apple had in its pipeline, the state of the digital music, mobile telephony and Internet communications eco-systems, and the readiness of his audiences to listen. Which, in turn, raises further questions. For instance, was it Jobs alone who was "speaking," or did the setting also make it possible for his statement to have a performative effect? And what about the expectant audience eagerly willing to listen to him?

In answer, performativity scholars agree that a capacity to speak is itself performatively constituted and, thus, precedes such speech.[1] For instance, Butler noted:

> The speech act is a reiterated form of discourse, so we would be mistaken to overvalue the subject who speaks. The judge learns what to say, and must speak in codified ways, which means that the codification and ritualization of that discourse precedes and makes possible the subject who speaks. (Butler, 2010: 148)

Similarly, Callon (2010:164) argued, "A successful illocution, like a successful performation, implies the active presence of appropriate socio-technical agencements." In the case of marriage, a properly ordained minister or other official is typically required, and the parties must perform the relevant marriage conventions correctly and completely. For Jobs to "speak," the stage was carefully set for his minimalist-style pronouncements to have maximal dramaturgical effects on eager audiences (Lampel, 2001).

So, was Job's presentation just a carefully rehearsed performance and, if so, how is this different from performativity? One understanding of the notion of performance is through Goffman's (1959) work. Performances are skilled front-stage enactments that have been practiced back-stage. Such a view stands in contrast with views on performativity as taken-for-granted constituted orders discursively prescribing subject and abject positions (Butler, 1993).

Our own position is that any performance can have performative effects, either directly or indirectly. For instance, Jobs may have been performing front-stage with the intention of having a performative effect on his audiences.[2] However, lacking felicitous conditions (e.g., enabling technology, audiences, and eco-systems), his performance could just as easily have gone awry. Infelicity generates what Austin (1962) has labeled as "misfires," thereby setting in motion a "set of actions" or "effects" towards felicity (Butler, 2010:148). The dynamics underlying such constitutive forces have been labeled as *perlocutionary* performativity, which Callon argues also encompasses illocutionary performativity:

> Illocutionary performativity is a successful performation because it is able to make inactive and invisible the overflowings or misfires that comprise any illocution but that will (perhaps) be discovered only later. One simply has to broaden the timeframe to transform illocution into perlocution. (Callon, 2010: 164)

In other words, for Callon (2010) (and for Butler, 2010), perlocutionary performativity is the more important and interesting of the two.

The performativity puzzle

If a capacity to speak and express oneself is constituted by the arrangements in place and the discourses in circulation, how might transformative change occur for those who do not have a voice? Paradoxically, an answer to this question lies in deepening the puzzle, as Barad accomplished through her observations on performativity:

> Performativity, properly construed, is not an invitation to turn everything (including material bodies) into words; on the contrary, *performativity is precisely a contestation of the excessive power granted to language to determine what is real.* Hence, in ironic contrast to the misconception that would equate performativity with a form of linguistic monism that takes language to be the stuff of reality, performativity is actually a contestation of the *unexamined habits of mind* that grant language and other forms of representation more power in determining our ontologies than they deserve. (emphasis added) (Barad, 2003: 802)[3]

By taking this critical stance on performativity, Barad offers a ray of hope even to those without a voice within existing discursive arrangements. Specifically, a critical understanding of the material discursive constitution of phenomena can help

[1] This generates a "metaphysical quandary," viz. "if this new reality is constructed, what is the presumption about a non-constructed reality that serves as the basis of construction" (Butler, 2010: 153)?

[2] A study of call-center agents in India (Raghuram, 2013) documented how their rehearsed performances generated differential effects on audiences and on the agents themselves. With respect to audiences, some debtors paid off their outstanding loans, whereas others became annoyed. With respect to call-center agents, these performances led to identity shifts for some, manifested in the adoption of their call-center personas, even when not on call. Others continued with their original identities, despite presenting a different image during call-exchanges; a mismatch that generated considerable stress for these agents.

[3] This position is different from the two ontological positions—social constructivism and realism—that sparked a debate between Felin and Foss (2009a, 2009b), and Ferraro et al. (2009).

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