Antenarrative and Transnational Labour Rights Activism: Making Sense of Complexity and Ambiguity in the Interaction between Global Social Movements and Global Corporations

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Abstract
Antenarrative research and writing techniques challenge scholars to look beyond pre-existing expectations as to which actors and processes are likely to be most influential and to resist limiting their narratives to relatively ordered and predictable plot sequences. Instead antenarrative draws attention to the multiple disordered and conflicting ‘little stories’ which populate and influence social processes. Whereas previous antenarrative analysis of the interaction between global social movements and global corporations has focused on antenarratives constructed by actors themselves, in this paper we construct our own antenarrative accounts of two aspects of the long-running transnational labour rights campaign targeting Nike and other sportswear companies. We counterpoint each of our antenarratives with an established scholarly account based on more traditional narrative approaches. We argue this approach to antenarrative analysis can make important contributions to understanding global activist networks, particularly by drawing attention to...
the generative possibilities of the complex combination of ordered and disordered processes which characterize such networks.

**Keywords:** antenarrative, corporate social responsibility, global social movements, labour rights, sweatshops, transnational advocacy networks, Nike Inc, Adidas

In this article we further explore the potential and limitations of Boje’s (2001b; 2008) concept of ‘antenarrative’ as a methodology for researching and writing about complex, geographically dispersed and relatively disordered social movements. Whereas traditional narrative approaches tend to focus on particular kinds of actors and bring their actions together into a single, seemingly coherent plot-line, antenarrative emphasizes the discontinuous, uncertain and contested elements of a research subject, and may draw attention to actors, actions and perspectives which traditional narrative approaches would ignore or treat as peripheral (Boje, 2008).

Here we use antenarrative to problematize two ordered scholarly narratives regarding the international anti-sweatshop movement’s long-running campaign targeting Nike Incorporated (Nike) and other companies in the sportswear industry. This campaign is a highly complex and evolving research subject and one which has also been a long-term and major scholarly and practitioner focus for one of the authors of this article (Connor 2001; 2008; Connor and Dent, 2006). The first scholarly narrative we consider holds that during the late 1990s and early 2000s Nike used its considerable marketing expertise to comprehensively outmanoeuvre the challenge to its reputation from less well-resourced anti-sweatshop activists and other critics. The second holds that, in the absence of legal compulsion or industrial action by powerful trade unions, apparent compliance by corporations such as Nike with activists’ demands will always amount to little more than exercises in public relations. We then present two antenarrative accounts which unsettle these ordered narratives and which suggest alternative interpretations of the anti-sweatshop movement’s achievements and potential.

Boje has also written about the anti-sweatshop movement’s Nike campaign, but our application of his ideas further develops the possibilities of the antenarrative approach. Whereas Boje tends to quote and then analyse multiple lengthy ‘antenarratives’ produced by actors directly involved in or engaging with social movements, we deliberately construct our own antenarrative accounts. Our approach further demonstrates the potential for antenarrative
analysis to contribute to understanding global activist networks. Our first antenarrative indicates the potential of antenarrative methods to draw attention to the generative possibilities of the complex combination of ordered and disordered processes which characterize such networks. Our second demonstrates the value in antenarrative’s attention to the way different ‘stories’ are motivating a diverse range of actors and institutions as events unfold.

**Antenarrative as methodology**

Antenarrative is an approach to sense-making developed by David Boje (2001b; 2008), a management theorist. His research focuses on the way stories and narratives circulate, change, conflict and coalesce within and through corporations and the ways these stories and narratives influence the beliefs and behaviour of managers, staff, consumers, investors and other organizational stakeholders (Boje, 2008). Boje’s typology of the different ways stories and narratives achieve these effects is richly complex (see for example Boje, 2008, pp. 7-25). For the purposes of this article we concentrate on the broad distinction he draws between ‘narrative’ and ‘antenarrative’. By ‘narrative’ Boje means accounts which sort ‘characters, dialog[ue], themes, etc into one plot’ (Boje, 2008, p. 7) and hence which have a ‘relatively clear, beginning, middle and end’ (Jørgensen and Boje, 2009, pp. 32-3). Boje notes that within organizations such narratives are strategically constructed and promoted by senior managers to ‘institutionalize and strengthen particular traits in organizations ... [and] construct a sense of self and a sense of what the organization is all about’ (Jørgensen and Boje, 2009, pp. 32-3).

Boje (2001b, p. 117) argues such narratives often reflect and draw on established narrative forms or genres. Thus dominant internal narratives regarding the role of a company’s founder or CEO—such as Phillip Knight at Nike—are often structured in a manner which parallels stories of romantic heroes in the myths of ancient Greece: ‘A heroic CEO battles [operating] environmental threats, overcomes weaknesses of the firm, plays on firm’s strengths to exploit [operating] environmental opportunities’ (Boje, 2008, p. 142). Boje is concerned about the way these dominant organizational narratives are used to override or exclude alternative perspectives:

> Narrative also has a darker side .... Organizational life is... represented as a linear sequence ... overlooking the different voices and complex interaction inherent in creating this life .... Narrative thus contains a moral and “agreed” interpretation on something that
is in reality fragmented, pluralistic, paradoxical and ambiguous. (Jørgensen and Boje, 2009, pp. 32-33)

In 2001 Boje developed antenarrative in order to facilitate examination of these ‘different voices’ and their complex interaction within organizations. His use of the prefix ante invokes both its meaning as ‘preceding’ and its use in gambling to refer to a bet, or a ‘stake put up by a player…[i.e. “up the ante”] before receiving cards’ (Oxford English Reference Dictionary, 1996, p. 55). Antenarrative inquiry therefore both (i) explores a narrative moment prior to the closure associated with established narratives, and (ii) remains open to the many stories circulating within and through organizations and to the different stakes various actors have in whether one or other of these accounts gain currency and broad acceptance. Antenarrative inquiry is thus interested in the power relations embedded in the process by which organizational life is ‘storied and re-storied’ (Jørgensen and Boje, 2009, p. 32), including the way stories are used to promote or resist particular kinds of change (Vaara and Tienari, 2011). Antenarrative inquiry seeks to ‘shatter grand narrative into many small stories and to problematize any linear mono-voiced grand narrative of the past by replacing it with an open polysemous (many-meanings) and multivocal (many-voiced) web of little stories’ (Boje, 2001a).

Antenarrative and analysis of social movements

Boje (2001a; 2001b; 2008, p. 166-170) has also written about the anti-sweatshop movement’s campaign targeting Nike and other sportswear brands and, as this aspect of his work demonstrates, global social movements are particularly amenable to antenarrative analysis. The Nike campaign has been dispersed widely through time and space and has operated at a range of different scales—from major internationally coordinated public actions to individual acts of protest by actors on the peripheries of campaign networks. The campaign’s history itself is also intensely contested. Over a 20 year period Nike’s critics, the company’s public relations staff, journalists and other storytellers have constructed and re-constructed alternate and conflicting accounts, not only of the nature of working conditions in Nike’s suppliers’ factories but also of the character and actions of the company and its critics. Nike has at times mobilized its considerable marketing resources and public relations skills to challenge the credibility of anti-sweatshop campaigners, to promote the company as a leader in improving factory conditions, and to build relationships with other organizations which Nike hopes will support the company’s perspective. Nike’s counter-campaign strategies have in turn
generated responses from activist organizations, creating tangled and conflicting representations of events and institutions.

This mass of connected but disordered actions and actors does not fit easily into an ordered narrative structure. Boje (2001a) uses a theatrical analogy to describe the complexity of the interaction between Nike, anti-sweatshop campaigners, journalists and other key actors. He calls it ‘Nike Tamara’—Tamara being a popular play with a long-running Los Angeles season, notable for the way it is presented on multiple stages in many rooms, and its fragmented and mobile audience which tries to make sense of the simultaneous action. He notes that stories told within and between the organizations and individuals working on this issue interact, self-deconstruct and re-emerge and argues the campaign inhabits ‘a post-modern and chaotic soup of storytelling’ which resists simple plot sequences (Boje, 2001a).

Constructing a scholarly antenarrative
In this paper we draw on Boje’s concept of antenarrative but further explore its potential by applying it in a somewhat different manner to Boje himself. When Boje presents antenarrative inquiry into the Nike campaign, he includes and then analyses lengthy extracts from texts created by Nike, the company’s critics and other commentators (e.g. Boje, 2001a; 2001b, pp. 79-91, 103-6). This writing strategy suits his purpose of providing a detailed analysis of the way in which the stories contained in these texts interact in the battle to influence public perceptions of the company and its labour practices.

In the next two sections we introduce and summarize two scholarly narrative accounts of the Nike campaign, and counterpoint each narrative with an antenarrative account which we have constructed with the goal of providing a deeper, more nuanced, understanding of the issues covered in the two narrative accounts. In applying the principles underlying antenarrative inquiry, we have also sought out stories that contradict relatively well-established accounts of the interaction between sportswear companies and their critics. However, rather than quoting and analysing lengthy texts promulgated by participants in this clash of narratives, we instead provide our own direct antenarrative accounts by identifying, researching and narrating key events in the international campaign and interpreting their significance.

Our antenarrative accounts draw on on Connor’s (2008) doctoral research conducted through the period 1998-2007 and on further research conducted since then, including additional interviews. Research methods included: multiple in-depth interviews with representatives of Nike, Reebok and Adidas, and with labour rights campaigners in Europe,
the US, Thailand, Hong Kong and Indonesia; periodic review of media databases; and reflections on his observations and experiences as a direct participant in the campaign in the role of an ‘activist scholar’ in the period 1995 through 2010 (for an extended discussion see Connor, 2008: 90-118).

Narrative / antenarrative #1: ‘Teflon’ Nike or vulnerable giant?
The first pairing of narrative and antenarrative accounts centres on a key period of the campaign targeting Nike, the late 1990s and early 2000s. This period of the campaign was characterized by significant, highly visible activity by both Nike and its critics, and this section begins with a brief summary of a traditional narrative treatment of events of this period and their meaning. A longer antenarrative interpretation follows which we believe provides a richer understanding of the impact which the anti-sweatshop movement had on Nike’s reputation during this period and the way in which the movement achieved this effect.

Narrative: ‘Teflon’ Nike
In a recent article Waller and Conaway (2011, p. 85) argue that by the early 2000s Nike’s ‘countercampaign’ strategies had completely neutralized the anti-sweatshop movement’s threat to the company’s brand image. As evidence for their assertion, Waller and Conaway (2011, p. 102) point to articles praising Nike’s labour and human rights practices in prominent periodicals—Newsweek, The New York Times and the Washington Post—and in scholarly management journals—Business & Society and the Journal of Business Ethics. They also note that ‘although the company’s sales and stock share prices stagnated in the late 1990s at the height of the anti-Nike campaign ... Nike’s sales, earnings, and stock price had all regained their former momentum by 2003’ (Waller and Conaway 2011, p. 102).

It is true that the most comprehensive analysis of the direct financial impact of anti-sweatshop activism on Nike and other targeted corporations only found compelling evidence of negative impacts on sales and share prices during the periods of the most intense campaign activity, which for Nike was the two-year period from 1997 to 1998 (Bartley and Child, 2011). However, Nike invests very heavily in advertising and other marketing strategies and has a strong history of consistent growth, which arguably makes it difficult to assess whether or not campaign activities in subsequent years have caused the company’s sales to grow less quickly than they might otherwise have done. Further, as a later section of this paper demonstrates, a protest movement does not necessarily need to have a measurable impact on
a company’s sales or share price in order to persuade that company to respond positively to some of the campaign’s demands.

In the next section we use the piece in *Newsweek* cited by Waller and Conway as our entry point into an antenarrative account of the same campaign period. Whereas the *Newsweek* article portrays Nike as a ‘Teflon’ company, adept at preventing allegations of poor practices from sticking to its brand image (Emerson, 2001), our antenarrative suggests a more useful analogy for Nike’s interaction with anti-sweatshop activists during this period might be to depict Nike as a vulnerable giant: like Gulliver who woke up to find that the Lilliputians had tied his body and hair to the ground with hundreds of tiny ropes.

*Antenarrative: Vulnerable giant*

The article in question appeared in *Newsweek* on 12 March 2001. According to Tony Emerson’s (2001) story, Nike’s CEO Phillip Knight had decided late in 1997 that Nike needed to seize the initiative from its sweatshop critics. In that year Knight employed a public relations expert with a background in politics, Vada Manager, and gave him a considerable budget to employ consultants and executives to tackle challenges to the company’s image as they arose. A team of company executives established a ‘War Room’ from which to direct their work on the issue, and formulated a plan to become the industry leader in sweatshop reform and vigorously promote that role to the press (Emerson, 2001). Knight launched this new approach in a speech to the US National Press Club in May 1998 in which he announced a series of new labour programs, including raising the minimum age in supplier factories and providing after-hours educational opportunities to Nike workers (for a critical assessment of these programs see Connor, 2001).

Almost three years after Knight’s speech to the press club, the triumphant tone of comments by Nike representatives recorded in the *Newsweek* article suggests they believed Nike had effectively overcome the threat which anti-sweatshop activists had presented to the company’s brand image. In interviews with Emerson the Nike executives framed the debate over sweatshop conditions as sport, a competition in which Nike’s superior resources and knowledge of public relations would guarantee victory. Manager, who had previously worked in US President Clinton’s campaign team, described the strategy he was using with Nike as ‘…out of the Clinton playbook: leave no charge unanswered, control the agenda’ (Emerson, 2001). Emerson’s article described how in August 2000 Manager had employed extra security guards and worked closely with the police to counteract a series of student demonstrations at Nike stores across the US. According to Manager: ‘When the students saw
the growing security and police presence, it had a deterrent effect, and I think it went very smoothly. Nike approaches this as it approaches everything, as competition. And we aim to win' (cited in Emerson, 2001).

Although the *Newsweek* article was published in March 2001, the research for it had apparently been completed in August 2000—certainly the article makes no mention of any campaign events which occurred between that month and the story’s publication. Campaign developments during that eight–month period throw into question Emerson’s description of Nike as a ‘Teflon’ company. While Nike was cooperating with police to undermine the US students’ protests outside Nike stores, former US soccer professional Jim Keady and fellow activist Leslie Kretzu were spending August 2000 living among Nike workers in West Java and trying to survive on the equivalent of their full-time wage. Keady and Kretzu emailed photographs and daily diary entries to a friend in the US who put them up on a web site established for the purpose. Keady lost 9 kilograms and both described overwhelming feelings of hunger. The diary entries have considerable emotional intensity: in the entry for 14 August Kretzu described getting a headache, fever and nausea. She was strongly tempted to break her self-imposed economic discipline by buying medicine, but stops herself by asking what an Indonesian worker she had come to know would do in her situation:

What would Fitri do? Fitri my new best friend? My new soul sister? Fitri who lives in a box in a poor, dirty, overcrowded neighborhood in the Adidas factory ‘prison complex’. What would Fitri do? I don’t know, but I think she’d actually go to work. Though if she could take the day off, I suppose she’d be in that one small, smelly, congested room she shares with two other women…lying on a paper-thin reed mat on an uneven cement floor covered in shelf paper, without the money to buy what she really needed. And she wouldn’t have a choice. (Educating For Justice, 2002)

Keady and Kretzu’s web site attracted more than 200,000 page accesses in its first five months of operation (Jeff Lyons, Educating for Justice, New Jersey, pers. comm.). In September 2000 they flew to Sydney to participate in campaign activities targeting Nike organized by Australian anti-sweatshop groups in the lead-up to the Sydney Olympics. Also in Australia for this campaign was an Indonesian factory worker, Julianto, who had recently lost his job at Nike supplier PT Nikomas Gemilang as a result of helping to organize a strike. He told journalists and protestors of ongoing harassment of workers, of wages so low
workers could not meet the needs of their children and of serious accidents occurring regularly in his factory. Part of the translated speech he gave at campaign events read:

Nike claims they have good conditions but this is a lie. Nike says wages are just—but actually they are too low to live on. Nike says they have safe conditions—but every week at least one worker loses part of a finger in dangerous machines. Nike says they recognize the right of workers to meet and form unions—but what actually happens is that if they organize meetings workers are threatened and intimidated. (Oxfam Community Aid Abroad, 2001)

In the same week, demonstrations outside the World Economic Forum (WEF) meeting in Melbourne confirmed Nike was still a key target of the movement protesting neo-liberal globalization. Inspired by the demonstrations at the WTO meeting in Seattle nine months earlier, thousands of protestors attempted to blockade the WEF meeting. ‘Hey, Nike, you so bad. You so bad, you make me mad!’ was a popular chant among the demonstrators and on 12 September 5,000 people attended a demonstration outside the main Melbourne Nike store (Gumbel, 2000).

These various protest activities targeting Nike in September 2000 in Sydney and Melbourne received extensive coverage in the international press, including articles in The Globe and Mail, The Guardian, The Los Angeles Times and The Times of India. The protests also featured in free-to-air television news stories in Australia, the Netherlands, Spain, the UK and the US and on three cable channels with international reach—CNN, ESPN and Euronews. On their arrival in Sydney for the Olympics, Nike-sponsored athletes Michael Johnson and Carl Lewis were confronted by journalists asking what they thought of Nike’s labour practices (pers. obs.).

The following month the BBC’s flagship documentary program Panorama aired an episode which gave a scathing assessment of the adequacy of Nike’s system for monitoring labour rights in its suppliers’ factories in Cambodia (BBC, 2000). Also in October 2000, Dara O’Rourke, then Assistant Professor of Environmental and Labor Policy at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, released an equally damning report on the factory monitoring practices of PricewaterhouseCoopers, the company Nike was paying to monitor labour standards in its contract factories. O’Rourke’s report was covered in a number of major US newspapers including The New York Times (Greenhouse, 2000) and USA Today (2000).
The US student group, United Students Against Sweatshops (USAS) had been founded only three years earlier and had grown so rapidly that by this stage it had chapters at more than 200 schools (Featherstone, 2000). Using aggressive tactics such as extended occupations of university offices, between 1999 and 2001 the students had managed to persuade more than 100 US universities to adopt a labour code of conduct for the production of clothes bearing university logos and to require independent monitoring of source factories by the Worker Rights Consortium, an organization which the students helped to establish. Emerson’s March (2001) *Newsweek* article quoted USAS leaders predicting that the manner in which Nike had undermined their demonstrations in August 2000 would only inspire wider protests. In fact the students had got their chance in January 2001. Workers at the Kuk Dong factory, a Nike and Reebok contractor in southern Mexico, staged a strike and demanded decent wages, the right to be represented by their own union, and improvement in the quality of factory food—which they alleged was at times rancid and filled with worms. USAS organized protests across university and college campuses in the US and were ultimately successful in persuading Nike and Reebok to support a secret ballot election at the factory: the workers were later able to establish their own union and negotiate a collective bargaining agreement (Ross, 2004, pp. 267-74).

Also in January 2001 a communications student at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology who had not previously been active in the anti-sweatshop movement, Jonah Peretti, initiated what was to become one of the most effective activist responses to Nike’s attempts to protect its image. Nike was at the time offering consumers the opportunity to have a personalized message stitched into their Nike shoes. Peretti wrote to the company requesting a pair of shoes bearing the word *Sweatshop*. Nike refused and Peretti subsequently engaged in a polite but comic email correspondence with the company. When Peretti forwarded that email exchange to some of his friends for their amusement, it spread like an email wildfire. As a journalist wrote in the *Australian Financial Review*, Peretti’s email set off ‘a chain reaction that would reach millions of ‘friends’ across every continent and create a template for the marketer’s nightmare of the 21st century’ (Macken, 2001). Peretti’s email also became very popular with the mainstream press: the story was covered by more than 60 newspapers and magazines internationally including *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal*. Peretti also debated Nike’s Vada Manager on television on the *NBC Today* show and was interviewed on radio stations across the US, the UK and Australia (Macken, 2001).
Finally, in March 2001, just as the *Newsweek* article hit the news-stands, 85 representatives of organizations involved in the anti-sweatshop movement from 35 countries in Europe, Asia, the Americas, Africa and Australia gathered in Barcelona for the Clean Clothes Campaign’s (CCC) five-yearly conference to evaluate progress and set future strategy. Founded in 1991, the CCC had by this stage built an extensive network within Europe of ten national-level coalitions of unions and civil society groups campaigning to improve conditions in the international clothing and sporting goods industry, with Nike and Adidas among the major targets. Important decisions were made at the conference about future directions for anti-sweatshop campaigns, including a commitment to continue making sportswear brands a key target of the international movement.

Our first antenarrative account ends here. For want of space we have neglected other significant anti-sweatshop campaign activities undertaken between August 2000 and March 2001, including those by trade unions and NGOs involved in the Clean Clothes Campaign Network in Europe and by trade unions and NGOs in Asia and Latin America. Nonetheless we believe our antenarrative account of this eight month period serves to demonstrate the value of antenarrative: both as a means of problematizing traditional ordered narrative accounts of social and political processes and as a means of suggesting alternative interpretations. Waller and Conaway (2011) suggest the superior resources and public relations expertise of companies such as Nike makes ultimate victory over protestors almost inevitable. Yet this antenarrative account of the eight-month slice of the contest between Nike and the global anti-sweatshop movement demonstrates why, by March 2001, when Emerson’s *Newsweek* (2001) article was published, the reported confidence of Nike’s ‘War Room Team’ appeared incongruous to those who had been following the issue closely. Rather than wilting in the face of Nike’s highly professional and well-resourced public relations campaign, the anti-sweatshop movement continued to attract high levels of media coverage and to demonstrate considerable diversity and energy. It is beyond the scope of this article to analyse how this globally dispersed and relatively poorly resourced movement sustains itself and achieves these effects (for such an analysis see Connor 2008: 119-166). But our antenarrative account demonstrates that a multinational company’s superior resources and centralized and ordered planning processes do not necessarily guarantee a public relations victory over widely dispersed and loosely organized activist networks. Of course as we write this, in 2012, the global anti-sweatshop movement’s energy has dissipated somewhat from its highs in the period between the mid-1990s and the mid-2000s.
Nonetheless, as our next antenarrative indicates, organizations involved in the movement continue to influence the behaviour of targeted companies.

Narrative / antenarrative #2: Spin or substance?
In this second pairing of an ordered narrative with an antenarrative, we wind our focus forward to contemporary campaign events. Our specific interest is in a set of negotiations which have been taking place in Indonesia since 2010, involving representatives of various sportswear brands and their Indonesian suppliers; local Indonesian trade unions; and international organizations in the global anti-sweatshop movement. We present an antenarrative account of these negotiations as a counterpoint to a popular general narrative about corporate responses to transnational labour activism.

Narrative: Obvious spin

Nike Tamara is not about implementing reforms, one only has to tell a convincing story of a reform, make it believable to the stakeholders .... Nike is on occasion caught in a spin, and must make actual changes in some labor practices to keep face. But, again, too much change is not really necessary, because for all the hundreds of Nike watchers and monitors, most of the buying public will associate Nike with the winning heroics of Tiger Woods and Michael Jordan. (Boje, 2001a)

While this conclusion to one of Boje’s conference papers is not necessarily indicative of his other writing about the Nike campaign, it does reflect a common narrative among activists and scholars about corporate responses to anti-sweatshop campaigns. From this perspective, major corporations are only ever guided by the profit motive: all of the various labour rights initiatives announced by Nike and other major companies have at worst been nothing but “spin”, and at best they have been insignificant reforms which the companies have been forced to make in order to protect their reputations (e.g. AMRC, 2004; Lipschutz, 2004; Reich, 2007: 186; Ballinger, 2010). Scholars who take this view frequently contrast corporate self-monitoring of codes of conduct, which they perceive as weak and ineffective, with reforms which would allow workers more freedom to organize themselves into trade unions and hence the opportunity to exercise collective power within their workplaces. These scholars see no possibility that major corporations would cooperate in non-binding initiatives to expand workers’ freedom to form trade unions, and they usually advocate stronger
intervention by governments and the International Labour Organisation to achieve this goal (e.g. Ballinger, 2010).

There is no shortage of evidence to support this perspective. Most scholarly research into the effectiveness of corporate monitoring of suppliers’ compliance with labour codes of conduct has either only found evidence of primarily minor improvements (e.g. Barrientos and Smith, 2007: 720-1) or else has questioned whether codes have brought any benefits to workers at all (e.g. Esbenshade, 2004; Bulut and Lane, 2011). This research has frequently identified trade union rights as among those least likely to be effectively protected (e.g. Barrientos and Smith, 2007: 720-1). While this narrative clearly has considerable explanatory power, recent developments in Indonesia at least suggest we should be cautious about dismissing the possibility that major corporations would ever voluntarily participate in non-legally binding initiatives which provide workers the freedom to assert their right to join trade unions and bargain collectively.

Antenarrative: Possibility for substance

Today a historic agreement has been signed regarding trade union rights in factories in Indonesia. The pact was signed by Indonesian textile, clothing and footwear unions, major supplier factories and the major sportswear brands, including Adidas, Nike and Puma… ‘Our members have been waiting for this agreement to be concluded. It will help us in our bargaining efforts’ [said] Emelia Yanti, General Secretary of GSBI. (ITGLWF/CCC, 2011)

This extract is from a media statement jointly released by the International Textile, Garment and Leather Workers’ Federation (ITGLWF) and the Clean Clothes Campaign (CCC) in Jakarta on 7 June 2011. ITGLWF and CCC are involved in Play Fair, an ongoing global campaign alliance targeting the labour practices of sportswear brands. This trade union rights agreement—known as the ‘Freedom of Association Protocol’ (the Protocol)—represents one of the results of this campaign. The Indonesian supplier factories which have signed are PT Nikomas Gemilang, PT Panarub Industry, PT Tuntex Garment, and PT Adis Dimension; the Indonesian union signatories include Gabungan Serikat Buruh Indonesia (GSBI), Garment dan Tekstil, Serikat Buruh Sejahtera Indonesia (GARTEKS), Kongres Aliansi Serikat Buruh Indonesia (KASBI), Serikat Pekerja Nasional (SPN) and Serikat Pekerja Tekstil, Sandang dan Kulit (SP TSK) (Play Fair 2011a). Three other global sportswear companies—ASICS,
New Balance and Pentland—have also signed. If properly implemented, the agreement will significantly increase the scope for Indonesian trade unions to organize and represent sportswear workers. Among other things, it requires that a certain number of union officials be freed from their normal work duties on a full-time ongoing basis so they can undertake union tasks; that trade unions will be able to use notice boards within the factories to communicate with current and potential members; and that unions and suppliers will collaborate to facilitate automatic deduction of members’ union fees from their salaries (Play Fair, 2011a).

It took eighteen months (from November 2009 to June 2011) for the parties to reach agreement the standards in the Protocol and a further fifteen months (June 2011 - November 2012) for them to agree on composition, tasks and authority of the joint committees which will oversee the Protocol’s implementation and respond to complaints in relation to it. By all accounts it was a difficult negotiating process and, predictably, the reasons for these difficulties are contested. At one stage, in June 2010, some of the trade union leaders became so frustrated with lack of progress they organized a demonstration in Jakarta, involving workers from at least five sportswear factories. Lilis Mahmudah from the SPN union describes the impact of the demonstration in a documentary about the negotiation process:

After the demonstration, the Adidas headquarters representative, Bill Anderson [Head of Environmental and Social Affairs, Asia Pacific] came to Jakarta—that was on the 5th of July I recall .... Bill Anderson agreed to numerous matters, including five items that were crucial to the agreement, which were in our draft, and then the negotiations were once again able to continue .... We [also] wrote to friends from Oxfam, CCC and also ITG[LWF] so that they could also apply pressure. So at that time Harry [Nurmansyah, Asia Region Manager of Social & Environmental Affairs] from Adidas told me that he was called by Ashling [Seely, Policy Assistant to the General Secretary] from ITG, was criticized by CCC and also by Oxfam. So we made use of our international friends who have supported us through all this time, like ITG, CCC and then Oxfam [Australia]. So we’ve used these networks to keep the pressure up. (Play Fair, 2011b)

For his part Bill Anderson (Adidas, Singapore, pers. comm.) claims that Adidas found the protests ‘quite baffling because the negotiations were moving forward at the time’ and he maintains it was the request from Seely, rather than the union demonstrations, which prompted him to travel to Jakarta to help progress the negotiations. Anderson (pers. comm.)
also argues that the negotiation process was challenging because ‘not all of the five unions were of a like mind on the demands/scope of the Protocol’, but he notes that ‘the meetings with the unions to re-invigorate the process were very cordial and ultimately successful’.

In early December 2011, Connor met with three of the five trade union representatives involved in the unions’ core negotiating team in Jakarta, two of them as they participated in a ‘road-show’ to explain the agreement to workers in a number of different factories. They told him they were disappointed that negotiations regarding establishing a monitoring committee were progressing slowly and they expressed concern that some factory managers were trying to use ambiguity in some parts of the Protocol as an excuse to avoid fully implementing it. Even so, at that stage all the trade union and NGO representatives Connor spoke to were more optimistic than not that the protocol would bring improvements in respect for freedom of association in the factories covered by it. However, this optimism was constrained by uncertainty as to the intentions of the international buyers and local manufacturers. One of the trade union representatives, Franky Tan of SP TSK, told Connor early in the ‘road-show’ that he was ‘80-20’ about the agreement. That is, he was 80 per cent optimistic and 20 per cent pessimistic as to whether it would bring significant improvements in respect for trade union rights. He later emerged from a visit to one of the factories to tell Connor with a wry laugh that his experience talking to the factory’s management had reduced his optimism to ‘60-40’ (Franky Tan, SP TSK, Jakarta, pers. comm.).

It is also uncertain how broadly the agreement will be implemented. The four Indonesian manufacturers who have signed the agreement are significant employers—PT Nikomas Gemilang employs upwards of 40,000 workers and PT Panarub more than 10,000. However, between them Adidas, ASICS, New Balance, Nike, Pentland and Puma have direct ordering relationships with at least 81 other factory suppliers in Indonesia. The unions who have signed the agreement expect these companies to persuade all of these suppliers to implement it. How hard these companies will push all their suppliers to do so remains unclear. In May 2012 organisations involved in the Play Fair campaign initiated a web-page with a table which will provide ongoing assessments of the companies’ performance in this regard. As the time of writing (December 2012) this table indicated Adidas was doing more to support the establishment of local factory committees to implement the Protocol than ASICS, New Balance, Nike, Pentland and Puma, but of the six companies only New Balance was requiring implementation of the Protocol as part of contracts with suppliers (Play Fair, 2012).
Between December 2011 and June 2012 three of the trade unions involved also sent reports on the agreement’s implementation to international groups involved in the Play Fair campaign. The news from supplier factories was mixed. GARTEKS reported positive cooperation from Nike in working with management of PT Amara Footwear to implement the agreement in that factory, which employs more than 5,000 workers making Converse shoes. However GARTEKS claimed there was resistance from Adidas and its supplier PT Golden Continental in addressing labour issues in that factory (E. R. Silaban, GARTEKS, Jakarta, pers. comm.). KASBI reported that PT Kahatex, which supplies Nike and Adidas, had initiated disciplinary action against two union leaders who were calling for the Protocol to be implemented at PT Kahatex, and that the leaders of a new union branch at PT Shyang Yao Fung, which supplies Adidas, had also been discriminated against (Parto, KASBI, Jakarta, pers. comm.). ³ SPN reported progress in implementing the agreement in PT. Pancaprima Ekabrothers’ factory, which supplies Nike and Adidas, and PT. Panbrothers’ factory, which supplies Adidas. But SPN expressed concern about alleged freedom of association violations by PT Sinar Timur Indistrindo, which supplies Adidas, New Balance and Pentland, and by PT Panarub Industry, which supplies Adidas (L. Mahmudah, SPN, Jakarta, pers. comm.). Of the suppliers noted above, only the latter is a signatory to the agreement: clearly then the agreement is being taken seriously by more than just the four supplier signatories, but unions allege that some manufacturers are resisting it and it remains unclear how many of the more than 80 Indonesian manufacturers supplying Nike and the other signatory sporting goods companies will ultimately comply.

Thus at the time of writing, twelve months after the Protocol was signed, multiple interpretations of the process are still viable. Although this is not our expectation, we recognize it is possible the whole process may amount to little. It may well be that the sportswear companies have no real intention of ensuring the protocol is implemented over the long term, and instead wish to use it as public relations cover. This is certainly consistent with the narrative which asserts that companies will never voluntarily cede more freedom to workers to build organizational power, and some of the parties to confidential email list discussions among anti-sweatshop activists have perceived the agreement in this light.

However, other interpretations of the companies’ motivations are also possible. Of the major sportswear companies involved, Adidas is the company that has put by far the most effort into negotiating the Protocol. In a research interview on 4 July 2011 Bill Anderson noted that, in accordance with Germany’s Co-Determination Act (1976), half of the members of Adidas’ supervisory board are representatives of Adidas’ employees in Germany—
including trade union officials and elected Work's Council members—and that at least one of those worker-representative board members takes an active interest in Adidas’ labour rights compliance initiatives in Asia. In more recent communication Anderson (pers. comm.) has explained Adidas’ motivation as follows:

Also, in terms of our support and close involvement with the FOA Protocol it has been an organic process that has arisen from engagement processes, over an extended timeframe. The main driver for our supporting the FOA protocol and encouraging the participation of the suppliers in this process was the belief and understanding that such a protocol would reduce worker-management conflicts and broadly improve industrial relations... So it is less to do with reputation and very little to do with future profits, but much more an operational consideration in the day-to-day work with the factories.

It is of course appropriate to maintain healthy scepticism with regard to comments by corporate representatives about politically sensitive issues which they know will be publicly reported. However, it is at least plausible that in addition to the profit motive other motivations may have some role in determining Adidas’ behaviour, and indeed that of other companies who have signed this agreement.

We came to this research subject with our own pre-existing narrative expectations as to how this story may play out. Previous research into labour rights initiatives in this industry (Connor and Dent, 2006; Connor, 2008) leads us to expect that the effectiveness of the Protocol will primarily depend on two relationships: first, whether the Play Fair Alliance can continue to exert effective campaign pressure on global sportswear companies, and second, whether or not those companies provide their suppliers with sufficient incentives to comply (see Connor, 2008, pp. 275-310). If we had been writing a more traditional narrative account of this process, we would have given more central importance to these two relationships. While we believe such a narrative would have made a useful contribution to debate about these developments, applying an antenarrative approach has directed our attention to other relationships and processes, including relationships between the Indonesian unions involved, between the local unions and the international unions and NGOs, and the internal relationships within the global sportswear companies. This research process has persuaded us that these relationships are also likely to have an important bearing on the success or otherwise of the Protocol.
Discussion and Conclusion

It should be clear from the previous paragraph that we are not advocating a wholesale rejection of ordered scholarly narratives and their complete replacement with antenarrative methodologies. Both narrative and antenarrative approaches necessarily require researchers to make value-judgements about where to focus their attention and what to ignore or discount. For traditional narrative accounts the pre-existing expectations guiding the way these decisions are made will often reflect wisdom gained from considerable previous research and theorising. But with narrative accounts there is also a danger the researcher may, perhaps unconsciously, attempt to impose certainty and narrative consistency on a research subject which is in reality uncertain, disordered and not easily amenable to a traditional narrative structure. Antenarrative techniques can supplement narrative approaches and help overcome these limitations by drawing on alternative-to-dominant stories to provide insights to which traditional narrative approaches are blind.

Certainly in the two narrative/antenarrative pairings presented in this paper the antenarratives highlighted creative possibilities which were not within the radar of the narrative accounts. For the first such pairing—which focuses on the anti-sweatshop movement’s Nike campaign during the late 1990s and early 2000s—one of the key insights emerging from the antenarrative account is the generative potential of disordered and spontaneous campaign processes. The anti-sweatshop movement is not devoid of order, some of the organisations involved in the movement are hierarchically organised and strictly disciplined, and there is considerable coordination among many participants in the movement via email lists, conferences and other modes of communication (Connor, 2008, p. 143). These ordering processes are important means by which sub-networks within the movement, such as those involved in the Play Fair campaign, can agree on campaign demands and exert pressure on companies to comply. However, in an overall sense the movement is widely dispersed and loosely organised, with many of the participating organisations and individuals pursuing disparate and potentially conflicting objectives. Traditional, ordered narratives would tend to either disregard this aspect of social movements or else treat them as a hindrance to achieving the movement’s objectives. In contrast, antenarrative methodology facilitates attention to the way in which relatively disordered processes—including spontaneous actions by actors on the peripheries of campaign networks, such as Jonah Peretti’s viral email—can contribute as much to achieving the movement’s goals as can globally coordinated and highly disciplined campaign activities.
In so far as our second narrative/antenarrative pairing is concerned, the ongoing negotiations in Indonesia between local workers’ representatives, international anti-sweatshop movement organizations and sportswear manufacturers are still too current to allow for a conclusive judgment as to their wider or longer-term significance. The value of those negotiations is still being created. More traditional narrative approaches might lead the researcher to focus on a limited number of the processes and relationships which are influencing these negotiations, and to reduce major institutions, such as global corporations, to singular actors with predictable motivations enacting a predictable plot. Such an approach could lead the researcher to discount this process as nothing but a public relations exercise on the part of the sportswear companies, or to argue that it is unlikely to have any impact unless very strict conditions are met. It may be that such narrative accounts will ultimately be vindicated by the way this process unfolds. However our second antenarrative demonstrates the value of remaining attentive to the diverse motivations and stories circulating within and between a wider range of actors and institutions as events take place. Despite the declining intensity of the anti-sweatshop movement’s campaign activities, labour rights staff at Adidas have made, and are continuing to make, a sustained effort to negotiate and implement an agreement on trade union rights in Indonesia with a relatively weak local trade union movement. This sits uncomfortably with the narrative expectation that global corporations will never seriously act to support workers’ right to organise unless absolutely compelled to do so.

Antenarrative thus makes plain the importance of ‘live’ storytelling: its role in the shaping the course of events as they continue to play out. For activists as well as scholars it has the potential to help move analysis beyond pre-established narrative expectations and to provide a more nuanced understanding of the complex interaction between global social movements and global corporations.

Notes
1. One of the authors (Connor) took six months leave from doctoral research to organise the campaign activities in Sydney in the lead up to the 2000 Olympic Games.

2. One of the authors (Connor) participated in this meeting as a representative of Oxfam Community Aid Abroad.
3. In June 2012 we raised KASBI’s allegations in relation to PT Kahatex and PT Shyang Yao Fung with Adidas. Harry Nurmansyah replied that Adidas had only recently become aware of the concerns at Kahatex, and that his team was planning to investigate. With regard to PT Shyang Yao Fung he indicated Adidas had recently ‘intervened...to improve the FOA [Freedom of Association] and we see some improvement in their commitment. Nonetheless we will check again...’ (H. Nurmansyah, Adidas, Jakarta, pers. comm.).

References


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