Democratic Organizing in the Corporate Sphere: A Case Study

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ABSTRACT

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As a result of the Great Recession and the sluggish recovery, a downturn in the economy led to mass layoffs, leaving employees in various industries in the for-profit sector feeling hopeless and marginalized. Those employees were left voiceless as companies made autocratic decisions to cut wages and jobs to remain economically viable. This period of uncertainty for employee led to questions of whether or not space for participation, voice, and democracy could exist in the for-profit sector. Little research has focused on alternative, democratic organizing in the for-profit sector; hence, this research posed the central question: Under what conditions can a for-profit organization create a democratic, participatory culture that thrives in a capitalist society? To answer this question, a critical ethnography case study was conducted on a small for-profit telecommunications business that claims to be democratic. Ten individuals from the company and an expert on democratic corporations were interviewed. Results suggest multiple strategies enable democratic practices in a corporate for-profit environment that can flourish in a downturn economy. These strategies consist of a shared democratic narrative among employees, scalable practices, and practicing transparency while holding employees accountable in the face of a downturn.
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

During the Great Recession of 2007-2009, the economy shed an astonishing 8.8 million jobs, with the unemployment rate doubling from 5% in December 2007 to 10% in October 2009, going down in history as the worst recession on record since the Great Depression (Bureau of Labor Statistics [BLS], 2012; Kochhar, 2012; Wiseman, 2012). Within the timeframe of this recession, the total number of mass layoff events (which includes at least 50 persons from a single employer) was 34,126 (BLS, 2009). Since the recession ended in June of 2009, the recovery has been sluggish, creating around 4 million jobs, replacing just 46% of lost jobs (Wiseman, 2012). In comparison, the previous eight recoveries created an average of 350% of lost jobs during their respective recoveries (Wiseman, 2012). As it stands in 2012, there are currently 25 million Americans unemployed or underemployed, and never before in history have so many Americans been unemployed for so long three years into a recovery, with nearly 5.2 million without work for 6 months or more (Ferrara, 2012; Wiseman, 2012). Many indicators that measure the health of the economy, such as household income, poverty rate, consumer spending, and GDP growth, point to a sluggish recovery in the three years since the recession was declared over. In a recent study on the economic recovery, the Pew Research Center painted a bleak picture illustrating this slow drag: “Much like an unwelcome dinner guest who does not know when it is time to leave, the Great Recession seems blissfully unaware that it was declared over in June of 2009” (Kochhar, 2012, p. 4).

While recessions are of a cyclical nature, occurring every decade in our nation’s history (BLS, 2012); it is evident this severe recession and the slow recovery has had a
major impact on the workforce. Of interest is the swift rate in which employers, both public and private, cut jobs in the wake of falling profits and stock prices. For instance, General Motors cut 47,000 jobs by the end of 2009 (Marr, 2009), and Sprint Nextel, Home Depot, Caterpillar, and at least eight other companies cut more than 75,000 jobs domestically and internationally (Rampell, 2009). The record-breaking list of mass layoffs was a result of low demand and excessive job growth since the 90s. Sadly, the very employees who contributed to the explosive growth of the past 20 years were part of these mass layoffs. More importantly, those workers were being cut by executive committees to meet the bottom-line, with little regard for their contributions over the course of the last two decades. Those cuts left many feeling disenchanted, voiceless, and generally powerless against the tide of this deep recession. Given the slow recovery and long periods of unemployment, many of these workers are still looking for stable work.

In reflecting on this unfortunate turn of events, I am struck by the timeliness of this dissertation. When I started research on workplace democracy, the economy was still on the rise, home prices were soaring, and the Dow Jones was on the upswing at 12,000, continuing to rise and peak at 14,000 in October of 2007. In other words, the fear, depression, and general gloom of our country were much less severe than what we experienced during the Great Recession and still feel today. A critical look at ideologies such as participation, democracy, voice, and power in the corporate sphere were at the heart of my research focus. Interestingly, with the decline of the economy, these same ideas of democracy, participation, and general feelings of well-being and personal mental health have become main stream, as millions of workers lose their jobs and take a critical
look at corporate life and reconsider why they joined the corporate sphere in the first place.

This set of unfortunate circumstances, which consists of a perfect storm of economic turmoil affecting actors across the globe, creates a fierce urgency to examine and critique the way employees are treated in the corporate sphere. Particularly, the treatment inside corporations directly affects how we organize and participate in a democratic nation. The original aim of my research was to use a critical-theoretical perspective to examine power and resistance in the light of “corporate colonization.”

Given the decline in the economy over the last four years, I would be off the mark if I only critiqued without providing pragmatic solutions. As such, I set out to both critically examine and provide practical solutions on how bureaucratic organizations can create, facilitate, and sustain a participatory and democratic workplace for employees at all levels. In the following, I illustrate how a bureaucratic workplace has a significant impact on the heart of our society, shaping decisions, values, and perspectives in the private and public spheres.

Significance of the Study

In recent years, organizational communication scholars began to address gaps in the research on diverse sectors, cultures, and organization types (Mumby & Stohl, 2007), examining democracy, participation, and alternative realities. While there are valuable, emerging studies examining the opportunities for, and examples of participation in, non-profit cooperatives and other “alternative” sites (Harter, 2004; Mumby, 1996; Norander & Harter, 2012), there has been little research in participation and democracy, in for-profit, public organizations. More importantly, I am interested in the discursive space (or
lack thereof) for alternative organizing (i.e., flat hierarchy, support and empowerment, collective decision-making) within for-profit businesses.

I acknowledge that a participatory ideology and the bottom-line practical demands of for-profit companies are viewed by some as an inherent contradiction (Harter, 2004). Likewise, I embrace the notion that contradiction is part of organizational life (Trethewey & Ashcraft, 2004; Trethewey, 1997; Tracey, 2004). In most publicly traded companies however, what matters most at the end of the day is meeting and exceeding profit/revenue numbers, and competition trumps interconnectedness and caring. Thus, many who are already entrenched in the corporate world may question the practicality of alternative sites of discourse, and lived experiences of individuals. As Lammers (2011) points out, what good is the study of interpersonal interactions in an organization if the market drives an entire business to close? Therefore, the question researchers should be asking is not how to embrace the contradiction between alternative organizing and practical corporate demands, but whether or not participation and alternative organizing, while humane, can be conducive for meeting the bottom-line numbers required in for-profit organizations.

Workplace Democracy

It is undeniable that in a Western capitalist society, the “sun rises and sets with corporate messages” (Deetz, 1992, p. 36). The sky is the limit when it comes to the size of businesses, and the boundaries of work, family, and public life are defenseless against the imposing nature of these corporations with their hands in every aspect of society, shaping our education, politics, and values. The catch is that corporations provide meaning around bottom-line and technological futurism, which is not beneficial to basic human needs for community (Deetz, 1992; Kirby & Harter, 2003). Furthermore, while
the workplace is a major site of social influence (Novak & Harter, 2008), the workers have little to say in the decision-making process, as it is largely authoritarian in form (Melman, 2001; Deetz, 1992; Miller & Monge, 1986). If the corporate sphere does shape our (democratic) society, then the corporate process of decision-making and meaning creation should be democratic in and of itself. If not, the interests of people in the education, family, corporate, and community contexts are marginalized at the expense of a totalitarian machine.

To reconcile the lack of agency created by bureaucratic organizations, individual employees require discursive space to participate within the organization, thus creating a more democratic workplace. Participation, in general, is a loosely defined term, and there are different approaches and models aimed at enabling individual workers. Likewise, there is a wealth of research providing ways in which employees can more fully participate in organizations. In the following, I briefly define the different tenets of participation and democracy. Democracy, participation, and the way they relate to public organizing and corporations will be given greater scrutiny in the literature review. To begin, a general definition of participation is established.

Participation includes “who in a society or group has a right to contribute to the formation of meaning and the decisions of the group — which individuals have access to the various systems and structures of communication and articulate their own needs and desires with them” (Deetz, 1992, p. 94). Participation is akin to giving voice to individuals through multiple channels (Budd, Gollan, & Wilkinson, 2010). Ideally, participation refers to “those principles and practices designed to engage and ‘represent’ (in the multiple senses of the term) as many relevant individuals and groups as possible in
the formulation, execution, and modification of workplace activities” (Cheney et al., 1998, p. 39). However, participation is something that is privileged, a right allotted to individuals who can adequately understand and coherently communicate within the boundaries of set structures. Within the workplace structure, worker participation programs are designed as strategic programs from the top-down, enabling individuals at the local level to participate (Stohl & Cheney, 2001).

In contrast, according to Marshall and Stohl (1993), participation is not constructed as a single model/design at the macro level affecting individual actors. Rather, participation is a communicative process and strategy, enacted in a systemic manner, blurring the lines between structural and micro discourses (Cooren, Kuhn, Cornelissen, & Clark, 2011). As such, participation is more than just an individual cognitive phenomenon, or a simple structural design. Participation is a set of interactions (Stohl & Cheney, 2001) involving stakeholders both at the “floor” and “corporate” levels. In other words, “management may initiate participation as a new structure, but only those who work can give it form, life and meaning” (Stohl & Cheney, 2001, p. 358).

Workplace democracy, which is not a synonym for workplace participation, can be defined as a:

- System of governance which truly values individual goals and feelings (e.g., equitable remuneration, the pursuit of enriching work, and the right to express oneself) as well as typically organizational objectives (e.g., effectiveness and efficiency, reflectively conceived), which actively fosters the connection between those two sets of concerns by encouraging individual contributions to important
organizational choices, and which allows the ongoing modification of the organizations activities policies of the group. (Cheney, 1995, p. 170)

While this definition of workplace democracy is helpful, it is hard to imagine a workplace democracy in a bureaucratic organization operating in a capitalist society. According to Cheney and Cloud (2006), within the context of capitalism, “it is hard to have a fully ‘democratic’ workplace because workers are dependent on employers for their survival, and have little or no control over the terms of their work” (p. 512). Power and inequality in corporations invite a critical lens, as one of the primary goals of critical organizational studies is democratic organizing (Mumby & Stohl, 2007).

In an age of large corporations and globalization, bureaucracy is hard to overcome as large companies compete to operate as efficiently as possible to meet stock quotes and quarterly goals. According to some scholars, within such organizations, communication is aimed at the corporate interests, minimizing individual expression and identity, thus creating an isolating and alienating culture (Deetz, 1992; Cheney, 1995). This is problematic as many spend the majority of their adult lives as part of a large company, where they attempt to develop and grow as individuals. More recently, researchers are beginning to look at alternative organizations which counter the traditional bureaucratic masculine organizations. Next, I discuss in more detail the characteristics of these organizations.

For the majority of the 20th century, organizational theory centered on the idea that organizations were purely masculine, highlighting masculine characteristics such as bureaucratic hierarchies, competition, individualization, and the bottom-line (Buzzanell, 1994; Kirby & Harter, 2003; Mumby, 1996). More specifically, according to Ferguson
(1984), bureaucracy is a social system, “one in which certain social acts are established and maintained, certain types of behavior required, and certain motivations are encouraged” (p. 9). Because of this entrenched bureaucratic social system, the masculine traits of power, identity, and decision-making are taken for granted in the traditional workplace.

Alternative discursive sites have been established and examined to counter this masculine form of organizing. These alternative organizations can be viewed as “subaltern counterpublics that discursively challenge prevailing understanding of the ways in which gender, identity, power, and politics intersect” (Mumby, 1996, p. 286; see also Ashcraft & Mumby, 2004; Fraser, 1989; Maguire & Mohtar, 1994). Alternative organizations can be characterized by non-hierarchical structures, participatory collective decision-making, and interconnectedness (Harter, 2004). Alternative organizing privileges lived experiences in hybrid organizations, and more recently, the postcolonial-feminism framework expands the scope of alternative organizing to include transnational organizing (Koschman, 2012; Norander & Harter, 2012; Mumby & Stohl, 2007). The primary goal of alternative or feminist organizing in various frameworks is to create discursive space for “multivocal rule construction, meaning, and decision making” (Leeman, 2006, p. 9). Alternative organizations consist of feminist values that emphasize caring, support, and empowerment, and work is viewed as social rather than technical (Mumby, 1996). Where masculine, bureaucratic organizations stress hierarchy, competition, and individualization, alternative organizations open up space for cooperation and participation. An alternative organization is participatory and democratic
in that individuals are given equal voice, space, and recognition in the decision-making process.

**Critical-Theoretical Approach**

In looking at democracy in the corporate sphere, I take a critical-theoretical approach. I also acknowledge that as I write this dissertation, my lived experience consists of consulting in the private sector, and currently as an employee within the government sector. As a consultant, I have worked on a variety of projects. These projects include, but are not limited to, large projects pertaining to leadership and organizational effectiveness for Fortune 100 companies; international projects focused on Muslims’ perception of the West, taking me to Saudi Arabia and London; and “authorized use only” reports for undisclosed government clients in the Middle East to help shape policy. These diverse projects have provided me with a wide variety of corporate experiences and government experiences consisting of bottom-line, strategies and bureaucratic narratives emphasizing power, rank, and secrecy.

More broadly, as a privileged white male, I made the decision to leave academia and transition into the private sector as a means to make more money. After working in the private sector for three years, I learned it could be a very inhumane place to work. Profit and gross margin took priority over employee’s well-being, and competition to bring in new sales was sometimes ruthless. I saw many careers that were ended without hesitation for seemingly little reason. Transparency within the organization was absent, as a handful of corporate executives made decisions to cut jobs, transfer employees to new cities, and scale back pay. All of this was done behind closed doors among C-suite
executives without input from employees or explanation to the workers about why they made those life-altering decisions.

This experience has molded me, and while I acknowledge I have had a privileged history that enabled me to enter the corporate sphere in the first place, it has also placed me among the ranks of disenchanted employees that find themselves questioning issues of well-being in light of capitalism. Regardless of the connotation I associate with these experiences, they have all had a major impact on the way I see corporations, bureaucracy, and perceive the world. For better or worse, I am fully embedded within the corporate sphere, unconsciously living, breathing, creating, and reinforcing corporate and bureaucratic narratives myself. I drank the corporate Kool-Aid years ago; therefore, I am tainted by the very sphere I wish to critique. However, this time spent as a consultant and government employee gives me an insider’s lived experience from which I can draw on my own practical experience, straddling the line between theory and practice. Now that my personal standpoint has been established, I will elaborate on the theoretical standpoint I will use to inform this dissertation.

In light of capturing the tenets of critical theory, I will briefly trace the history starting with the Enlightenment. The Enlightenment was geared towards emancipating the human subject from tradition (dominant historical narratives, and social order). This emancipation, through the Enlightenment, could happen with the use of reason guided by scientific methods (Alvesson & Deetz, 1996). During the Enlightenment period, rationality and objective truth could be gained through using the scientific method of testing and re-testing. These Enlightenment themes were still prevalent in organizational
studies in the early 20th century, where the corporation was viewed as a site of rational knowledge and instrumentality (Morrison, 1995; Taylor, 1911/1988).

Hegel’s philosophical idealism complicated the scientific rationality of the Enlightenment. Hegel’s “philosophical idealism” put forward the idea that human existence and development can be understood only through the abstract categories of spirit, reason, being, and history (Morrison, 1995). Idealism was central to Hegel’s philosophy, as he stressed that human reason was the highest good. Marx, in response to Hegel’s work, believed that the highest good was not reason, but rather “materialism” (Morrison, 1995). For Marx, it was the capitalist mode of production, and ruling class ideology, which created a “false consciousness” under which society operates (Marx & Engels, 2001). Marx's thinking differed from Hegel in that individuals who were not in the ruling class had very little agency, as their lives were determined by modes of production.

The Frankfurt School was yet another development in the advancement of critical theory. Theorists such as Adorno, Benjamin, Horkheimer, and Habermas formed the Frankfurt School, and it served to critique orthodox Marxism (historical determinism) and totalitarianism in Russia and Germany (Burrell & Morgan, 1979). The Frankfurt School also was in response to the Enlightenment, and modernism in particular. Specifically, critical theorists emerging from the Frankfurt School were concerned with the arbitrary authority of science, and the subordination to technical rationality (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2001). Habermas, Adorno, and Horkhiemer have each taken up issues of power, ideology, and emancipation. Building on the framework laid out by these Frankfort theorists, current organization communication scholars have examined power
(Mumby, 2001), participation (Alvesson & Deetz, 2000; Deetz, 1992), and dialectics (Mumby, 2005) in the organizational context. I will now examine the specific concepts and defining characteristics of critical theory in its current form.

Perhaps one of the most defining characteristics of critical theory (especially in comparison to postmodernists, whom see the Enlightenment as dead), is that critical theorists see the modernist, Enlightenment period as “sick, and see hope for reconstruction in recovery of good parts and redirecting the future” (Alvesson & Deetz, 1996, p. 189). In contrast, postmodernists see the Enlightenment as a dead period with no future. In seeing no hope in the future of the Enlightenment, postmodernists such as Buadrillard (2001) believe that we are in a form of hyperreality. Through reproduction of models, we have lost the original form, and we feebly attempt to recreate the real through science and the ethnography of real cultures. According to postmodern thought, nothing is real anymore, and everything is relative to its surrounding context. Critical theorists, on the other hand, have trust in reason, and believe we can get to a sense of the real, but it will take work. To get at the real, critical theorists have developed critiques on a few different concepts. These concepts are ideology, hegemony, power, and reification. In the following section, I outline these four concepts. To begin my discussion of these concepts, I explain ideology.

Ideology can be defined as “the process of symbolically creating systems of meaning through which social actors’ identities are constructed and situated within relations of power (Mumby, 2001, p. 587). Marx (Marx & Engels, 2001) first developed the theory of ideology as something that is created by the ruling class through the division of labor. Those who do not have the means of production do not have the means
to think outside the ruling ideologies. The mass, therefore, takes the ruling ideologies as universal rules of thought and production. Furthermore, those who are in control of the means of production are also in control of ruling ideologies, which the mass (which is dependent on materials) takes to be universal because they do not have the means to do otherwise (Marx, 1976). This division of labor creates what is called false consciousness, where the mass believes they have the freedom to determine their lifestyle; but, in reality, their lives are controlled and dominated by the ruling class.

Expanding on the use and meaning of ideology, Althusser (1971) suggests that ideology is created, and maintained, through the school system, and protected by the state. Through education, we are taught obedience and class stratification. We never question this because the state has engrained in us the idea that education is all things good. The more we buy into education as a site of freedom, the more it can operate as an ideological apparatus. More importantly, Althusser suggests that we are “always already” subjects to something, meaning you can never operate outside the ideological state apparatus. Althusser, much like Marx, gives individuals very little agency in freeing themselves from false consciousness.

Hegemony and reification are both outgrowths of the powerful nature of ideologies. Gramsci (1971) defines hegemony as:

… the ability of one class or group to link the interests and worldviews of other groups with its own. Hegemony does not refer to simple domination, but rather involves attempts by various groups to articulate meaning systems that are actively taken up by other groups. (p. 587)
Hegemony works when subordinated groups consent to dominant ideas that privilege the dominant class. For instance, if a woman is told she needs to act assertive, to survive in the workplace, she is operating under a masculine hegemony that privileges men. Furthermore, if she laughs off a sexual proposition by her boss, and says he is just “acting like a man,” she is reifying her sexualized, subordinate position of a woman. Accordingly, reification is “the process through which humanly created structures take on an objective, ‘natural’ existence, independent from those who constructed them. Reification leads to a sense of alienation, which engenders the possibility for self-reflection and social change” (Mumby, 2001 p. 587, quoting Lukacs, 1971).

Another defining characteristic of critical theory is power, and the emancipation from power structures. Power can be defined as “the production and reproduction of, resistance to, or transformation of relatively fixed (sedimented) structures of communication and meaning that support the interests (symbolic, political, and economic) of some organization members or groups over others” (Mumby, 2001, p. 587). Because of power structures, individuals are not able to participate in meaning-making procedures. Accordingly, a central characteristic of critical theory is the emancipatory potential of reason (Alvesson, 1996). Critical theorists can work to create societies and workplaces that are free from domination, where all members have an equal opportunity to contribute to the production of systems and processes (Alvesson & Deetz, 1996; Deetz, 1992).

This critical-theoretical perspective will be my lens when examining the culture of the site I researched. In holding to my call for a practical solution for democratic organizations, I go beyond critique, and also incorporate the modernist movement to
highlight the powerful potential of reason as a means to organize, resist, and change power structures.

The site of examination that originally set the stage for my current research was “Big Box,” a pseudonym for a publicly traded retail company that employed 155,000 full-time, part-time, and seasonal workers domestically and internationally. Big Box was a specialty retailer of consumer electronics, home office products, entertainment software, appliances, and related services (Google Finance, May 2009). As of February 2009, the company operated 1,023 US stores. US stores are broken down into eight territories, divided into districts, managed by district managers who oversee store management and meet regularly with store managers to discuss customer loyalty, employee satisfaction surveys, and store operating performance.

In June of 2006, traveling to eight retail stores in two different states, I conducted over 60 in-depth interviews with general managers, sales associates, and supervisors for a pilot study conducted by my previous employer for Big Box. With a team of five other field researchers/consultants, we were able to synthesize our findings to make actionable, innovative recommendations to senior executives at the corporate office. The problems our team uncovered centered on a breakdown in communication between the corporate office in the Midwest and the retail stores spread throughout the country. This breakdown in communication resulted in a lack of engagement among employees at the store-level, as they felt disconnected from the decisions made in the corporate office that were affecting the stores in which they worked.

Unfortunately, given the contract between my previous employer and Big Box, we were unable to focus our consulting work on this problem, and we put our resources
into solutions that were easier for my employer to implement. Interestingly, in December of 2008, Big Box announced that its third-quarter profits sank 77%, due to what their CEO called a “dramatic and potentially long-lasting change in consumer behavior” (New York Times, 2008), as customers drastically cut back their spending in light of the failing economy. As a result of this sharp decline in profits, Big Box offered a voluntary severance package to 4,000 of its corporate employees in December of 2008, and approximately 500 employees accepted (Baxter, 2009). This announcement to cut costs back in December of 2008 led to a rising stock price, despite falling profits.

In April of 2009, after poor fourth-quarter results, a Wall Street analyst announced that Big Box was poised to cut another 1,000 jobs at the Assistant Manager level in the retail stores throughout the country (Moylan, 2009). With these latest cuts, there have now been mass layoffs at the corporate headquarters and in retail stores, affecting everyone in the organization. While mass layoffs are happening to other retail organizations around the country, Big Box was of particular interest because of efforts it makes at the corporate level to include employees, and make them feel as though their thoughts and opinions matter. In contrast, as the in-depth interviews we conducted illustrated, many retail store employees were disenchanted because they felt silenced by corporate executives.

This struggle between the corporate employees and the store-level employees brings up core critical-theoretical issues of power (Mumby, 2001), participation (Alvesson & Deetz, 2000; Deetz, 1992), and dialectics (Mumby, 2005) in the organizational context that need further examination. Unfortunately, after re-contacting
Big Box to explore these struggles further, I was told by senior management that my study would be a liability to the company.

After refocusing my search for “democratic” organizations, I looked at a network called “WorldBlu” which highlights the most democratic companies in the United States and abroad every year. In searching WorldBlu’s network, I found BW, a pseudonym for a company that was rated by WorldBlu as one of 100 companies worldwide that made the top democratic companies list in 2007, 2008, and 2009. BW was a much smaller, private for-profit organization. Further, given that 99.7% of all employers are small businesses consisting of fewer than 500 employees, (U. S. Small Business Association [SBA], 2012), BW is a small business that many people can identify with. The future of the U.S. employment rate and economy in general hinges on the successes or failures of small businesses such as BW. Therefore, this site of research can address issues of democracy and participation in a contemporary environment.

I was able to get in contact with Mike, the President of BW, and it immediately became clear that BW would be transparent and easy to access. This accessibility allowed me to carefully explore ways in which a struggling company can meet profit expectations of outside stakeholders and, at the same time, create, facilitate, and maintain a democratic, participatory workplace.

To reach this end, I posed a list of pertinent questions, which are addressed through further review of the literature.

• Can an organization be profitable and meet external stakeholders’ expectations while maintaining democratic practices?

• Are capitalism and democracy in the workplace mutually exclusive?
• What does a democratic workplace look like in the for-profit sector?
• Are there corporate hegemonic narratives in place that are preventing employees from participating in decision-making processes?
• What are the micro/macro-level dialectical contradictions inherent to a democratic workplace in a bureaucratic institution?
• What are the implications for the private and public spheres if bureaucratic organizations were to shift from a totalitarian structure to a more democratic structure?
• Can a more democratic workplace make individuals more willing and better prepared to participate in a democratic society?
• Can a democratic workplace lead to more engaged citizenship and community involvement?
• What tools should be used to implement democratic ideologies into the workplace?
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Now that the justification for this study has been identified, the following research problem will help guide the literature review, and the rest of the dissertation: “Under what conditions can a for-profit corporation create a democratic, participatory culture that thrives in a capitalist economy?” To explore this question, the literature review will be presented in three topical areas: (1) Democratic public sphere theorizing; (2) Democratic and participatory workplaces; and, (3) Critical perspectives of capitalism and bureaucratic organizations. To start, an overview of the literature pertaining to public sphere organizing is reviewed.

Public Sphere Theorizing

Democracy

Democratic practices, both within the workplace and in American society, are at the heart of this dissertation. In negotiating the compatibility of democracy in the greater society to democratic practices within the workplace, basic tenets such as democratic values, what it looks like, and who it serves were explored. Furthermore, a broader look at democracy in our society will also help to explore the boundary-spanning ways which internal and external affairs of an organization are interrelated (Cheney et al., 1998, p. 45). Once a brief democratic backdrop of our Western society is established, one can better situate and contextualize democracy in the workplace. To reach this end, literature that illustrates the defining characteristics of democracy in the public sphere was highlighted.

Democracy can be defined in terms of:
… relatively equal access to the material resources that a society creates and to an ongoing, open, self-reflective and malleable system of sociopolitical organization. Although it does not offer a clear beacon for or a straight line toward progress, the ideal of democracy is a healthy counterpoint to alternatives of totalitarianism of various kinds. (Cheney & Cloud, 2006, p. 513)

Equality, as illustrated throughout this literature review, is a key condition for democracy. As deTocqueville (1835) eloquently states “equality of conditions does not itself engender regularity of morals, but it unquestionably facilitates and engenders it” (p. 736).

Democracy is at the heart of public organizing, a “type of community rule in which the process of decision making generally entails widespread and effective participation of community members” (Mason, 1982, p. 153). As such, democracy is more than a form of government it is a “primary mode of associated living, a conjoint communicated experience” (Dewey, 1944, p. 87). Accountability is a fundamental characteristic of democracy (Ferree & Martin, 1995). In granting every member of society accountability to confidently act and think for himself or herself instead of just taking orders, we can come closer to establishing a democratic ideal (Dewey, 1944). It follows then, that if workers are not brought up in a society where democracy is valued and practiced, it will be very hard for participation and democratic ideals to thrive in organizations (Lammers & Szell, 1989).

Public sphere

In order to understand how democracy and organizing works in organizations, it is helpful to further understand how our (democratic) society comes together and
organizes in the public sphere. Much of the literature in the review suggests that the public sphere and organizations are inextricably bound. In reaching a better understanding of how Western society comes together to conduct moral deliberations and reach decisions in the public square, one can, in turn, critically examine the organization-society relationship. To begin, a definition of the public sphere was established, followed by a look at critical scholars’ perspectives of the public sphere. A critical perspective of the public sphere, according to DeLuca and Peeples (2002), entails “the curious dynamic of subjecting the public sphere to scathing criticisms, but then declaring it to be absolutely necessary” (p. 128).

The public sphere can be defined as “a discursively constructed space for argument in which different interest groups compete to articulate conflicting worldviews” (Mumby, 2000, p. 10). Warner (2002) argues that communication is the glue that holds a public together: “A public is a space of discourse organized by nothing other than discourse itself. It exists by virtue of being addressed. Belonging to a public sphere requires at least minimal participation rather than a state of being” (p. 413). According to Habermas (1962/1989), the ideal public sphere is a place where a reasoning public is free to critically, and rationally, debate. Habermas (1962/1989) has developed four criteria for a reasoning public sphere as follows:

1. Virtually as many people express opinions as receive them; 2. Public communication is so organized that there is a chance immediately and effectively to answer back any opinion expressed in public; 3. Opinion formed by such discussion readily finds the outlet in effective action; 4. Authoritative institutions
do not penetrate the public, which is thus more or less autonomous in its operation. (p. 249)

In taking a critical look at the public sphere, scholars have questioned the stability of the public sphere, what constitutes it, and also suggested alternative, competing spheres. Habermas, for instance, has laid claim that the public sphere, which by his definition consists of rationally debating citizens, has collapsed with the rise of the social welfare state. This social welfare state consists of a number of factors that are irreparably harming and eroding the public and private spheres. Namely, the public sphere has been sucked dry by the “social sphere,” in which “the state and societal institutions fused into a single functional complex that could no longer be differentiated according to criteria of public and private” (Habermas, 1962/1989, p. 148). Private laws are now constituted under social legislation, and private matters are aired out in public. Through a surrendering of our private rights to the social sphere, we are under the hand of a state that hinders the public expression of private men and women.

Habermas' conception of the public sphere has come under criticism. Specifically, Fraser (1990) suggests that Habermas, in focusing on one bourgeois public sphere, fails to examine other competing public spheres. Accordingly, Fraser (1990) states:

We can no longer assume that the bourgeois conception of the public sphere was simply an unrealized utopian ideal; it was a masculinist ideological notion that functioned to legitimate an emergent form of class rule … Members of subordinate groups would have no arenas for deliberating among themselves. Also they would have no arenas in which to undertake communicative practices that were not, as if it were, under the supervision of dominant groups. (p. 62)
Feminist theorizing highlights the discourses of alternate and marginalized spheres, challenging the ways in which the bourgeois public sphere disempowers certain groups (Harter, Edwards, McClanahan, Hopson, & Carson-Stern, 2004; Mumby, 1993). Specifically, feminist theorizing problematizes the way in which the bourgeois public sphere privileges masculine narratives in the public domain, and feminizes the domestic sphere. In breaking down this dichotomy, feminists aim to bring interconnectedness, emotionality, and family to the public life (Harter et al, 2004; Lichtenstein, 2006). Allowing all groups to participate in the public sphere, including competing publics, we can come closer to achieving a participatory democracy (Mumby, 1993). It also follows, that competing publics, or groups, in the workforce are necessary for workplace democracy to thrive. Next, I looked at literature that discusses how we can deliberate in the public sphere(s).

*Public deliberation*

Public deliberation is democracy in action in the public sphere. According to Arendt (1958), “A life without speech and without action . . . is literally dead to the world: it has ceased to be human life because it is no longer lived among men” (p. 176). In contrast to passive silence, speech leads to action, which helps shape community. Likewise, Arendt (1958) writes, “Action not only has the most intimate relationship to the part of the world common to us all, but it is the one activity which constitutes it” (p. 198). In addition to shaping community, dialogue at the same time helps one understand the self in relation to the other. When specifically addressing race, McPhail (2004) illustrates the reflective nature of dialogue stating: “Racial dialogues engage people in a reflective process that responds to their social identities and group affiliations” (p. 213).
Stepping forward to speak and act with strangers helps people effect change, while at the same time learn about themselves.

How members of a society come together and engage in dialogue to create action and change is under debate, as the literature suggests. For instance, Sennett (1974) emphasizes the need for “civility” in the public sphere, defined as “the activity which protects people from each other and yet allows them to enjoy each other’s company.” Sennett adds that individuals in the public sphere should wear “masks” which hide their private feelings, and disguise power relations. At the heart of civility is the “shielding of others from being burdened with oneself” (p. 264).

In contrast, others argue that the conceptions of civility and tolerance are harmful for public organizing as they create barriers between individuals who merely tolerate each other. According to McKerrow and St. John (2003):

Playing nice with the cultural other must involve more than a procedural and patronizing willingness to ‘hear the other side out.’ Civility, in at least one critical respect is not a filtering device; it is a blocking device . . . it is not an agent for fruitful civic discourse, and should be eliminated from those frameworks seeming to advance it as precisely as that. (p.750)

Communities, according to St. John and Shepherd (2004), should be spaces where people assert their values, sometimes in heated debate, promoting what is best for themselves and their communities. Still, others argue that we are losing our sense of community altogether, due to a variety of factors. As Putnam (2000) argues, our communities have moved from the “front porch” to the “water cooler” as organizations are starting to create a sense of community for employees at work (p. 85). The problem
with shifting our communities to the workplace lies in the limited space for open dissent and debate on politics, morals, and spirituality, which McKerrow and St. John (2003) deem essential for the public sphere.

Another impediment to public deliberations is the idea that a select few control the masses. Even if everyone is allowed freedom of expression, public deliberation is pointless if the media (or those who control the media) shape the debate. As Deetz and Putnam (2001) illustrate, “freedom of expression is meaningless if the person with the biggest megaphone drowns out the chorus of free voices. In effect, freedom of expression neither specifies the right to be heard nor guarantees the expression of all positions” (p. 9). Scholars have addressed issues of power in deliberating, calling for future research that addresses inherent inequalities in deliberative events (Carcasson, Black, & Sink, 2010).

Further, authors have noted that people are “frequently apathetic, unknowledgeable, irrational, easily swayed by group influences, and profoundly affected by technology and mass communication” (Dachlar & Wilpert, 1978, p. 5). As such, the goal should not be to judge the accuracy of technology and mass media, but rather to study how these mediums create perceptual gaps in status, power, and access to resources, thus influencing citizens’ participation in the public sphere (Gandy & Baron, 1998). Finally, with greater use of technology comes greater specialization to access and use the public sphere. Given this shift, Goodnight (1999) asks, “if technology and specialization is [sic] necessary to make knowledgeable decisions, then what value is the participation of common citizens?” (p. 258).
After examining the literature on public sphere organizing, one can begin to see that the lack of participation in the public sphere is reflected in the workplace. Given this relationship between the public sphere and the workplace, it is worth evaluating how these deficiencies in the public sphere are amplified/muted in the corporate sphere. Therefore, the next section of this literature review will focus on democratic organizing in the workplace.

**Democratic, Participative Workplaces**

**Workplace democracy**

Now that democracy and deliberation in the public sphere have been critically discussed, one can better situate democracy in the workplace. First, it must be made clear that democracy and participation are not synonyms. For instance, lower-level workers may be invited to participate and contribute ideas to influence upper-level managerial decisions, but ultimately upper-level management has their hands in the final decision (Patemen, 1970). In this case, it is a participatory workplace, but not wholly democratic. On the other hand, while participation is a necessary condition for democracy, it is not sufficient (Cheney, 1995). There are many organizations and political systems which claim to be democratic, but have very poor participation. The definition of workplace democracy is fluid, and contextual. What might seem democratic to one organization may seem constraining to another; therefore, it is hard to tie down an all-encompassing definition that reflects organizations with different structures, cultures, and goals. To better conceptualize the constructs of workplace democracy I have broadly outlined its main components, followed by a discussion of workplace participatory programs.
According to Cheney et al. (1998), workplace democracy refers to “those principles and practices designated to engage and ‘represent’ (in the multiple senses of the term) as many relevant individuals and groups as possible in the formulation, execution, and modification of work-related activities” (p. 38). This system of governance values feelings, and connects individual’s goals with organizational objectives through the encouragement of individual contributions to important organizational decisions (Cheney, 1995).

Harter (2004), however, aptly points out that equitable or proportional rewards, are part of a broader, masculine bureaucratic discourse. Equity suggests that while everyone is invited to participate; privileged individuals are given more access and greater rewards than others; therefore, just bringing everyone to the table is not enough. Once everyone is invited to participate, diverse individuals, and those groups, in particular, that have been marginalized in the past deserve equal participation, recognition, and rewards. Accordingly, workplace democracy can be defined as a site which provides its workers with relatively equal access to the material resources, and widespread and effective inclusion of all members in shaping the conditions of the workplace (Cheney & Cloud, 2006; Mason, 1982). In short, the core values of workplace democracy entail equal decision making, solidarity among workers, mutual trust, and equality (Melman, 2001), which are all very similar to the core tenets of democracy in the public sphere as discussed earlier. More simply put, democracy in the workplace is as much a democracy as in the public sphere (Mason, 1982).

Interestingly, democratic systems, in addition to creating a humane workplace, can also increase efficiency and drive profits. Melman (2001) concludes:
The conventional businesslike, undemocratic concentration of decision power over the use of physical capital holds back the potential of the means of production. Democratic control over the marvelous physical capital of the economy can release productive potential that is now restrained and channeled to serve corporate and state managers’ striving for profit and power. (p. 16)

Linking the positive relationship between democracy and production in the workplace makes democratic practices both theoretically and practically valid. The idea of a democratic workplace is not a modern trend, or a reaction to capitalist corporations and the economic downturn of 2008-2009. In fact, the very ideal of democratic workplaces (albeit restricted to white males) can be traced back to ancient Athens (Cheney, 1995). Corporations, according to Dewey and Tufts (1923) have always been inherently democratic as they typically elect their management or executive committees. But, the sheer size and complex nature of modern corporations makes it hard for elected members to make change, and even harder to unite a majority to take action or question organizational laws.

Given the profound size of organizations and imposing nature of capitalism, critical scholars are simply asking “how do we implement democratic practices in work organizations?” (Cheney, 1995, p. 169). This simple question is more complicated than one might think as there are limited possibilities for democratic systems and persuasion in capitalist organizations (Cheney & Cloud, 2006). As Bachrach and Botwinick (1992) illustrate, “as workplace democracy becomes more accepted as an essential democratic goal, it simultaneously becomes more elusive, unattainable, and utopian” (p. 115). Bachrach and Botwinick (1992) offer this solution to better conceptualize democracy:
It would accord better with our common-sense institutions, as well as make the theory of democracy less vulnerable to attack, if it were conceptualized as comprising both means and ends: the principle end being the self development of all individuals, and the chief means to that end being equal and effective citizen participation at all levels of public decision making. The core principle embodied in both ends and means is the equality worth of individuals. (p.19)

Framing democracy in the workplace as a means and an end prevents organizations from benevolently “managing democracy” or “piecemeal social engineering” (Alvesson & Wilmott, 2001, p. 434). Instead, a means/end orientation places just as much emphasis on the process of democratic organizing as the outcome. Finally, if workers are provided voice for decision making processes in the workplace, they would consequently use their voice to engage in civic domains outside of work (Cheney et al., 1998, p. 43).

Recent literature has discussed ways in which organizations have implemented participatory programs to facilitate a democratic culture within workplaces. Next, this literature on workplace participation and participatory programs was examined with greater scrutiny.

**Participatory workplaces**

Whereas democratic practices have been around since ancient Greece, participation programs of late are being considered a fundamental social right by workplace members. This movement arises out of the following modern conditions:

(a) disenchantment with bureaucracy, (b) the desire to support employee security and autonomy, (c) reactions to worker displacement and corporate outsourcing,
(d) new appreciation for the human side of enterprise, (e) the uneven effect of globalization, and (f) the full-scale application of democratic values to work and organizations. (Stohl & Cheney, 2001, p. 351)

Participatory programs are narrower in scope than workplace democracy, and they are typically corporate-sponsored systems that may not have democratization as their main goal (Cheney et al., 1998, p. 38). According to Marshall and Stohl (1993), participation in the workplace can be defined as an “alternative to traditional forms of subordination as well as a process of institutional and societal stability” (p. 357). Furthermore, Stohl and Cheney (2001) define participation in the workplace as “organizational structures and processes designed to promote and enable employees to identify with organizational goals and to collaborate as control agents in activities that exceed minimum coordination efforts normally expected at work” (p. 357). These activities can be (but are not limited to): decisions at the shop-floor level, involvement in hiring/firing decisions, and involvement with corporate-level strategic decisions (Stohl & Cheney, 2001). Depending on an organization’s value and goal orientations, workplace participation can be defined and utilized differently based on the needs of the organization (Dachler & Wilpert, 1992).

Regardless of the motivations behind participatory initiatives, certain conditions facilitate greater egalitarian participation. For instance, characteristics such as small group size, common goals (including participatory-democratic goals), sharing of management level information, relatively equal knowledge and experience, individual rights, and members who are flexible and noncompetitive can improve the possibilities for workplace participation (Ferree & Martin, 1995; Lidenfeld & Rothschild-Whitt,
But, according to Stohl and Cheney (2001), these tenets can prove futile if there is not an attempt to democratize the workplace.

Finally, when entertaining the characteristics of a participative workplace, Habermas’s ideal speech situation might serve as a strategic model that can eliminate communication difficulties, and grant equal access to all members in decision-making processes. The ideal speech situation entails the following presuppositions:

(a) Symmetrical distribution of the chances to chose and apply speech acts that can be heard and understood; (b) Individuals can express claims and counterclaims without privileging certain forms of data; (c) Participants need to have the opportunity to establish legitimate social relations and norms for conducting research; and (d) Interactants must be able to express their own authentic interest, needs, and feelings free from coercive and hegemonic processes. (Deetz, 2001, pp. 290-30)

While many of the critiques leveled at Habermas's ideal public sphere were addressed earlier in this literature review, Alvesson and Wilmott (2001) provide an argument that is relevant in this section, suggesting a “large chasm exists between the experiences of employees (including managers) in today’s corporations, and Habermas's philosophical reflections on the ideal speech situation” (p. 437). Even as corporations have shifted in a direction that has brought managers and employees far from the ideal speech situation, Alvesson and Wilmott (2001) argue that the ideal speech situation is still a model worth aiming for in modern corporations. Later in this dissertation, the ideal speech situation is elaborated on in hopes of providing a practical solution for democratic organizing.
With capitalism being viewed as inconsistent with participation programs, Swanberg-O’Connor (1995) suggests examining the limits we have placed on these programs in order to produce future success. Some limits and challenges that can be placed on participation programs include managing time, handling frequent and intense expressions of emotion, and coping with the reality of inequalities (Cheney, 1995).

As evidenced by the literature, workplace participation can help facilitate a more humane workplace where workers are able to contribute to the decision making processes. Furthermore, a shared democratic vision will put the theory of participation into practice. Nevertheless, even if workers are granted more direct participation in managerial decisions, another problem exists. With higher turnover, lower job stability, and employees’ willingness to seek new jobs more quickly, “there is little incentive for them to place the long-term viability of the enterprise before their own short-term interests” (Burnheim, 1985, p. 66). In other words, if an organization is broken, why waste energy trying to fix it if you can easily move into a different organization.

Thus far, the literature has covered theoretical ideas of democracy and workplace participation, with little focus on actual praxis. The next section focuses on literature pertaining to institutionalized programs of participation in practice.

*Institutionalized attempts at participatory programs*

According to Seibold and Shea, (2001), researchers interested in communication and organizational participation programs should explore both the formal and informal organizational communication systems of participation. In the following, greater emphasis will be placed on literature illustrating formal participatory programs.
Over the past few years there have been various formal institutionalized attempts at creating participative workplaces. For instance, Employee Stock Ownership Programs (ESOPS), Codetermination, Concession Bargaining, Scanlon Plans, and Quality Control programs (Lammers, 1989; Mason, 1982; Siebold & Shea, 2001) have all been introduced with different degrees of success. The extent to which these programs actually increase workers’ power over their work is still in question. It may be argued that certain programs are just window dressing, such as an ESOP that serves to take advantage of tax laws. In this case, workers have been “co-opted more than they have been empowered” (Lammers, 1989, p. 225). Under the positive guise of participation a variety of programs can be implemented to increase worker efficiency and company surveillance, yet reduce individual freedom. As the Mondragón case in Spain illustrates, participation can be a “symbolic umbrella” which serves as a disguise for what is, in reality, an autocratic management team (Cheney, 1999, p. 160). Given these limits on formalized participation programs, democratic organizing in the future can be assessed based on the following:

Specific opportunities by employees to contribute to the development of business strategy and the ways “participation” itself is open to negotiation by employees. Though we may decide that it is unrealistic in a particular case for all employees to have a shaping influence on corporate or organizational policy, we can say more confidently that everyone out to have some capacity to affect the conditions and requirements of work. (Cheney, 1999, p. 160)

The challenge, then, for employees and employers alike, is to facilitate participative programs that allow employees to shape the conditions of their working environment and, at the same time, provide efficient and quality work that can maintain
and increase profits for the company. One solution is to create a conceptual shift from an “owner/manager” model to a “stakeholder” model of organizations (Deetz, 2001, p. 38). This conceptual turn would not be created by an institution as a disguise for participation solely to increase profits. Rather, this would be a model that gives representation rights to everyone in the organization, from executive to the sales floor associate. This stakeholder conception is not to be confused with ESOPS, as it has been found that in only 39% of ESOPS do stockholders get voting rights (Lammers, 1989). Establishing a participatory system that honors shop floor employees every bit as much as executives is a problematic which this discussion will illuminate. Next, another form of organizing which encourages worker participation is examined. In particular, alternative organizing, which is more informal than the institutionalized programs, is reviewed.

*Alternative organizing*

Alternative organizations can be understood as communities that discursively challenge prevailing ways in which gender, identity, and power intersect (Harter, 2004, p. 94). In contrast to masculine bureaucratic organizing, which is discussed later in this literature review, alternative organizations are focused on collectivist feminist values that emphasize inclusiveness and democracy, thus challenging the masculine bureaucratic status quo consisting of hierarchy, competition, and rational thinking (Buzzanell, 2000; Harter, 2004). Feminist organizing occurs in opposition to the way of doing things (Ferree & Martin, 1995). Alternative organizations, in contrast to institutionalized participation programs, are not created from the top-down to enhance profit margins at the expense of the employee.
While literature suggests that alternative organizing aims to eliminate masculine forms of hierarchy and leadership (Fine & Buzzanell, 2000), some authors suggest that alternative organizing can operate alongside bureaucracy, not in its place or against it (Ashcraft, 2006; Lidenfeld & Rothschild-Whitt, 1982). Likewise, according to Melman (2001), the core values of workplace democracy entail the ability to consider alternatives to hierarchical rule in every industry. According to Lidenfeld and Rothschild-Whitt (1982):

The issue is not, then, how to change entrenched hierarchical bureaucracies; that problem has proved to be so recalcitrant as to appear nearly impossible to solve as stated. But, through the creation of parallel structures, alternatives to bureaucracy can be fashioned alongside it. That is the point. (p. 382)

Capitalist bureaucratic organizations are so entrenched in our society that completely overhauling the current system seems to be an impossible task (Ferree & Martin, 1995). What may seem more reasonable is creating new ways and models of organizing that are more humane for employees (which would include the characteristics of alternative organizations) while maintaining forms of innovation and efficiency that currently work in capitalist organizations. This is no simple task, but this dissertation explores practical ways to facilitate such institutions. Finally, as Harter et al. (2004) discovered, alternative organizations, much like bureaucratic organizations, are not perfect, as they face tensions dealing with money, bottom-line, and mission. However, in managing these tensions, alternative organizations aim to create space for moral deliberations and value-centered discourse (Harter et al., 2004), which is in contrast to autocratic decision-making processes in bureaucratic organizations. Now that democratic
practices in the public and corporate spheres have been reviewed, literature that critically dissects organizations and the relationship between public democratic ideals and capitalist goals is examined.

**Critical Perspectives of Bureaucratic Organizations**

*Critical theory defined*

As suggested earlier, a critical-theoretical lens was used to examine bureaucratic organizations. Critical theory is a broad term with a rich history, and much of the scope is outside the aim of this literature review. Instead of conducting a broad overview and history of critical theory, I focused my review of literature on critical-theoretical works that apply to communication theory and organizing. To begin, a definition of critical theory is established, followed by its basic tenets.

According to Deetz (2001), the central goal of critical theory in organizational communication studies has been to “create a society and workplaces that are free from domination and where all members can contribute equally to produce systems that meet human ends and lead to the progressive development of all” (p. 26). To reach this end, critical organizational scholars examine ideological struggle, domination, and ways in which organizing is “produced, reproduced, and resisted, and transformed through myriad discursive and material practices” (Mumby & Stohl, p. 50).

Thus, critical research examines both micro and macro discourses to understand how repression is developed at the macro-level, in tandem with struggle and agency at the individual actor level to overcome domination, and create meaningful dialogic communities (Arnett & Arneson, 1999; Mumby, 2000). Communication studies is at the center of critical theory, as human communication “suggests the possibility for
community dialogue and the creation of meaningful and collective behavior” (Mumby & Ashcraft, 2006, p. 82). Using this lens, critical organizational communication scholars “often study how this possibility is closed off through communication, which constructs organizational and individual realities rooted in particular interest and power relations” (Mumby & Ashcraft, 2006, p. 82).

Hegemony, reification, and ideology are key tenets of critical theory. Ideology is the process of symbolically creating systems of meaning through which social actors’ identities are constructed and situated within relations of power. Ideological struggle entails the attempts of various groups to “fix” and “naturalize” their worldview of others (Mumby, 2001, p. 587). In addition, Althusser (1971) claims that the ideological state apparatus, a form of political domination, is created and reproduced in the education system. (p. 152). Hegemony is defined as the:

… ability of one class or group to link the interest and worldviews of other groups with its own. Hegemony does not refer to simple domination, but rather involves attempts by various groups to articulate meaning systems that reactively taken up by other groups. (Mumby, 2001, p. 587)

Finally, reification is the process through which humanly created structures take on an objective, “natural” existence, independent from those who constructed them. Reification leads to a sense of alienation, which engenders the possibility for self-reflection and social change (Mumby, 2001 p. 587).

Critical scholarship applies these tenets to ask key questions about the way in which communication both constitutes and is constituted by power, resistance, inequalities, and conflict in organizations. Specifically, May and Mumby (2005) identify
key problematics that critical scholarship should seek to explore, concerning issues of power, knowledge, and identity; communicative process of dissensus/consensus; discourses of work between and among public and private spheres; tensions between profitability and social good; and ways in which organizational communication scholars can be agents for organizational and cultural change.

In addressing these problematics, scholars have conducted ideology critiques to illustrate ways in which individual actors are unable to act in their own interests, as they are repressed by managerial and corporate discourses (Alvesson & Deetz, 1996). Hence, local communication practices cannot be taken at face value, and must always be examined in light of broader political ideologies (Craig, 1999).

In addition, critical research has shifted from simple critique of macro structures, and applied more practical application in the form of “interventions” at the micro level (Strine, 1991, p. 200). Habermas's work, which was reviewed earlier, serves as a good example of practical application of critical theory. While Habermas's work since the late 1970s focuses on ideology critique and distortions of communication, he also provides practical steps. Thus, Habermas’s approach is quite different than traditional ideological critique in that he attempts to provide practical solutions (rather than a utopian hope for freedom and equality) approaching an “ideal speech situation” (May & Mumby, 2005, p. 98).

Now that the critical-theoretical approach has been defined, I use a critical lens to examine capitalism, which constrains (and sometimes enables) democratic organizing in the workplace.
Critical perspective of capitalism

Capitalism is at the heart of corporate America. Much of the organizing that takes place in the corporate sphere is created, maintained, and reproduced through capitalist narratives, shaping how we think about work life and private lives. Given the heavy influence of capitalism on the corporate sphere, I would be remiss if I examined democratic organizing without taking into consideration the enabling and constraining effects of capitalism on the workplace. In the following, I looked at literature that assertively questions the relationship between capitalism, society, identity, power, and democracy. Much like critical theory, capitalism has a long and complicated history; therefore, to keep this literature coherent and on point, I focused specifically on literature that takes a critical perspective on capitalism in Western society.

Max Weber, in discussing capitalism, defined three imperatives or demands in Western capitalism: First, the devotion to amassing wealth and profit beyond the personal needs of the individuals; second, the commitment to unrelieved toil and work coupled with self denial; and, third, the avoidance of the use of wealth for purposes of personal enjoyment. It is this “spirit,” according to Weber, that forms the special nature of Western capitalism (Morrison, 1995, p. 245). Furthermore, according to Milton Friedman (1962), competitive capitalism promotes political freedom as it separates economic and political spheres, allowing each to offset one another.

From a critical perspective however, when capitalism is separated from politics, it is excluded from ethical debates. And, as long as corporations are pursuing profits without breaking the law (or not getting caught breaking the law), they are free to do as they wish.
Moreover, as corporations amass power and wealth without checks and balances, they gain an (a)moral control over public and private spheres of society. As such, the morals of corporations need to be questioned. John Dewey and ?? Tufts (1923) first warned of the imposing (a)moral nature of capitalism in the 1920s, stating that the corporations were beginning to wield growing control over capital, without the constraints that are typically placed on individuals. Thus, according to Dewey and Tufts (1923), “The corporation has treated competitors, employees, and the public in a purely economic fashion. This insures certain limited species of honesty, but does not include motives of private sympathy or public duty” (p. 499).

More recently, critical scholars have begun to question the ethics of capitalism, problematizing the relationship among labor, corporate control, and free trade. Kincheloe and McLaren (2000) argue that “[Capitalism] manages our perceptions of what should constitute the ‘good society,’ and creates ideological formations that produce necessary functions for capital in relation to labor” (p. 304). They go on to add that capitalism has frightfully reterrorized the motion of labor. Given this fierce influence of capitalism, Kincheloe and McLaren suggest that future research should use capitalism as the starting point for analysis of organizational studies, not the end point.

Using words such as reterrorize creates the impression that capitalism is an evil that needs to be overhauled and replaced with a more humane process. Overhauling capitalist systems and creating wholly democratic workplaces remains unattainable, because workers are dependent on their employers for an income, insurance, and basic survival. This unbalanced relationship between employee/employer makes it hard for workers to have control over the terms and conditions of their workplace environment
Furthermore, capitalism has been naturalized into Western society, and improperly conceived as the only way to fulfill individuals’ needs in the workplace (Alvesson & Wilmott, 2003, p. 436). The existing order is viewed as a given, and rarely challenged.

Unfortunately, while workers fail to challenge the status quo, corporations continue to disregard the standard of living for employees. Even in profitable corporations, service workers and industrial employees are facing extreme pressure to adapt to long hours and limited control over their work (Cheney & Cloud, 2006). Still, as Clair (1996) points out, college students and others preparing for a “real job” are bound and guided by the ideology of work provided by Adam Smith (p. 264). Thus, the cycle of capitalism continues.

**Capitalism and society**

As noted earlier, Western capitalism reaches far outside the workplace, affecting how we organize in the public and private spheres. In this section, literature on the relationship between capitalism and society is explored.

While it has been argued that capitalism is a catalyst of freedom (Friedman, 1962), others have questioned the competing, alienating force caused by capitalism (Morrison, 1995; Melman, 2006). In addition, it has been established that the impersonal organizations have vast power over our society, but “make responsibility difficult to locate” (Dewey, 1923, p. 512).

This impersonal relationship among corporations, the law, and the public sphere, allows corporations to stretch ethical boundaries under the mantra “it’s just business” (Cheney, 1999, p. 141). Writers such as Friedman (1962), suggest that corporations
should not be expected to uphold social responsibility; and, in a free market, the sole aim of a corporation is to increase profits. According to Friedman (1962):

The view has been gaining widespread acceptance that corporation officials and labor leaders have a “social responsibility” that goes beyond serving the interest of their stockholders or their members. This view shows a fundamental misconception of the character and nature of a free economy. In such an economy, there is one and only one social responsibility of business-to use its resources and engage in activities designed to increase its profits so long as it stays within the rules of the game, which is to say, engages open and free competition, without deception or fraud. (p. 133)

In contrast, critical theorists such as Deetz (1992) make the case that corporations, whether we like it or not, shape social decisions both indirectly and directly. DeLuca and Peeples (2002) elaborate on the relationship between corporations and society stating that corporate interests are “inextricably entwined in ‘public’ activities, a process that sociologist Boggs terms ‘corporate colonization’-the increased corporate penetration into virtually every corner of American life” (p. 126). Likewise, Deetz (1992), in his landmark book, *Democracy in the Age of Corporate Colonization*, asks a pointed question: “Since major social decisions are made within the corporation, shouldn't it be open to public democratic processes? The individual is not given expressive power within organizations” (p. 52). This question is an important one, and the idea of democracy in the face of corporate colonization is at the heart of this dissertation.
Furthermore, in discussing the impact of corporations on our everyday private lives, Deetz (1992) identifies a key shift in the way we organize as capitalism invades our privacy:

Support from friends can be replaced by a therapist; child rearing can take place in daycare; community value-clarification exercises in schools . . . as different forces in society, including corporate practices themselves, lead to the erosion of stable production of meaning and identity in home and community, the corporation becomes even more central in the process of coordinating individual activity. The catch, however, is that corporations provide meaning around “bottom-line” and ‘technological futurism,’ which is not beneficial to basic human needs for community, family, etc. (p. 42)

Naturally, it can be argued, it is beneficial for organizations to incorporate a sense of community, and provide for its employees what they could previously get only in their private lives. The more an employee can feel at home within corporations, the more time he/she will spend in the office, resulting in greater productivity and higher profits. But, as capitalism takes over the private lives of individuals, it begins to penetrate every crevice of society. Hochschild (2003) explains this shift in how capitalism is played out in everyday life as a transition from an “economic system” to a “cultural system” (p. 209).

Likewise, Mumby (2000) has labeled this relationship an “organization-society problematic” wherein the boundaries between organizations and their environments are “indistinct and permeable” (p. 85). Given this problematic, Deetz (1992) suggests that important questions need to be asked about identity, social capital, meaning creation, and the relationship between organizations and society. Organizational communication
studies, according to Mumby and Stohl (1996), have taken up this call with the belief that “society, culture, organizations, and communication are inextricably and reciprocally bound” (p. 65).

**Bureaucracy**

As an organizational communication scholar, it is worth defining, and examining bureaucratic structures because they are social communicative systems which emerged with the rise of capitalism (Ferguson, 1984). In defining bureaucracy, Ferguson describes a bureaucratic organization as a system that “proliferate[s] rules as means to their ends, and emphasize[s] adherence to established procedures in order to obtain standardized, reliable progress toward these ends” (p. 8).

Many bureaucratic practices, according to Barker (1993) are not overt, which makes it hard for employees to organize and resist messages of power and domination. Barker (1993) eloquently describes the paradox many employees face in bureaucratic organizations, stating that the “apparent of control” is hidden in natural rules and hierarchy, and the rules that shape how we organize come to “confine us as solidly as if we were caged behind iron bars” (p. 411). In this sense, conflict and overt struggle are “muted by repression” similar to an authoritarian state (Ferguson, 1982, p. 17). While workers are treated humanely if they stay within the rules, they have no say in establishing the rules. Hence, according to Deetz (1992), the workplace is largely “totalitarian in form” (p. 54).

Based on this literature, it is easy to gather that bureaucracies and democracy are somewhat incompatible. Bureaucracies thrive on secrecy about their knowledge and intentions, excluding the public from decision-making and production of knowledge
(Morrison, 1995), where democratic organizations emphasize openness and inclusion in the decision-process. Furthermore, many bureaucracies are controlled by an elite few who are largely exempt from accountability and consequence by the government (Morrison, 1995). Interestingly, as illustrated at the beginning of this literature review, accountability is a key component of democracy. As Cheney (1995) points out, “bureaucracy is not inherently undemocratic, but its rigid isolation and stultifying effects in many settings effectively minimize the potential for both individual expression and collective pursuit” (p. 177).

*Gendered communication*

Where bureaucratic organizing typically produces hierarchy and masculine forms of communication, many critical scholars focus on gendered communication to explore alternative ways in which masculinity and femininity are produced and reproduced within organizations. In organizational communication theorizing, according to Buzzanell (1994), we need to situate gender in everyday relations as “traditional societal and organizational themes of competition, cause-effect linear thinking, and separation/autonomy continue to exclude women’s experiences, values, and forms” (p. 377). In shifting the perspective of communication in the workplace from masculine forms of organizing and focusing instead on community, integrative thinking, and connectedness, feminist values can be highlighted and brought to the forefront (Buzzanell, 1994).

Problematicizing masculinity allows women, as well as male feminists, to critique male bureaucratic systems of power and repression, and explore new avenues for democratic organizing (Mumby, 1996). Masculine hegemony, which produces ideologies
of managerialism, threatens democracy in the workplace; therefore, Harter (2004) emphasizes the need for moral deliberations, where employees and critical scholars alike can reflect on the intersections between values and practice, challenging these existing hegemonic masculinities to create a more humane, alternative workplace.

From a theoretical standpoint, organizational communication “should unmask exclusionary assumptions about race, gender, and class, as well as other systems of subordination that are reinforced, or not acknowledged in communicant theory development” (Parker, 2003, p. 283). Gendered communication gives voice to marginalized communities, and privileges narratives of participation, diversity, client orientation, and consensus-oriented processes (Parker, 2003). Furthermore, gender organizational scholars can look for ways to teach women and other marginalized groups skills such as individual/collective problem solving, conflict resolution, or other important skills to facilitate empowerment in light of dominant organizational discourse (Trethewey, 1997)

Finally, gendered communication questions masculine ways of practicing diversity. As Kirby and Harter (2004) make apparent, diversity in many organizations is a resource to be “managed” as “companies are encouraged to use diversity to increase profits and a competitive edge” (p. 36). A gendered perspective of organizing can problematize masculine ways of practicing diversity, and provide alternative, feminine approaches to diversity.

In the future, organizational scholars who wish to incorporate a gendered perspective can ask the following questions:
What are the organizational sites and practices whereby gender is made visible or obscured? What is the relationship between masculinity and feminism, and how is it constructed in and through organizing? What are the specific micro and macro practices that produce gendered work? What are the effects of “feminine styles” of managing? (May & Mumby, 2005, p. 274)

In sum, this literature review has taken up the themes of democracy, public sphere organizing, capitalism, bureaucracy, and critical theory. This is heavy subject matter, to say the least. In drawing from literature that highlights and problematizes the relationship among capitalism, public sphere organizing, and democracy, I am now better situated to answer my original research question: “Under what conditions can a for-profit organization create a democratic, participatory culture that thrives in a capitalist society?” Next, I outlined the methodology that helped me answer this research question.
CHAPTER 3: METHODS

For my study, a critical-interpretive approach was the best method to answer the research question. This approach was utilized because the interviews were conducted over the phone due to the remote, dispersed nature of BW. This approach was ethnographically-inspired, as I originally sought to conduct an ethnographic study wherein I would be physically inside an organization, observing the local culture. However, BW does not have a physical space where employees go to work, everyone in the organization works remotely throughout the country. As a result, this study was ethnographic in theory, and interpretive in practice.

According to Charmaz and Mitchell (2001), “ethnography relies on developing a full description of society or group of people and, thus, provides the details of their everyday life” (p. 160). The central goal of ethnography is to understand the meaning individuals assign to specific actions and events (Heyl, 2001). To understand individuals, the researcher needs to spend a considerable amount of time in the field, intensively studying people and groups of interest (Bantz, 1993). An ethnographic study can employ in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document analysis to understand the people and culture under study (Bantz, 1993; Heyl, 2001; Rock, 2001). Ethnography goes further than simple analysis, and requires a deep read of the culture, persons, or place under study. Furthermore, a critical study addresses the systemic privileging of certain discourses and meanings associated with forms of power (Alvesson & Deetz, 2000). Critical methodology pays particular attention to the ideologies which are created and maintained by power structures.
The critical interpretive method I used served to combine micro interpretation and analysis in light of macro discourses. According to Alvesson and Wilmott (1996), a critical interpretive approach:

Takes seriously the complexity, ambiguity, and inconsistency of people’s discourse and practice without falling into the empiricist trap of naturalizing the ideology, power, and communicative distortions (including the ambiguity of language) that are central to reproduction of management and organization. (p. 180)

A critical interpretive method serves to privilege both the micro and macro, allowing the researcher to employ methodological practices that unveil the tensions between the local and the global. In doing so, a critical interpretive study does not just display local meanings through description and analysis; rather, a critical interpretive approach problematizes everyday meanings in light of dominating ideologies and power struggles. Therefore, this methodology should not be mistaken with a conventional ethnography. A critical interpretive approach goes beyond describing “what is,” and asks “what could be” (Thomas, 1993, p. 4).

Likewise, a critical interpretive study should not be confused with traditional critical research. Traditional critical research places heavy emphasis on the macro discourses, neglecting the power of human agency at the local level (Mumby, 2005). A critical interpretive approach takes into account the voices of individuals and the discourses that emerge through practical interaction. In sum, a critical interpretive study draws from both critical and interpretive approaches, striking a good balance between interpretive research of the micro and critical examination in light of macro discourses.
Forester’s (2003) use of Habermas’ Theory of Communicative Action to examine twelve lines of dialogue between city planners is a great example of a critical ethnography. In his study, Forester (2003) uses the four validity claims of the Theory of Communicative Action as a lens to examine the relationship between power and action in regard to a very mundane conversation. Similarly, I used Habermas' lens of Communicative Action to interpret the results from the interviews I conducted. Below, I have outlined the data sample for my dissertation.

*Persons and Sites of Discursive Performance*

As mentioned earlier, the site of these interviews is BW, a pseudonym for a small for-profit telecommunications organization that provides voice and data recording. BW is the only nationwide voice and data provider that “focuses on serving businesses, enterprises and organizations that have social and sustainable missions” (BW.com [sic], December 2009). With remote offices throughout the country, there are 15 employees, and over 1,000 customers (BW.com [sic], December 2009). BW is unique in that it solely serves clients that have social and sustainable missions. These sustainable missions consist of donating revenues to social and environmental causes, and attaining carbon neutral certification.

The organization’s corporate headquarters are in Tysons Corner, Virginia, with remote offices in California and South Carolina. Privately owned, BW’s management team is better placed to maintain their social justice and responsibility values. Notably, BW is the only telecommunications carrier in the United States that is classified as a “for benefit” company by B Corporation (bcorporation.net, December 2009), meaning they meet “transparent and comprehensive social and environmental performance standards”
(corporation.net, December 2009). Additionally, BW has been ranked as a top democratic organization by WorldBlu each of the three years WorldBlu has provided rankings (BW.com [sic], December 2009). WorldBlu is a global network of organizations that practice freedom and democracy in the workplace. In short, BW differentiates itself from other for-profits through its work with clients that have a corporate responsibility mission, and, also, through its internal efforts to facilitate democratic practices.

First, to examine the micro discourses at BW, I discuss lived experiences which best illustrate opportunities and barriers for democratic organizing. This includes corporate decision-making processes, and corporate initiatives to facilitate participative programs. Gathering data across various job roles inside the organization provided a rich understanding of how the organization both facilitates and constrains democratic processes, from a variety of perspectives.

To reach this end, I conducted in-depth, unstructured interviews with BW employees. Specifically, I sought to understand how employees thought about and perceive the democratic practices in their organization, supported by specific examples. According to Bernard (2000):

> When you want to know about the lived experience of fellow human beings, what it is like to survive hand-to-hand combat, how you get through each day when you have a child dying of leukemia, how it feels to make it across the border into Texas from Mexico only to be deported 24 hours later—you just can’t beat unstructured interviewing. (p. 193)

I understand that my interviews were not seeking the life-changing experiences Barnard mentions. I believe that mundane, micro practices shed equal light on an
important matter. Furthermore, upon gaining insight from various employees with
different lived experiences, I made clear the impact the democratic practices (or the lack
thereof) had on the public and private lives of diverse individuals. Finally, I chose
unstructured interviews over structured interviews because unstructured interviews
provide more depth of data than other types (Fontana & Frey, 2000). Plus, I was not
looking for a specific answer in my interviews. Instead, through an iterative approach, I
looked for themes of control and resistance at the micro level.

All interviews were conducted over the phone and tape recorded with the
subjects’ permission. The interviews were loosely structured, allowing the interviewees
to raise issues surrounding democracy and participation programs that they deemed
important. Each interview lasted from thirty minutes to one hour, with the average at 40
minutes. In addition, the interviews were guided by the following procedure:

• After introductions on-site, I described the purpose of the research project, which
  was the development of democratic, participatory programs in for-profit
  organizations.

• I asked the interviewee to describe his/her role in the organization, followed by a
  brief overview of the company. In addition, I asked if he/she had any materials
  regarding participatory programs that the individual could provide to me,
  including employee and customer engagement initiatives.

• I had the interviewee describe the participatory programs in his/her organization,
  and generally discuss the extent to which he/she believed the organization was a
democratic institution.
• As topics emerged throughout the interview, existing data from previous interviews was used to guide specific questions. These questions helped verify or contradict perspectives among employees.

It was very important that the interviews remained confidential, allowing the subjects to be more candid. In the event that an employee was fearful that his/her statement might reflect poorly on the company, I suggested conducting the interview(s) without a tape recorder, and off-site not during work hours. However, after discussing the nature of the interviews, all interviewees agreed to be tape-recorded. To better understand participation programs and democracy (or lack thereof) in the workplace, I asked a series of open-ended questions pertaining to specific programs, decision-making processes, and communication between different branches of the company. After recording the interviews, I had them transcribed, yielding 136 single-spaced pages. The transcripts were printed out and stored in a locked cabinet with the tape recordings. Some examples of questions I asked are:

• What is your definition of a democratic workplace?
• What are some best practices that you see among for-profit organizations?
• Are democratic processes scalable as an organization grows?
• Do you see a connection between a sustainable mission/social responsible organization and democratic practices?
• Can you have both democratic and bureaucratic practices?
• Has the downturn in the economy affected your organization?
• What initiatives stand out to facilitate greater democracy among employees?
• To what extent do employees contribute innovative ideas regarding customer service, sales strategies, and operations procedures?

• Do you notice any barriers in communication among employees and between employees and customers? If so, can you elaborate on these barriers?

• What is the difference in the level of participation among high-performing individuals and low-performing employees? How do people in your organization facilitate participation initiatives compared to employees in other organizations?

• Please think of a decision that was recently made in the organization that affects everyone.

• Would you be able to diagram how communication flowed during the decision-making process?

• Do people get input on health care, etc? Do you participate in civic opportunities? Town hall meetings, etc?

Critical Incidence Questions

• Please take a few minutes to respond to each of the questions below about the past week at work.

• At what moment this week did you feel most engaged with what was happening at work?

• At what moment this week did you feel most distanced from what was happening?

• What action that anyone took this week did you find most affirming and helpful?

• What action that anyone took this week did you find most puzzling or confusing?
• What event this week surprised you the most? (This could be something about your own reactions to what went on, or something that someone did, or anything else that concerns you.)

Data Analysis

According to Alvesson and Deetz (2000), the critical researcher interviews, makes observations, and writes field notes in ways that are not dissimilar to (other) qualitative researchers. But, the stance of the critical ethnographer is different than other traditional qualitative approaches. For the critical ethnographer, the interpretations which have a specific bearing on issues of power, domination, constraints, social suffering, and lost possibilities for action, are seen as the most important to explore (Alvesson & Deetz, 2000). Moreover, at the outset of the study, the critical ethnographer must have a theoretical understanding of ideology, class order, and macro-level discursive domination, which can then be used as a lens to interpret empirical material (Alvesson & Deetz, 2000). Therefore, in analyzing the data, I compared statements against questions being asked, and also compared statements against overall themes of power, ideology, and control. This comparative method yielded micro themes of daily practices and conversations in light of macro themes regarding corporate narratives.

The critical ethnographer has a different set of guiding criteria than other traditional ethnographers. Critical organization researchers operate from the premise that organizational life is in constant tension between control and resistance (Mumby, 2005; Thomas, 1993). Likewise, critical ethnographers take mundane events and reproduce them in a way that “exposes broader social processes of control, taming, power, imbalance, and the symbolic mechanisms that impose one set of preferred meanings or
behaviors over others” (Thomas, 1993). Once these constraints are exposed, I employed the Theory of Communicative Action, providing norms and values to guide discourses of capitalism and democracy. Thus, the critical interpretive researcher has a different axiological approach than the traditional interpretive researcher in that values and norms are used by the critical interpreter to guide his or her research.

My Role as a Researcher

Critical theorists are criticized for being far too removed and elitist, as their privileged position places them above those who are unwilling to think for themselves (Deetz, 2001). I am aware of this criticism, and want to emphasize that this study, while being critical in theory, is ethnographically-inspired. As such, according to Emerson and Pollner (1991) ethnographers immerse themselves with the lived experience of those under study, “Seeking the lived meaning of social worlds, ethnography strives to overcome difference and distance. Although particular ethnographers may resist total surrender, the ethnographic project—at least in its more phenomenological expressions—invites a virtual merger between researcher and participant” (p. 155). Ethnography allows for complete inter-subjectivity between the researcher and those being researched. Through in-depth interviewing and direct interaction with those I was researching, I was drawn into their worlds, bringing me into the study. As opposed to being an armchair theorist, making assumptions about those I barely know, I am “in the mix,” so to speak. This ability to truly grasp the perspectives of those I wish to study is demonstrated through empathic identification, or what is called “verstehen” (understanding) (Lindlof, 1995; Shwandt, 2003). In accordance with this concept of verstehen, I made every effort to truly understand those I was studying and walk in their shoes. In sum, it is a simple
fact that, through the process of ethnography, I was changed, and so were those under study.

**Ethical Concerns**

Finally, I will speak of the ethical issues that arose during this study. One main concern was protecting the individuals’ identities in a small organization. According to Silverman (2001), the researcher needs to first clarify his/her intentions before conducting a qualitative study. In order to do so, the researcher must determine the following: (a) Decide what is the purpose(s) of your research, e.g., self-advancement, political advocacy, etc.; (b) examine which individuals or groups might be interested or affected by your research topic; and, (c) consider the implications for these parties of framing your research topic as you have (pp. 55-56). For my study, the purpose was to critique democratic practices, and provide practical ways in which corporations might facilitate a democratic culture within the corporate for-profit sphere. The general public might be interested in this study and, more specifically, those who are directly and indirectly affected by the corporate narratives which pervade the public and private spheres will be interested. Given BW is such a small company, it will be easy for those familiar with the organization to identify interviewees. As such, it is my duty to keep the identities of the interviewees anonymous and to frame their responses to the interviews in a manner that does not distort their lived experiences. Therefore, to ensure the privacy of the individuals, I provided pseudonyms for the company and the interviewees.

Because this was a critical study, I understood that my goal was to critique democratic practices; however, I was also fair in addressing the positive practices. Thus, I am careful in assuming that discussions of democracy and participation are inhibited in
all contexts I examine. There are pockets of discussion or debate that are enlightening, challenging my preconceived “critical” perspective. Or, perhaps part of being a sound critical scholar is recognizing the good with the bad, and addressing both. Capitalism, in general, and corporations that operate under a capitalist umbrella can be sites for growth, and this study reflects on and confirms the positive advancements being made in regard to corporations.
CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

In December of 2009, I met with Mike Brown, the President of BW to discuss the possibility of interviewing employees at BW on the topic of democratic organizing. After listening to Mike elaborate on his idea of democratic practices and how he incorporated these practices into the workplace, I was convinced that BW would serve as an insightful case study. Plus, Mike was extremely forthcoming and transparent about his organization, providing me with easy access to the employees at BW. After meeting with Mike, ten interviews with employees from BW were conducted between January and March of 2010. In addition, to help provide a broad overview of democratic organizing, a subject matter expert on democratic workplaces throughout the world was interviewed. To protect the identity of individuals within BW, I chose to use pseudonyms throughout the results section.

The research question guiding the unstructured interviews consisted of the following: “Under what conditions can a for-profit organization create a democratic, participatory culture that thrives in a capitalist society?” While the interviews were unstructured, the following questions were used as a framework when conducting the interviews:

- What is your definition of a democratic workplace?
- What are some best practices that you see among for-profit organizations?
- Are democratic processes scalable as an organization grows?
- Do you see a connection between a sustainable mission/social responsible organization and democratic practices?
- Can you have both democratic and bureaucratic practices?
• Has the downturn in the economy affected your organization?
• What initiatives stand out to facilitate greater democracy among employees?
• To what extent do employees contribute innovative ideas regarding customer service, sales strategies, and operations procedures?
• Do you notice any barriers in communication among employees and between employees and customers? If so, can you elaborate on these barriers?
• What is the difference in the level of participation among high-performing individuals and low-performing employees?
• How do people in your organization facilitate participation initiatives compared to employees in other organizations?
• Please think of a decision that was recently made in the organization that affects everyone.
• Would you be able to diagram how communication flowed during the decision-making process?
• Do people get input on health care, etc?
• Do you participate in civic opportunities? Town hall meetings, etc?

In addition to the above questions, critical incidence questions were asked to capture employee’s recent experiences regarding participation and engagement. Some critical incidence questions that were asked are as follows:

• Please take a few minutes to respond to each of the questions below about the past week at work.
• At what moment this week did you feel most engaged with what was happening at work?
• At what moment this week did you feel most distanced from what was happening?
• What action that anyone took this week did you find most affirming and helpful?
• What action that anyone took this week did you find most puzzling or confusing?
• What event this week surprised you the most? (This could be something about your own reactions to what went on, or something that someone did, or anything else that concerns you.)

In using an iterative approach to analyze the results of the interviews, ten broader themes emerged consisting of employee satisfaction, decision-making processes, social responsibility, turning a profit, technology, accountability, discourses of democracy, democracy and bureaucracy, and culture. In the following, these themes are outlined in greater detail, starting with a definition of democracy from the employees’ viewpoint.

**Defining Democracy/Key Tenets**

When talking to the interviewees, I wanted them to define democracy as they perceived it at BW. These definitions served as a framework for democracy as it is discussed throughout the results section. Furthermore, these definitions of democracy spoke volumes about how democratic organizing was enacted and maintained within BW. Interestingly, one theme that continuously emerged among interviewees is the strong encouragement of voice and participation.

Jim defined democracy as “everybody has a voice. Everybody’s heard, and ... it’s discussed. It doesn’t necessarily mean you get your way, but everybody has a voice in what is being done” (p. 8). Similarly, Art defined democracy as giving people the space to be heard: “You will be heard. That’s very important, and then that gives you kind of a
comfort zone that if you have a concern or if you have something to improve in the company … we just take action right away.” Likewise, “Obviously, an organization where the voices of the people working there are readily heard, and there’s a lot of consensus in corporate decision making” (Jerry, p. 1).

Gary echoed this statement by Jerry and provided the following explanation of how he envisioned a democratic workplace:

I think everyone has the opportunity to participate equally. Some people may not participate as much as others. I think you would find that, if you’re in a room and you’re having a discussion, some people will speak up more than others and I think this is typical. I think the key thing is everyone has the opportunity, no — everyone is encouraged to provide their input and whether they provide input is up to them. (p. 2)

Finally, Pam and Terri drove home the importance of having a voice: “Just bare-bottom that everybody has a voice. Everybody is allowed to say how they feel, raise concerns, give suggestions freely without any concern that somehow that’s going to jeopardize how they feel at work” (Pam, p. 2). Providing the opportunity for voice to the people is the key tenet, “It’s, at the core, how do you give power and voice to the people?” (Terry, p. 4).

Job Roles

See Figure 1 for an organizational chart of BW. In the following, employees’ job roles and where they fit into BW is described in detail.

Gary ran BW operations:
I guess you would say my primary responsibility is running the company operations and that would include both the technical operations related to installing and maintaining our circuit base and our other services. Also, Art, who runs our customer service operations also reports to me, so I sort of oversee all the customer service operations for the company.” (p. 1)

Where Gary was in operations, Doug helped with customer support:

I mostly help with customer support issues, our technical support and things when there’s a – some kind of a customer problem or something like that, that Art or Gary or Jerry are not able to resolve, I usually help out in that way. I also – just because it’s a small company, so we all try to contribute in different ways. So I also help just by identifying potential customers, things like that. Sometimes I go on sales calls to answer questions, especially technical questions. (p. 1)

Art was on the operations side and is the face of the organization to customers: “I am the, you know, Director of Customer Operations. Basically, I’m responsible for customers. I do customer care, technical supports, collection, anything, you know, related to customer issues incoming” (p. 2).

Jim was the director of sales, and John’s role was developing relationships, partnerships, and a customer base on the west coast. Georgia worked with the sales team, doing all the proposals, and getting quotes on Internet circuits, videophones, and telephone services. She also reported to Jerry, who was on the regulatory side. Jerry’s role focused on four areas: “Primarily it’s regulatory, which is filing tariffs in different states, applications for service, another area is paying taxes – weekly taxes – in about 35 states, and filing different reports quarterly and annually.” Another function of Jerry’s
role was customer service. Jerry worked with Art on customer problems and installations. In addition, Jerry was in charge of billing and collecting.

Pam was an “affiliate” with BW. While she was not considered a full-time employee of BW, she did work with them: “I'm called an affiliate. Basically, what that means is that I work on a commission. Anybody that I bring to them that signs up and becomes a client, I get a percentage of their monthly bill” (p. 1). Pam, by trade, was an eco-coach, and she owned her own green business. One of the things that she did regularly was promote products, services, and businesses that she liked.

Finally, Terri was not an employee of BW. She worked for WorldBlu, which promoted democratic workplaces throughout the world. WorldBlu had an annual ranking of the 50 most democratic organizations in the world, and BW was continuously ranked as one of the most democratic organizations. As such, along with BW, Terri has worked with many public/private and profit/non-profit democratic organizations throughout the world.

Employee Satisfaction

Holistic approach

Prior research has indicated that employee satisfaction and employee engagement are directly related to a company’s profits. For instance, according to Gallup, higher employee engagement leads to greater innovation, higher productivity, less turnover, and fewer sick days (Gallup, 2006). Naturally, the more engaged an individual is with his/her workplace, the more motivated he/she is to contribute to the company’s mission and bottom-line.
Throughout the interviews, a few different themes emerged that contributed to the employees’ well-being and overall satisfaction, which they thought were unique to BW. In describing what contributed to individual’s satisfaction, different employees suggested that BW treated its employees in an “holistic” manner, contributing to employees’ well-being. While “holistic” is a vague term, interviewees described it as a combination of valuing the environment and caring about the community, while being profitable. This is also known as the “triple-bottom-line,” which was described as “business that is concerned not just about having — you know, being profitable, but also having a valuable impact on the environment and on people” (John, p. 2). Similarly, democracy could be measured holistically by “looking at all levels and ensuring that peace and compassion and health and equity, all these things are promoted to benefit everybody, from the janitor all the way up to the top honcho” (Pam, p. 4).

In addition, Terri suggested a fourth dimension to the triple-bottom-line, which was caring about your employees internally: “The triple-bottom-line typically means healthy financial bottom-line, caring about the environment, and caring about the community. I would like to see a fourth dimension to that, which is caring about your employees internally” (p. 12). Based on the interviews, it seemed BW incorporated this fourth dimension of caring about employees internally. As such, Art stated: “This is a whole different environment we are in. Externally, we are dealing with these things (social justice), and also we are practicing these kind of policies within the company to get the best out of our people” (p. 8). Caring for the environment and caring for individuals within the organization went hand-in-hand: “A care for the effect that my
organization has on the environment often blooms right alongside a care for people who are working in my organization” (John, p. 7).

As noted by the interviewees, BW’s “holistic” approach had four dimensions: environmentally friendly, profitability, civic engagement, and employee well-being. Of interest is the way in which BW’s mission of social responsibility was also practiced internally among its employees. While profits and bottom-line were a major concern, BW applied its mission as a socially responsible organization internally to achieve positive results. Furthermore, according to the interviewees, marrying the external social responsibility mission to the treatment of employees inside the organization was a natural process. Next, employee’s well-being and engagement will be discussed.

*Employee engagement*

Given that BW was a small and transparent organization, it was easy to recognize if employees were engaged or disengaged. As Gary aptly stated: “We’ve got a small team. All the pieces are integral to the other and if someone was to get disengaged, then the whole team would suffer” (p. 12). As a result, if someone was not pulling his/her weight, the rest of the team would notice that results are down, and would then be forced to address why an employee is disengaged.

Specifically, interviewees spoke of factors that contributed to their engagement. Two themes that contributed to employees’ engagement were helping customers and each other. When speaking of when he was most engaged in the last week, Jerry stated: “It would have to do with customer service and when one of our customers had a big problem. We worked on it for a while, and the customer says, ‘Hey, it’s fixed. Thank you” (p. 7). Where Jerry spoke of customer service as the source of his engagement,
Georgia discussed how being helped by a fellow employee contributed to her engagement: “I do a lot of interaction with J.P. He helps me with questions about the difference between VOIP, boom, and overlay, and we just had a conversation yesterday about that. So, he’s always helpful to me” (p. 7). Likewise, Art provided an example of an employee helping him out for a client deliverable: “I decided the idea was we need to do this thing, but I wasn’t in a state of mind of doing it. I asked a favor of one of my colleagues. I said, ‘can you do this thing for me?’ I sent him the information. He put it together, and I sent it to my customer” (p. 14).

In addition to helping each other out, John mentioned employee recognition as a way to engage individuals: “When we see something, a good week of activity or achievement for somebody on the team, we chime in with little e-mail ‘way-to-goes,’ and ‘awesome activity,’ and ‘great contribution,’ that sort of thing” (p. 17). John, like Art, pointed to working with other employees to create a humane work environment. While these examples may seem mundane, they were important because they illustrated how employees immediately think of instances where they were helping each other and customers when asked about when they last felt engaged at work.

**Freedom**

Another theme that emerged which contributed to individuals’ engagement was the culture of “freedom” within BW. As the following excerpts illustrate, when discussing engagement at work, the interviewees consistently mentioned the level of freedom they had at BW. Interestingly, the interviewees used freedom in a variety of different contexts, ranging from freedom to work from home, to freedom to speak up. Regarding working from home, Pam stated: “I think the flexibility of working from home
... I mean it’s very green, but it’s also a huge freedom. There’s so much extra time you gain when you’re not commuting” (p. 8).

Freedom to ask questions and assert opinions were also highlighted:

I’ve had other organizations where I’ve asked, “Why are we doing that?” And I have been told, “Don’t worry about that. That’s not your job.” And to me, that is where we differentiate ourselves from, you know, the big corporations where I can ask anybody anything. And that’s the difference with us. Anybody can ask anything to anybody, and we’re all happy to share why we are doing something. (Jim, p. 20)

Gary elaborated on the freedom to voice one’s opinion: “The founders of the company, Mike and Jim, believe in having a free dialogue … listening to everyone’s opinion and then, as a group, discussing what the different options are and coming to a decision in what needs to be done” (p. 2).

In addition to having the freedom to voice opinions, John talked about the freedom to develop his own sustainability forum for networking purposes. He talked about the benefits of this opportunity: “When I came here I saw an opportunity ... and created the Sacramento Sustainability Forum as a way to connect the government agencies, the businesses, non-profits, interested citizens, and students in the area around relevant topics of sustainability for our region” (p. 16). John went on to describe the personal satisfaction he gained in developing this network, stating “that’s kind of a unique thing ... I just feel like that’s a really unique opportunity, to have total freedom to go out there and build something like that as a vehicle for building our customer base here” (p. 16). Taken together, when given space to voice opinions and provide innovative
ideas, employees felt personal gratification and were contributing to the company’s bottom-line.

Decision-Making Processes

Process for implementing ideas

As mentioned earlier, employees at BW valued the freedom to contribute to decisions that affected the company. To gain a better understanding of how employees were able to contribute their opinions and innovative ideas, the interviewees discussed the process they used for implementing ideas. According to Art, the process was very fast: “It’s very simple. We don’t, you know, mess around with things … We adopt things very fast, so if someone in the lower level had a great idea, we put our head around it, put it forward” (p. 6). Gary also spoke to the speed by which ideas are implemented, stating: “You have an idea, we say we’re going to do it, and we do what it takes to get it done” (p. 14).

Furthermore, interviewees suggested that what makes the process unique for implementing ideas at BW was the fact that there was no formal process. As such, Georgia suggested: “We don’t have a process for that. It’s just—just pick up at the end of the conference call that we have every month, and it’s an open forum, and you can bring up any subject you want to for discussion with the group” (p. 2). Gary also indicated there was not a process for implementing ideas: “No, we don’t have a strict process that says, ‘oh, if you’ve got an idea, we need to go through the process and that process and so-and-so has to approve it’” (p. 6). There was little formality for implementing a suggestion: “I make a phone call to any one of the members with a suggestion or idea, and I would say 99 percent of the time it’s agreeable and adopted. There’s very little
formality for changes in standard operating procedure” (Jerry, p. 2). As these testimonies suggested, BW was quick and efficient at implementing ideas, absent of any set processes.

Moreover, employees were very satisfied with the speed by which ideas were implemented, and they could see the difference they make both within the organization and with customers:

My experience is, I’ve never worked for an organization like this, and it’s a breath of fresh air. I feel like I’m making a difference, and there are ideas that I have had that we have implemented, and I think they have made a difference in our organization. (Jim, p. 12)

Art spoke about how engaging it was to implement an idea that helped a customer:

I am so engaged every day ... there is some heated stuff that we were engaged in earlier, a big customer and this company is bringing in high dollars for us. There was a question of installing a new service to their account, and I had an objection to that specific service for this specific customer, because I thought that type of service would end up problematic for them for the type of business they were doing. And the moment I heard that, I brought it up in the discussion. (p. 12)

Art continued with this example: “It was a heated discussion and then we decided not to sell the product that was originally offered, and then we sold something different that’s more robust, that we think was the right way to service them, and I brought it up” (p. 13).

Interestingly, as these interviewees suggested, employees in different roles believed their opinions mattered. Jim, when discussing the decision-making process
illustrated this point: “Our operations, our President, Director of Sales, we are all on these calls … Everybody has the right to speak up, and everybody’s idea is listened to and discussed and explained” (p. 3).

**Autocratic decision-making**

While the interviewees suggested their ideas were implemented and opinions were heard, they also mentioned instances when everyone’s vote was not equal: “I have one opinion and Mike and Jim have a different opinion. I get to have my say, I give my reasons, I get their reasons, but at the end of the day, someone has to make the decision” (Gary, p. 2). Moreover, Gary went on to make a very important point regarding equality in democratic organizing:

Sometimes, the decision is one I agree with. Sometimes, it’s not, but I think that a democratic organization doesn’t necessarily mean that everything gets put to a vote and everybody’s vote counts equally. At the end of the day, someone needs to make a decision, but what you have is the right to say what you please and to give your opinions and then a decision is made. (p. 2)

Art supported this claim that, for efficiency purposes, sometimes upper management made the decisions: “So, then, what you do is, you work with your technical people and then you have higher management to make a decision … You can ask people, but you would probably waste your time or the other people’s time” (p. 10). Art continued to explain why some decisions need to be made without input from others: “There are some decisions that you cannot bring everyone to make it at the same time, and this is one of them” (p. 10).
On a macro level across various organizations, when Terri suggested that not all employees needed to be involved in every decision: “The idea of democracy and sort of power to the people is you want to give people a sense of voice and you want to give them a say in the decision-making process, the decisions that make sense for them to be engaged in” (p. 2).

Terri spoke to what the interviewees at BW were experiencing at the micro level. In short, everyone was invited to the table to voice their opinions, but for efficiency purposes sometimes a decision was made without everyone’s input when there was a tight deadline. As mentioned by Terri and Gary, what mattered is that people knew that if they want to speak up, they could.

*Communication breakdowns*

Since BW was a for-profit organization with over 1,000 clients, there were multiple timelines and expectations that had to be met to serve customers. In addition, there was a constant need for increased productivity to meet the bottom-line and increase profits. With that pressure came increased communication among employees and with customers. And with increased communication, combined with high demands, came a greater potential for communication breakdowns. Next, specific examples of communication breakdowns and “dropped balls” will be illustrated.

According to the interviewees, the majority of disconnects occurred between the operations and sales teams. The sales team developed business with customers and outlines the deliverables, and the operations team worked to fulfill those deliverables. For the most part, operations and sales teams had a smooth relationship. As the following examples illustrate, however, there were some times when a breakdown occurred:
John outlined one source of disconnect between sales and operations:

Sometimes operations and sales overlap a bit, one of the areas where we still need to grow in terms of our own clarity is having really a set sense of our own roles. I’ll give you an example here that was one of my customers that I brought on had questions about the operation side of things, and then operations hands it back over to me, even though it’s a question they need to answer. (p. 17)

Jim also alluded to a very similar disconnect he experienced when working with operations: “There was a person on the operations side that was interacting with one of our customers, and they deferred the work over to me that they had right at their fingertips … I think they were just being lazy” (p. 17). Jim went on to illustrate how this was not a very efficient way to conduct business:

For me that’s frustrating, because it’s a waste of time for the customer. It’s a waste of time for everybody where that person could have taken care of it in three minutes. Now it has taken two days for the customer to get the information from them. (p. 17)

Like John, Jim stated this breakdown in communication had to do with the overlap between sales and operations: “There’s some overlap of who does what. If operations is busy, then they tend to dump stuff back to sales or vice versa” (p. 17).

Furthermore, as John and Jim reiterated, they were sometimes in the dark about what operations was doing. According to John: “I’m rarely super aware of what’s going on with the operation side of things. I become aware when it’s something that I feel I have a contribution to make, because they ask me or let me know about it” (p. 16). With
Jim, it was a matter of picking up the phone, “if I’m in the dark about something, it’s because I just need to call and ask” (p. 16).

Interestingly, many interviewees touched on the different kinds of technology implemented at BW to help create and facilitate smooth and efficient communication between employees and customers. Next, the different technology that is integrated into BW will be discussed.

**Technology**

Interviewees spoke to the ways in which technology enhanced democratic principals. According to Terri, technology helps facilitate a democratic workplace: “When a company starts to embrace these technologies that give voice to the people and contribute to the knowledge sharing and freedom and openness and give power to the people” (p. 5). She continued, “they can help a company move a needle from less democratic to a more engaged and democratic workplace” (p. 5). Specifically, employees at BW used instant messaging, voiceover internet phones, LiveMeeting, and, of course, e-mail and cell phones. In the following, workers elaborated on the benefits of these different mediums of communication.

According to Georgia, the use of different technologies allowed for greater transparency, and increased freedom to work from remote workplaces:

Besides the instant messaging, you know, with the LiveMeeting, we put up our reports for everyone to see now. We’re certainly working with all the different technologies. Add me working at home, and Jerry working at home ... and years ago we wouldn’t have been able to do this in the larger companies.” (p. 8)
Jerry outlined similar technologies: “We’re pretty well versed in communication. We have instant messaging, e-mail. Everybody has voicemail and Voiceover internet phones. And the guys who are on the road carry their BlackBerrys and cell phones” (p. 2).

Both Jerry and Gary discussed how these technologies contributed to the democratic culture at BW. As such, Jerry stated: “When you can communicate with any member of the organization within a matter of seconds, that’s gotta help a democratic organization” (p. 3). In addition, Gary aptly stated that technology was not just a tool in the democratic process:

Technology is a tool that might facilitate some of the discussions or make it easier to present your ideas through use of web conferencing or other tools like that. However, I think the technology is just a tool and the main thing that is important in having a democratic workplace, if you will, is the willingness and the culture to have a democratic workplace and setting the stage and giving everyone the opportunity to contribute in decisions and discussions. (p. 4)

Meetings and conference calls
Interviewees spoke of the importance of conference calls in facilitating a democratic workplace; furthermore, in speaking with different employees, it became very clear that conference calls were integral to BW. With employees spread out across the United States, conference calls were a chance for people to report on their achievements, ask questions, voice opinions, solve problems, and catch-up with each other. There were three different conference calls each week that served various purposes: “We have two calls that most of the people are involved, and one of them is a call we do on Monday
morning, which everyone at the company gets onto that call, and, then, also during the week, sales team does a call, and then on Fridays, operations team does a call” (p. 3). There was a monthly and quarterly conference call, as well.

Conference calls were typically one hour, and if there was something that needed to be addressed to just a couple of employees, there was a follow-up call. Jim discussed the process: “Definitely ideas come out in those calls and are discussed … if we need to discuss it more, we might, you know, shelve it and set up another call for people to get on” (p. 2). In addition to addressing current problems and solutions, these calls served as an impetus for innovative processes: “This morning we had a call … and I had a suggestion for getting new business, opening up a place out in San Francisco, using one of our business partners” (Jim, p. 2). Everyone joined in on the process, and even though the idea was turned down, Jim appreciated the deliberation: “Everybody had a comment on it. It was something that wound up, I think we are not gonna do, but it was interesting, It wasn’t something that we do behind closed doors” (p. 3).

Conference calls and meetings allowed for people to share ideas, and contribute to a democratic workplace in a variety of ways: “Again, there is that transparency, but then there is also the dialogue and listening and other principles of the democratic system” (Terri, p. 3). Sharing ideas (and progress) in addition to having people listen to one’s concerns was a key component to the conference calls at BW: “Just on those calls, the open discussions that we have are where those calls or where those ideas would originate, so the conference calls that we have is where people can share ideas or concerns” (Jim, p. 2).
Remote workplace

Technology and conference calls enabled employees to work remotely at BW. After speaking with employees at BW, it became clear they spent very little time in close physical proximity. As a telecommunications company, it seemed employees would find telecommuting to be a natural fit. Georgia stated she tried working from home at a previous employer and she was laid off: “They sent me home as the one to try it, and I spent four years at home. [Chuckle] And then they laid me off … since it could be done from anywhere. So that wasn’t good” (p. 9). According to the interviewees, however, there were tradeoffs to working remotely. John, who was located in California, had very little physical interaction with other employees except for Mike: [Baby Crying] “Yeah, teleconferencing is able to facilitate 80 percent of the touch/feel of being together in real-life discussions. But, you know, it’s always special when you can have time physically together” (John, p. 14). Bringing people together physically costs money, and making people report to work at set times can create disengagement, given the interviewees use of the word freedom when defining democracy. Pam addressed this tradeoff: “There’s always tradeoff. But which way does the scale tip? If you’re gonna get folks that are happier and more productive, and that’s what the research says, then that’s a freedom to me” (p. 9). Pam stated that working remotely had been extremely satisfying, citing the ability to “close up your computer and go out to your local park and pick weeds or whatever” (p. 8). John provided a more complex explanation, on how empowering people to work from home, adds to the bottom-line of the company:

Because when people are, in essence, kind of trusted to [do] their work without having any sort of direct supervision, they go hand in hand (democracy and
telecommuting). So, being able to take advantage of telework also involves interior changes ... but the interior is an experience where it tends to foster more of individuals being empowered. You know, a results-oriented work environment versus time in a chair. (p. 19)

John addressed a larger issue worth noting. According to John, shifting towards a telecommuting workplace did not entail tangible interior changes such as new offices and a nice building; rather, the change is one of empowerment and freedom, which was less tangible. And instead of focusing on how much time someone sits in a chair and logs in hours at work, BW was more focused on results and productivity.

*Turning a Profit*

*Democracy and productivity*

Results and productivity in a democratic environment was a key component of this dissertation, and the interviewees illustrated how BW was both productive and democratic. Transparency was one theme that repeatedly came up in the interviews, as employees discussed how transparency at BW was an incentive to perform. Gary explained the power of transparency well:

> Having it out there and transparent for the whole world to see, I think, is a lot of incentive to do a good job. Also, when you look at it more as a team, we’re part of the same team, we’re working for a common goal and no one wants to let the team down. I think there’s a strong sense of commitment by all the people in the company to want to hold up their end of the bargain and get their part done. (p. 7)

Interestingly, given that BW was a small, close-knit organization, when someone was not pulling their weight, they participated less and people noticed: “I think people
that [sic] tend to under-perform tend to be a little bit more quiet on the conference calls” (p. 6). Furthermore, Art went on to discuss how he had the freedom to participate in the democratic process at work as long as he produced: “I have a lot of freedom to work here, and I produce a lot, and that production is the name of the game, but I am not asked how or whether I produce it. As long as I am producing what I am asked to produce” (p. 8).

Art’s statement suggested that accountability and transparency did not extend beyond what someone was accomplishing at work. While reports on accomplishments, progress, and customer service were open for everyone to see, the means of accomplishing objectives were not scrutinized. All employees were free to reach their goals in their own fashion, and contribute innovative ideas and concerns. What mattered was that tasks get done. This level of accountability and transparency on accomplishments was reiterated by Gary: “In other words, if you’re laying out results openly before the whole company, then you’ve got a lot of incentive to make sure you’re not the weak link in the chain” (p. 7).

When speaking on the macro level, Terri discussed productivity and competition in a democratic organization: “They go hand and glove [democracy and capitalism]. Look, I mean, think about it, what does it require to be competitive? In order to be competitive, how do you compete? You compete on innovation” (p. 7). Terri went on, noting, “You compete on speed. You compete on productivity. Well, how do you get that? You get innovation by having an environment where people are free to think and come up with ideas.” This freedom to speak up, while mentioned earlier, was also a key component to productivity at BW. Jim spoke to this specifically: “I think that once you
have interviewed everybody, you’ll find no one’s in fear of losing their jobs because they have an opinion about something” (p. 5).

Finally, as noted by Art, the democratic culture at BW positively affected profit and the bottom-line because there was lower turnover: “How is it [democratic values] affecting our bottom-line? Well, first of all, we don’t have turnover. That just, you know, affects in a way that once we hire people, usually they stay with us” (p. 6).

*Downturn/Crisis situations*

Since interviewees maintained that BW thrived as a democratic organization for the five years since it started, I asked how the downturn in the economy affected the democratic process. More specifically, I wanted to know if the downturn caused BW to become more autocratic to handle the economic crisis and make some hard decisions. Interestingly, the interviewees observed that the downturn actually brought the organization together and made it more democratic. The way BW reacted to the downturn actually surprised Georgia: “It’s surprising that we’re able to evolve in the way we have, still at the same pace. So, very surprising” (p. 5). Jim explained how BW reacted to the downturn: “It’s not until the times where things start getting a little hairy where you think you need to start making some changes, and at that point, that’s when the democratic process kicks in” (p. 8).

Likewise, Gary stated that the downturn made BW more democratic in their decision making process, and made them more cohesive: “I think, it [the downturn] has sort of made us ... feel that we need to work together more closely as a team and make sure that we understand what’s going on in the marketplace” (p. 9). BW came together to help their clients come up with solutions for handling cutbacks:
It’s a tough marketplace out there, so we’ve got to do everything we can to make sure that we’re keeping our customers happy, providing them with high quality services and when they get into a situation where they need to downsize or reduce some of their expenditures, where we can help with that. Maybe make suggestions about how they can improve their operations to save themselves more money.

(Gary, p. 9)

John suggested that BW did not become autocratic in the downturn because their values and leadership would not allow it: “In a place where that’s not the ethic, that leadership doesn’t exist in that form, when things get tight, it can get just more and more conservative and top down.” John continued, adding this could cause an organization to become “less and less of a fun place to work, less and less actually effective” (p. 7). An argument could be made that it would have been relatively easier for BW to remain democratic in a downturn because they were a small and cohesive organization that did not have to go through mass layoffs to stay afloat. As Terri illustrated, however, based on her research on democratic organizations, even a large public organization called Continuum that went through mass layoffs could remain democratic:

It’s just hard to let people go. But what did they do? They did it differently. Rather than a couple people in the back room in the C-suite firing everyone, they engaged people. They asked people, “How can we keep them out? How can we be creative? How can we not have to lay people off.” And so they did that whole thinking. Then, when they laid people off, they did it with dignity. There was a conversation, everyone was kept informed. There weren’t surprises. (p. 8)
As these interviewees observed, BW continued to thrive through the downturn and earn a profit because they came together and worked as a team in a crisis. Furthermore, as Terri suggested, even larger corporations can use similar best practices to successfully navigate mass layoffs (or at least do it in the most humane way possible to maintain employee engagement) and increase profits. Next, the way in which BW engaged customers to increase profit will be examined.

*Customer engagement*

Some of the interviewees commented that BW differentiated itself from other telecommunications companies because of the personalized customer service. If a client had a problem, they could easily speak to someone in sales, operations, or even with Mike, the president, to come up with a solution. Naturally, this personalized approach was achievable because BW was a small organization:

> Fortunately, we’re small enough as an organization that, if you have ongoing interactions, you’re going to be dealing with the same person. If you have a customer service issue, you’re probably going to be talking to Art or you’re talking to me. Over a period of time, you develop a relationship with your customers. You sort of understand their business. They understand what you’re all about and it’s easier to get things done. (Gary, p. 8)

Art, who also works in customer service and operations, illustrated how easy it was to get in touch with Mike, the president: “I mean, if someone wants to reach directly to our president ... they can reach Mike or write him an e-mail for any customer issue, and it happens. They address it right to him” (p. 4). Mike then would bring the issue(s) to
the appropriate employees: “He brings it right to me or, you know whoever, but they send him an e-mail, and he reads them, and, you know, he takes an action on it” (p. 4).

When asked whether BW’s democratic system was used as a selling point to customers, interviewees said it depends. According to Art:

So if we’re talking to IT guy, that’s probably not gonna be discussed (the democratic piece), but if we’re talking to, like, their marketing person or their CEO, that’s discussed what we’re a very democratic organization, because we want to create as much synergy between the two organizations as possible, and a lot of the times those organizations operate the same way. (p. 5)

Conversely, Pam mentioned that she had never thought about bringing up the democratic mission to customers, but she might do so in the future: “When [I] try to pitch it or sell it to them why BW’s different, I actually never bring up that piece and I have no idea why, but now I’m going to use it as another selling point” (p. 12). Pam, however, thought that customers care more about what’s going to save them the most money — not the mission of the organization they are working with: “Our value system is changing and our perspectives are changing. I think people say they care about stuff like that; but, when it comes down to it, if you can save them money, that gets people right away” (p. 12).

Corporate Social Responsibility

As mentioned earlier, BW integrates social responsibility into their mission as an organization, encouraging employees to get involved with the environment, and they only worked with clients who are “green.” Pam spoke about BW’s priorities through the way they spend their money:
I think ... just the fact that they have a non-profit that they donate to, and then that money is distributed. So Mike always talks about how they don’t have an advertising budget, they don’t sponsor golf tournaments, they’re not flying their executives all over the place and staying in expensive hotels, and they’re really clear. I mean, obviously there are some expenditures, but they’re really clear about where their priorities are in terms of where their money is gonna go. I don’t see that very often, so that’s pretty cool. (p. 10)

In speaking with the employees, I started to ask if there was a connection between their mission as a socially responsible company and the fact that they were democratic. Employees were slightly mixed on the extent in which democracy and social responsibility go together. According to Art, social responsibility and democracy are related to one another: “So our customers work with us just because we are a green lender [meaning BW supports organizations dealing with the environment and social justice in their supply chain] but what makes us green is also, you know, just having this very open democratic environment” (p. 7). Similarly, Gary thought they went hand-in-hand:

You know, I think the two sort of go hand-in-hand. I think it would be very difficult to go out to the world and say, “Hey, we’re very socially responsible. We believe in the doing the right thing, et cetera, and oh, by the way, we’ve got very strict management organization and we don’t listen to anyone’s ideas and if it’s my decision, I’m going to make the decision. I don’t care what the heck you have to say about it.” I think that would be too conflicting to many of us. I believe that one does lead to the other. (p. 5)
On the contrary, both Jerry and Georgia said they did not see a connection between the fact that they are democratic and socially responsible. Art, however, framed the connection between democratic organizing and social responsibility in very simple terms: “I mean, at the end of the day ... you’re doing good ... you do good with your customers. Also, you do good with the your people that work with you” (p. 8).

Democratic practices and social responsibility, according to the interviewees, falls under the umbrella of “doing good.” Interestingly, as Pam illustrates, the mission of the organization and the way they treat their employees should be compatible:

“[On organizations claiming to be democratic] But their t-shirts are made in China and they’ve never been over to visit the factories ... I think it [the mission] has to benefit everybody that [sic] is touched by that business. So even though in a home office maybe you are doing really great things ... people feel that it’s free and a safe and healthy place, but yet the products that you’re selling are being made in a sweatshop. Can we really say that’s a democratic business? (p. 4)

Relatedly, Gary believed that companies that are not socially responsible could be democratic, but organizations that are socially responsible would have a hard time not being democratic: “Now that doesn’t mean that companies that are not socially responsible can’t be democratic, but I think that it would be very difficult to go the other way and say, ‘If you’re socially responsible, but you’re not democratic” (p. 5). Gary believed that a socially responsible organization that was not democratic would be contrary to the mission of the company. This perceived connection that Gary and others mentioned is important because it underlines the value employees placed on “doing
“good” both externally with employees and social responsibility, and internally with each other. Next, the mission of BW and democratic organizing will be discussed.

Mission of BW and Democracy

Accountability

As the interviewees reported earlier, accountability and transparency are a key tenet of democratic organizing at BW, leading to higher productivity and greater participation. In the following, I will outline in more detail how transparency affects the employees at BW.

When interviewing Terri about the key principles of democracy in the workplace that she has discovered in her work, she repeatedly said that transparency, or “open book management,” was absolutely necessary:

What is the biggest thing, the biggest initiative that is going to move the needle in this direction is always going to be open-book management, when a company decides to open the books up, because what that’s gonna do is you have to have conversation that creates dialogue and listening. Transparency creates accountability. (Terry, p. 9)

Similarly, Art, Jim, and Gary all spoke to the transparency at BW. As such, Art described the extent to which BW is transparent:

Everything is in the public domain. Everyone knows what is collected, how much money the company just got in, and the dollar amounts are in public view. We distribute these reports, and people can see it, and then also all the budget and where we are and all that, they are all shared with people on the state of the company in the monthly meetings. (p. 12)
This transparency allowed people to engage in open dialogue and participate in the decision-making process. Accordingly, Art continued: “Yes, we have an open door policy. That’s just one of the most important things, and everyone can speak their mind on any particular issue that is maybe at the table or not at the table all the time” (p. 1).

Jim provided a specific example of how this open-door policy worked when he questioned how the company was allocating its money:

When we first started this organization ... we were raising capital, our CEO was spending gobs of money on a nice office space and I’m like ‘why are we doing that?’ You know, we’re wasting money. We need to be, you know, in something that costs a fifth of what we’re spending here.’ And it was all about, and I don’t have any experience in this, but raising the money. You know, people that want to, you know, put a million dollars into our organization don’t want to go into somebody’s basement ... And I didn’t get that, and then it was explained to me, and I was like, ‘Oh, okay, I see. It makes a lot of sense now.’ Some other organizations, they might have just told me to ‘shut up.’ (p. 20)

Likewise, Gary talked about the transparency of mistakes, taking responsibility, and working on ways to improve:

That’s not to say we all don’t have failures. You know, I stubbed my toe, I dropped the ball on something or whatever. We make a mistake, we talk about it. Always, the first thing we discuss is, ‘okay, how do we keep it from happening again?’ We don’t want to make the same mistake twice. Yeah, you made a mistake. Okay. Let’s learn from that mistake. We’re not up here to penalize anybody for making a mistake. To err is human, but how do we keep from
making the same mistake again and let’s improve the situation, let’s make changes or whatever, and then we go on and try not to make the same stupid mistakes twice. (p. 7)

These testimonies from Gary, Art, and Jim highlight the importance of the transparency and accountability that Terri discussed, which entailed opening up the books, opening up dialogue, and listening to the ideas and suggestions of others. Next, Georgia, Jerry, and Jim elaborate on what participation is like at BW.

*Participation*

According to Jerry, participation at BW is “about as equal as I’ve ever seen. Everybody has a voice, and they’re not afraid to speak up and express their opinions. So I’d give that a definite A” (p. 3). In contrast, Georgia said it was a little harder to speak up at times:

> When we’re on a conference call and it gets very boisterous with people speaking up. It’s just, it’s still hard for me to get into it; it really is. I mean, after all those years of the way it was [at her previous employer]. But I love it, and I’m learning more often to speak up when I see something that — or if I don’t like the direction something is taking, or if I know that I have a better idea. (p. 2)

While it was initially harder for Georgia to speak up when she first started at BW, she learned it was necessary to do so in order to effect change.

Jim stated that the door is open for everyone to speak up, but understandably there are certain topics that people are not going to feel comfortable discussing because it’s outside their expertise. In Jim’s words:
I think, that if you’re running an organization, there’s some people that [sic] aren’t gonna want to, like Georgia is not gonna want to put her two cents in, although she can. But I don’t think she’s going to put her two cents in about how to, you know, close more sales, or you know, I’m not gonna have an opinion about, you know a strong opinion about ... the finances, but I might ask questions, and we do, and I think that from BW’s standpoint, anybody can ask a question or, you know, get a clearer understanding of why we’re doing something, which I think is democratic. (p. 19)

*Discourse of Democracy*

*Dialogue about politics & social issues*

When speaking to individuals about the freedom to speak up about whatever they felt the need to discuss, I was curious if this freedom extended to discussing politics in the workplace. After talking to the employees, it became clear that there was a “pretty well-diversified political spectrum at BW” (John, p. 11), but the interviewees were not in agreement on the extent to which politics are discussed. According to Georgia, who earlier mentioned that she doesn’t always feel entirely comfortable participating in all conversations, stated: “These days, politics — not a good thing to get into here [laughter]” (p. 6). I was not entirely sure if she meant that politics were a heated topic at BW, or if she personally did not think it was necessary to talk about politics in the workplace given her political views. In contrast, Jim claimed there were partisan debates: “I’m conservative by nature in my politics, but, again, I know there are a couple other people that aren’t the same way. We’ve got people that are very, you know, liberal
minded within our organization, but, you know, we have our debates” (p. 13). Gary suggested these debates about politics are good-natured:

From time to time ... the conversation will digress into that, but particularly, I mean, we sort of have some good-natured fun with each other because I would guess one or two people in the organization are more right-leaning from a political standpoint. A number of people in the organization are more left-leaning and we have some good, lively discussions about politics from time to time. (p. 11)

Democracy and bureaucracy

One could make the argument that democratic practices are inherent to an organization like BW because it is a small, cohesive company. It is easy to give everyone a voice in the decision-making process when there are only 12 people to bring to the table. As BW continues to grow, and there are more decisions with more stakeholders, could BW remain democratic? When I discussed this with interviewees and asked them whether or not these democratic processes were scalable, they were mixed on how democracy would look if BW became a large organization.

Jerry and Georgia thought it would be hard to maintain the same democratic structure as the company grows. According to Georgia: “I think the size definitely makes a difference. I don’t know that we would be as democratic as we get larger” (p. 4). She continued, “Maybe it’s because of my background, but I have a hard time seeing how it would continue if we added another 10 or 20 people to the company” (p. 4). Likewise, based on Jerry’s experiences in the past, he had a hard time envisioning how a larger organization could remain democratic: “Well, probably the main factor is the size. The
companies I worked for before I retired were the 5, 6, 700 people. I was an engineer at Westinghouse, Mitsubishi, and it just seems to me you could have a whole lot better democratic organization when you’re small” (p. 4). He summed it up stating, “When it’s large, it’s just very difficult to have the same communication and structure” (p. 4).

In contrast, others at BW thought the democratic practices were scalable; they would just look different. Gary explained how these democratic practices had more to do with the culture of the company and less to do with size:

I think, in our particular situation, it would definitely be scalable and something that would continue, even if we get larger because I think a lot of it comes from the core culture of the company and the willingness of everyone that sort of forms the cornerstone of the company ... So as the company grows, that culture will be passed on to other people when they come into the company and it will grow with the company. (p. 3)

Similarly, Art suggested the democratic processes would remain as long as the environment and attitudes of employees remained the same: “That’s the million dollar question, of course, and if we keep the key people in place as it is right now, then I think we can to a certain degree … We’ll take this environment as long as it goes” (p. 6).

Jim mentioned that while democratic processes will remain as the organization grows, they will change: “So, as the organization grows, I think that the processes are still gonna be there. They’re just gonna be segmented up into different groups where they still do the same thing, and we’ll definitely keep those processes in place” (p. 9). More specifically, Jim talked about how the format of meetings would change as BW grows: “So, I don’t think that we’d be able to listen to everybody’s good news story, and I don’t
think that we would be listening to what everybody does, but at least each group maybe it breaks up into five groups of 20 where they have Monday calls” (p. 9).

Interestingly, John compared the scalability of democratic organizations to cities: “Perhaps a large organization could function that way as well, creating essentially smaller neighborhoods than itself, that still allowed a proper scale, where people could know each other, work closely together, have accountability and leadership, a certain autonomy” (p. 9). On a grander scale, Terri compared democratic organizations to democratic countries: “If democracy is scalable at a country level, then it’s scalable at a company level. We shouldn’t sit here and say, “Oh, that country’s too big for democracy” (p. 3). Terri went on to suggest that not all democratic practices needed to be the same across different companies. As long as you have practices in play that work for the specific company and the industry, then they are scalable: “It is scalable. You just have to figure out the right practice for the size of the company, for the industry that it’s in, and for the goals that it’s trying to achieve” (p. 4).

Finally, Gary made an interesting point about trying to instill democratic practices in an existing company that is bureaucratic, as opposed to growing a company that has a democratic culture to begin with:

I think it’s probably more difficult if you had an existing company in place that was a little bit larger to instill that culture if that culture wasn’t there previously, but I think it’s certainly easier if you start with the core and then grow. It’s a lot easier to maintain it through the growth of the company than it would be if you had to try and instill it later in the company. (p. 3)
As these testimonies suggest, many were in agreement that democratic practices are scalable as a company grows. One question that needs to be addressed after examining these is responses is whether a company can have both democratic practices and a bureaucratic structure. Up to this point, bureaucracy and democracy have been framed by the interviewees as an either/or phenomenon. Next, I will look at what the interviewees had to say regarding both bureaucracy and democracy.

**Democratic versus bureaucratic**

When getting interviewees to talk about their opinions on democratic organizations and bureaucratic organizations, they mostly talked in contrasts, as a few employees had left organizations, they perceived to be bureaucratic, for BW, which they perceive to be very democratic. For instance, Georgia was at large corporations before joining BW: “I spent 16 years working with large corporations, Bell Atlantic, Meridian, Nortel, the big companies where, dude, I was just a number basically and had no say in any of the processes” (p. 2). Gary talked about his reasoning in transitioning into a more democratic organization like BW:

I’ve worked at a number of different organizations. One of the reasons I’m at BW is I like the philosophy, I like the chemistry, I like the people. I’m certainly not doing it because I’m making a ton of money because I can probably be making more money elsewhere. I’ve made a personal decision that I’d rather work with the folks at purpose in life and what I’m doing than a straight 9:00 to 5:00 job. (p. 13)

Similarly, Jim mentioned that in his 20-year career he has not worked for a company as democratic as BW: “I really think that our organization is very unique. I
mean, I’ve worked for about a dozen companies in my 20-plus career, and I don’t know anywhere where it was as, you know, democratic of an organization as what BW is” (p. 12). Furthermore, he went on to discuss how Georgia, who came from a larger bureaucratic organization, had a harder time adapting to the democratic processes: “I work a lot with Georgia, and I’m like, ‘why don’t you say anything?’ She was like ‘I don’t want to say anything.’ And it’s funny. Now, you know, a year or so later, they’re, you know, speaking up” (p. 4). Georgia herself supported Jim’s perception of her: “It was very strange to get my hands around what went on here at BW, that you could actually tell someone that you don’t think that’s the way the thing should be done, and not be chastised for it” (p. 2). Next, this particular culture of BW will be explored in more depth, looking at the leadership and job roles.

**Culture**

**Leadership**

In discussing the culture of BW, interviewees suggested that the leadership played a major role in creating and facilitating a democratic, humane environment. According to Jerry, the leadership consists of four individuals:

Well, I’ll say that the leaders, who are Gary, Mike, Jim, Art; they are very successful, which an organization has to have to make a profitable bottom-line. Yet, those same people, their personalities are very good in the sense they work well with people; they listen. They’re not autocratic. (p. 9)

In addition to listening, John explained how the leadership is both empowering while holding everyone accountable: “I consider what we do a lot better than many other small businesses out there” (p. 10). He continued, stating it was more than just talking
about being democratic: “And that is largely other than talking about it, it’s creating, it’s having a different quality of leadership present that empowers individuals and holds them accountable in a different way than a top-down setting does” (p. 10). Furthermore, John went on to state that Mike creates a participatory culture: “During all of our meetings, it’s specifically stated that humorously, but quite accurately by Mike, that one thing that gives BW the culture that it does is that we can all tell anyone to fuck off whenever we’d like to, without fear of losing our jobs” (p. 4).

While Mike used profanity as an example of open dialogue, there seemed to be a friendly, humane environment at BW. Jim had a lot of respect for Mike, which gave him less stress at work: “I don’t have the same types of stresses [others] have in your job. You like what you’re doing with your career, but you don’t necessarily like your boss, or you don’t necessarily care for how your organization might be treating you” (p. 12). He concluded, “I don’t get any of those feelings at BW” (p. 12). Similarly, Pam likes that Mike respects the employees and allows them to speak up: “I think he respects people and trusts that they’re gonna do what they need to do ... You were talking about being reachable if somebody’s a client, but he’s also really reachable for me if I have a question or concern” (p. 17).

In summary, the results illustrated a close-knit organization wherein the abovementioned factors worked together to facilitate a profitable, democratic environment. BW had a triple-bottom-line approach that practiced social responsibility both internally among employees, and externally with clients and the environment. This approach increased the engagement and well-being of employees that led to greater productivity and less turnover, which ultimately increased profits. BW’s democratic
practices are scalable, utilizing tools such as technology, while maintaining a democratic macro narrative to facilitate and recreate a democratic environment over time. This specific case and these themes illustrate how a democratic environment can contribute to the bottom line. Further, this mission of democracy ran alongside of, or significantly in support of, building the business financially, and keeping it afloat throughout a recession. Next, the significance of this connection between democratic practice and profitable outcomes will be outlined.
CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSIONS

Given the economic downturn in the last three years, there have been mass layoffs and an increase in disregard for employee well-being both in the public and private sectors. Democratic practices, especially during this economic slowdown, are disregarded in exchange for autocratic decisions in times of crisis. My interest in workplace democracy intensified when I experienced first-hand the effects of a down economy while working in the private sector as a consultant with the Gallup Organization. I wondered if it was possible for a for-profit organization to enact democratic practices in the face of layoffs and budget cuts. There has been a lack of research on democratic practices in for-profit organizations; therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore a new territory of workplace democracy in the for-profit arena, and examine the conditions under which a for-profit organization could create a democratic, participatory culture that thrives in a capitalist society, especially during an economic slowdown.

To explore the conditions under which a for-profit corporation could create a democratic, participatory culture that thrives in a capitalist economy, my literature review analyzed three different topical areas: (1) democratic public sphere theorizing; (2) democratic and participatory workplaces; and, (3) critical perspectives of capitalism and bureaucratic organizations. This review of literature led me to a critical ethnographic approach, which entailed ethnographic practices such as in-depth, open-ended questions, while taking into account critical elements such as power, conflict, and inequality. Critical ethnography allowed me, as a researcher, to explore micro discourses of everyday workplace practices in light of macro discourses that both enable and constrain individuals.
To gain a better perspective of practices at a for-profit organization that claims to be democratic, eleven employees from BW were interviewed. BW is a telecommunications firm rated as a top democratic organization by WorldBlu five years in a row. Each interview was conducted over the phone and recorded, using an in-depth open-ended protocol. After the interviews were conducted, the recordings were transcribed verbatim, and interpreted using an iterative approach, yielding nine broad themes consisting of: (1) Employee satisfaction; (2) Decision-making processes; (3) Social responsibility; (4) Turning a profit; (5) Technology; (6) Accountability; (7) Discourses of democracy; (8) Democracy and bureaucracy; and (9) Culture. In this final chapter, I have synthesized and analyzed the nine themes from the previous chapter, and provided new theorizing in democracy and organizing in response to my research question. First, a summary of the results provide a framework for interpretation.

Generally speaking, BW is a small, cohesive organization that values transparency and invites participation from employees regarding decisions that affect the company internally and externally with clients. Many attributes of this company facilitated a participative environment, which in turn, led to higher employee satisfaction. Interestingly, the increase in employee satisfaction due to a participative environment also contributes to an increase in profit. In the following paragraphs, I elaborate on the connections among decision-making processes, employee satisfaction, and increases in profit.

Employees at BW indicated they were highly satisfied with work because of the value placed on their well-being. They referred to this treatment as a holistic approach, citing a “triple-bottom-line,” which placed employee’s well-being and social
responsibility equally as important as profit. In addition, perceived freedom, which ranged from the ability to voice an opinion during a conference call, to the freedom to work from home, contributed to the well-being of individuals at work. Taken together, these factors led to higher satisfaction at the workplace.

In addition, the actual process by which decisions were made led to an increase in satisfaction. The process for making decisions at BW was swift and informal. While there were no clear processes in place for making decisions, employees stated that while many processes were democratic, some decisions were autocratic in nature for efficiency purposes. When time was limited, the leadership would make minor decisions. In these instances, not everyone’s vote was equal as the leadership made the final decision to meet deadlines or to push the company forward. Employees did not express dissatisfaction when the decision making process was autocratic on minor details, rather they viewed it as necessary for getting a specific job done.

Technology, in addition to being used as a tool to aid in the decision-making process, also helped improve employee’s well-being. Specifically, BW utilized technology to provide greater transparency, while at the same time allowing employees to contribute to meetings from the comfort of their home. The use of LiveMeeting, for instance, is a tool wherein employees can show reports during weekly calls while working remotely. Interviewee’s cited technology as a tool that provided them with the freedom to work in the city of their choice.

BW is a for-profit organization, and interviewees discussed ways in which the organization differentiated itself from its competition to provide unique customer service. As a relatively small company, BW was able to adapt to meet customer needs, providing
customers with easy access to the president of the company. Furthermore, employees discussed how their production was on display for the rest of the company to see, making every individual accountable for his/her work. This accountability led to greater production, and a results-oriented culture. Transparency extended to the president of the company. While individuals’ results were transparent and open to the company, the means they used to achieve their results were not scrutinized. Employees enjoyed this freedom to use innovative and creative means to reach their goals without fear of close examination. In fact, throughout the recession, employees believed they could continue to be innovative without fear of losing their job, as there was little turnover in the company. BW focused on training and retaining the employees they had throughout the downturn.

Employees agreed that leadership was key to a participative culture. Leadership had created a culture at BW that was both empowering and accountable. Employees were empowered in many ways, and they were drawn to the philosophy and vision of BW. Interviewees admitted they could have made more money at a different company, but chose a democratic, satisfying participatory workforce over a higher paycheck. While employees enjoyed the democratic workplace of a smaller organization, some were skeptical that BW could remain democratic as it grows in size. This raises an interesting question. Is democratic organizing scalable? While this question is outside the scope of my current research project, I will come back to this question in my suggestions for future research. Next, my analysis of workplace participation and democracy, scalability, and democratic organizing and profitability provides insight that might be fruitful in the field of democratic organizing.
Implications

Workplace participation and democracy

Much of this dissertation has been focused on “participation” and “democracy,” organizing principals that can be easily confused as synonyms. Employees at BW painted the picture of an equitable environment at the micro level, supported by a democratic egalitarian vision at the macro level. For instance, discussions of daily practices illustrated how BW workers were afforded the opportunity to participate in various work functions. Examples of participation were found in employees’ testimonies about weekly meetings, suggestions for innovative solutions, and their ability to provide input regarding decisions about the future of company. As described earlier, a workplace can have participatory programs in place; but, if it lacks an overarching, egalitarian, democratic vision, then participatory initiatives can fall short (Stohl & Cheney, 2001). Creating an “equitable” environment that is by no means “equal.” In a democratic, egalitarian environment, everyone gets a seat at the table, and their votes, suggestions, and innovations are equally rewarded and recognized. As such, workplace democracy entails equal access to resources, and inclusion of all members in shaping the organizational environment (Harter, 2004; Cheney & Cloud, 2006; Mason, 1982).

Interviewees pointed to a democratic, overarching culture that emphasized accountability, transparency of managerial functions and finances, and a high value placed on individual freedom and well-being. Employees repeatedly touched on ways in which the organization placed a value on the feelings of the employees, in addition to honoring freedom and autonomy. This culture of democracy was enabled and maintained with relative ease due to the small size of the company. This aligns with previous
literature that identifies small group size, common goals (including participatory-democratic goals), and individual rights as key conditions that facilitate greater egalitarian participation (Ferree & Martin, 1995; Lidenfeld & Rothschild-Whitt, 1982). Taken together, these participative practices at the micro level, combined with a shared democratic vision, formed a participatory, democratic environment at BW.

From a critical standpoint, the democratic vision at BW was a dominant, powerful ideology that was recreated and maintained through daily practices and broad narratives. Most employees adamantly supported the democratic practice of equal participation, transparency, and exercising the right to debate and voice dissent. However, democratic organizing can be just as stifling as a bureaucratic/totalitarian structure if an employee is comfortable with consensus and control. For example, Georgia, who came from a bureaucratic organization, had a hard time adjusting to the culture at BW: “When we’re on a conference call and it gets very boisterous with people speaking up. It’s just, it’s still hard for me to get into it; it really is.” Likewise, Jim pointed out Georgia’s hesitation to voice dissent, stating: “I work a lot with Georgia, and I’m like, ‘why don’t you say anything?’ She was like ‘I don’t want to say anything.’ And it’s funny. Now, you know, a year or so later, they’re, you know, speaking up” (p. 4).

This instance is an example of how “speaking up” became a dominant ideology, and more broadly illustrates how aspects of democratic organizing can privilege individuals who are comfortable with debate and dissent and marginalize those individuals who are more comfortable with control. BW, and other organizations that are democratic in nature, must balance this tension between control and dissent among employees who feel forced to “speak up.”
Scalability

Given the small size of BW, it is easy to see how a small group can share similar democratic values, facilitate inclusiveness, and practice accountability. However, as BW increases in size, the question lingers as to whether the organization can remain democratic in a capitalist system, or if it will take a bureaucratic turn, creating hierarchy, exclusivity, and a shift towards a totalitarian environment. As the critical approach to capitalism suggests, since the 1920s, the corporation has treated employees in a purely economic, impersonal fashion, with little regard for individual well-being (Dewey & Tufts, 1923). Further, a large bureaucratic structure operating within a capitalist society creates an “apparenecy of control,” wherein rules confine employees as if they are “caged behind iron bars” (Barker, 1993, p. 411), and are treated humanely only if they stay within the rules. Unfortunately in a bureaucracy, employees have no say in establishing these rules, and the bureaucratic workplace is totalitarian in practice (Deetz, 1992).

Employees at BW were mixed on if, or how, the organization would remain democratic as it grows in size. Older employees, who had worked in larger bureaucratic structures in the past, were not sure the company could remain democratic, while other employees thought it could, but it might “look different.” The idea that BW could be both democratic and large in size, is a both/and approach inherent in alternative organizing. Scholars have suggested that alternative organizations can operate alongside bureaucracy, not in its place (Ashcraft, 2006; Lidenfeld & Rothschild, 1982), where workers are treated humanely, while maintaining innovation and efficiency.

In terms of scalability, democracy at BW was likened to democracy in cities and countries. Jim provided an illustrative comparison between an organization and a city,
stating, “a large organization could function that way as well [like a city], creating essentially smaller neighborhoods than itself, that still allowed a proper scale, where people could know each other, work closely together, have accountability and leadership, a certain autonomy.” (p. 9) Democracy as a city/country metaphor is interesting insofar as it blurs the boundary between the public sphere of city organizing, and the corporate sphere or workplace organizing, supporting many scholar’s assertion that society and organizations are tightly bound (Deetz, 1992; Mumby, 2000; Mumby & Stohl 1996).

However, as Dewey (1927) points out in his book, The Public and Its Problems, the key to democratic organizing in local communities is face-to-face communication, also known as “personal intercourse” (p. 237). Simply put, Dewey believes co-located communities are a necessary condition for democracy, stating: “In its deepest and richest sense a community must always remain a matter of face-to-face intercourse (p. 211). In contrast, remote employees at BW have very little face-to-face communication; yet, despite the absence of “personal intercourse,” they still consider themselves a democratic community. From a critical standpoint, the question arises as to how BW can foster democracy without face-to-face communication, especially as they grow larger in size.

Technology at BW provided opportunities for democratic organizing as the company grew, enabling employees the freedom to work remotely from home, and hold live meetings to discuss operations and innovations. Autonomy and freedom are constructs that employees continuously referenced in the interviews when discussing why they thought BW was democratic, but technology is both enabling and constraining. Advances in technology such as live meetings, iChat, Blackberries/iPhones, iPads/tablets have the potential to make employees “connected” to work 24 hours a day, 7 days a
week. One is never “free” from work, if he/she is constantly connected, always on call, and expected to respond to Blackberry messages no matter what time of the day. This tension is one that employees at BW will have to manage as the company grows and technology continues to be an integral part of the workplace.

Democratic organizing and profit

The overarching question in this dissertation has been focused on the extent to which a democratic organization can drive profits while at the same time value the well-being of employees. Testimonies from BW illustrate a workplace that became more democratic as the economy took a downturn, discussing ways to meet the customers’ needs when the budget was tight. Throughout this process BW was transparent, and employees thought they could contribute, and voice their opinions about the best way to move forward without fear of losing their jobs. Whereas the companies that the interviewees previously worked for were described as ambiguous and autocratic, BW created a space for dialogue and deliberation as individuals in the company pulled together during the downturn. As a result, BW collectively decided to cut expenses such as travel, expensive hotels, and overhead, and instead looked for creative ways to meet customer needs within a budget.

This shared mission of democratic culture became a best practice when the company encountered a crisis. While it may be easy to talk about being democratic when a company is flourishing, remaining democratic in practice when money is tight and stress is high is more of a challenge. Jobs reports, worker well-being indexes, and interviewees’ discussions of past employers all suggest that many times corporate narratives shift toward autocratic decision making in crisis situations. In BW’s case, the
focus turned to the employees as space was created for ideas and dissent, engagement remained high as the economy went down, and efficiency went up. In turn, engaged employees led to engaged customers as BW continued to innovate for their customers. This entire process of holding on to the democratic mission, and keeping employees and customers engaged, led to a profit for BW. Melman (2001) hits on this productive potential of democratic organizing, stating: “Democratic control over the marvelous physical capital of the economy can release productive potential that is now restrained and channeled to serve corporate and state managers’ striving for profit and power” (p. 16). Rather than protecting their own interests in the downturn, leadership at BW put the focus back on the employees, holding them accountable for results while remaining democratic, and producing profitable results.

BW also practices social responsibility as part of their “triple-bottom-line” approach. Mumby and May (2005) outlined the tension between profitability and social good as a key problematic that critical scholarship should explore. Incidentally, Milton Friedman (1962) suggested that corporations should not be held accountable to uphold social responsibility, as the main goal of a corporation is to increase profits. To the contrary, in the interviews, it became clear that BW believed there was a connection between social responsibility and profit. BW’s work in social justice was not something that had to be managed, nor was it a top-down initiative. Rather, social responsibility outside the workplace came naturally for the employees, because it was part of the culture of the organization. Interviewees suggested their approach to social justice outside the company was no different than their approach internally to get the most out the employees. This connection among the organization, social responsibility, and society is
best reflected in a casual statement by an employee at BW: “A care for the effect that my organization has on the environment often blooms right alongside a care for people who are working in my organization.” (p. 7). Given this perspective, social responsibility and profit at BW was a harmonious connection, not a tension.

These factors are both enabling and constraining. While enabling the employees with the freedom to work from home, BW’s remote workplace could potentially constrain individuals from having personal intercourse that Dewey (1927) deems necessary for a democratic community. In addition, technology is a necessary tool that will enable employees to connect with each other as the company grows larger, while also constraining individuals, making them connected 24/7. Finally, the discourses of democracy within BW are enabling the employees to create a macro narrative that facilitates equal participation, while at the same time constraining individuals who are used to consensus and control.

Limitations

There are several limitations to this study. The first is clear in the methodology section. As discussed earlier, I originally set out to conduct a case study on a major retailer that I had previously done interviews with during my employment at Gallup. With over 60 interviews, I had deep, relevant information in the area of participatory programs that could be used as a starting point to go back to the retailer and conduct more interviews for this project. This robust organization, with various levels of management and communication channels would have made for a rich, nuanced study of democratic organizing in a massive corporate culture.
Unfortunately, after initially getting approval to conduct this follow-up study for my dissertation, at the last minute I was told by management at Big Box that I would not be allowed access to the organization. Initially I panicked, thinking this was the only organization I could study for my dissertation. However, after finding BW and talking to the president, I realized that getting shut out of the big-box retailer was a blessing in disguise. BW was the antithesis of the Big Box retailer. Small, transparent, and welcoming, it proved to be the perfect company to access for this dissertation. Yet, due to the setback with the retailer, I had to reorganize the dissertation and gear it towards a vastly different company. Furthermore, given that BW had remote employees throughout the country, I conducted all of the interviews over the phone. Without getting into an actual organization and seeing the culture for myself, I was limited in truly understanding the lived culture of BW.

My second limitation was the size of the company. BW had 13 employees, which narrowed the scope of the study. BW’s employees were extremely cohesive and open with each other, and they all had very similar perspectives of the organization. As such, they provided a fairly monolithic, homogeneous view of democratic organizing. BW was also a flat organization, which made it hard to examine how power and domination played out in different levels of the organization, or between managers and subordinates.

While conducting a critical study of a singular, smaller organization such as BW is not a limitation, I acknowledge that a comparison model of different organizations in diverse industries could potentially produce different results. Given that BW’s mission revolved around telecommunications in sustainable industries, it seems natural they would have a socially responsible nexus and a caring attitude towards employees. If
future studies look at different for-profits such as investment bankers on Wall Street, or private law firms, the focus on the well-being of employees and social responsibility might look much different. These suggestions lead me to ideas for future research.

**Suggestions for Future Research**

This study has produced several recommendations for future research, including studying the following: (1) larger, for-profit organizations; (2) diverse industries in the for-profit sector; and (3) for-profit alternative organizations that do not claim to be “democratic.” Future researchers could examine larger, for-profit organizations across a variety of industries, e.g., a broader study could compare larger organizations in retail, law, or healthcare fields. Each industry would have different crises that inherently bring conflict, stress, and downsizing. Examining the ways in which larger organizations enact democratic and participative practices in the face of these challenges would be fruitful in broadening the field of democratic organizing. Best (and worst) practices could be highlighted from such studies and applied in a very tangible, constructive manner.

Studying various industries from a critical theoretical standpoint might be informative as well. Looking at the way in which power, resistance, inequalities, and conflict are played out in different industries could shed light on macro discourses in the for-profit sector.

In addition to studying diverse industries, future research should examine diverse institutions. An in-depth case study of people with different roles at various levels of an organization would help us understand how democratic organizing looks in a large organization. A partner in a private law firm might have a much different perspective on humane, democratic practices than a first-year associate working 100 hours a week. Likewise, a corporate marketing manager at a big retailer might have a different
viewpoint than a college freshman working as a floor salesman in a retail chain at the same company.

Finally, this study has privileged democratic organizing. Future research could place importance on other alternative organizations that are not necessarily democratic, but function in ways that allow space for employees to feel engaged, valued, and productive. These organizations could consist of stakeholder/shareholder models and bureaucratic companies, within capitalist constraints. Methodologically, in addition to conducting face-to-face interviews, the researcher should be a part of the organization to truly feel the culture. This could take place through a visiting consultant/contractor or internship agreement between the researcher and the company. This would be a mutually beneficial relationship between the researcher and the company under study. Building off the results of this dissertation, these recommendations for future research can have theoretical application for the field of communication and practical application in for-profit organizations as well.
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APPENDIX A: IRB APPROVAL

A determination has been made that the following research study is exempt from IRB review because it involves:

Category 2. research involving the use of educational tests, survey procedures, interview procedures or observation of public behavior.

Project Title: Democratic Organizing in the Corporate Sphere: A Case Study

Primary Investigator: Brent Bonine

Co-Investigator(s):

Advisor: Anita James

Department: Communication Studies

Rebeca Cale, AAB, CIP
Office of Research Compliance

The approval remains in effect provided the study is conducted exactly as described in your application for review. Any additions or modifications to the project must be approved (as an amendment) prior to implementation.
Figure 1: BW Organizational chart