Chapter 1
Applications of Actor–Network Theory in Media Studies:
A Research Overview

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ABSTRACT

The chapter offers an international research overview of the possibilities and problems of applying Actor-Network Theory in Media Studies and media related research. On the one hand the chapter provides a summary of the central aspects and terminologies of Bruno Latour's, Michel Callon's and John Law's corpus of texts. On the other hand, it summarizes both theoretical and methodological implications of the combination of Actor-Network Theory and strands of Media Studies research such as discourse analysis, Production Studies and media theory.

INTRODUCTION

Ten years ago, Nick Couldry[1], a researcher in the field of media, communication and social theory, pointed out to the fact that Actor-Network Theory "seems perfectly placed to generate a theory of the role(s) of media and communication technologies in contemporary societies" (2008a, p. 93). Yet, he also notes that although the "potential affinity" (p. 94) between and the connectivity of ANT and Media Studies has been sporadically mentioned in critical Media Studies and theory discourse, "this connection has been surprisingly little explored" (p. 94).

The fact that a stable link between ANT and media theory has not been established -ironically, ANT is not "networked" with media theory - cannot be explained by ignorance. Not only does ANT have a high profile in the social sciences (as indicated by the wide currency of We Have Never Been Modern, the main book of one of the ANT founders, Bruno Latour: Latour, 1993), but in the late 1980s studies of how media technologies, especially television, are embedded in domestic and social space were closely aligned with work in the sociology of science and technology influenced by ANT. (p. 93-94).

Meanwhile, in the course of the last two decades, "thinking about ANT in Media Studies" has significantly increased, which is manifest in the growing number of international publications, dissertations, academic conferences and workshops as well as university seminars and lectures. Whether or not Actor-Network Theory even needs to be understood as a „new paradigm of media theory," as Gramp (2009a; also cf. Hoof, 2011) suggests, is still up to debate or even questionable in the light of canonized, traditionally stabilized and omnipresent approaches to media such as narratology, discourse analysis or semiotics (to name a few). Nevertheless, the current emphasis on the interferences between ANT and media in critical discourse can at least be considered a "boom," (Glaubitz, 2011, p. 16; cf. Teurlings, 2013, p. 101) "trend," or "tendency" (Fornäs, 2008, p. 6), a "common ground" (Hoof, 2011, p. 45) or maybe even as "one of the most interesting developments in Cultural Media Studies in the last years" (Engell & Siegert, 2013, p. 5).

In accordance with Couldry's early remarks about the noticeable problems and limits that media poses to the applicability of ANT (2008, p. 94), German media theorists Lorenz Engell and Bernhard Siegert (2013) conclude that despite all the theoretical challenges of this conjunction, it yet offers "surprising theoretical convergences" (p. 10). In fact, the interplay between potentials and challenges has been emphasized in a number of works related to this discourse, not at least by Couldry in his 2008a publication: "the relationship between ANT and media theory is a significant, if uneasy, one" (p. 106). Interestingly enough, as Engell and Siegert and Erhard Schüttplez (2013) argue, ANT, which is usually considered a sociological theory and/or method or a certain strand of Science and Technology Studies (STS), has "ever since incorporated an implicit theory of media and also explicitly conducted analyses of media as well" (Engell & Siegert, 2013, p. 7; cf. Schüttpelz, 2013, pp 16-18). Among others, photographs, print media, maps and scientific instruments have fulfilled the functions of actors or mediators in the key texts of ANT's protagonists (e.g. cf. Latour, 1987). Admittedly, "media" have rarely been addressed explicitly, however, as Tristan Thielmann (2013a) points out, taking into consideration the theoretical and methodological agenda of ANT as put forward by their key proponents (Bruno Latour, Michel Callon, John Law), ANT actually does not even allow for the concept of "non-media." Because according to Thielmann (2013a), ANT's main theoretical and methodological agenda is based on the possibility to

… enable a mode of representation in which the "social" and the "technical" are interleaved and consequently evens the differentiation between human and non-human actors … Since in return, media's role of being in-between is highlighted, Actor-Network Theory proves to be an Actor-Media-Theory. ANT does not allow for "not-media"… and thus turns out to be a "not-not-media theory." (p. 377).

In the following, I will give an overview of both theoretical considerations with regard to the connections between Actor-Network Theory and Media Studies and applications of Actor-Network Theory as an approach to analyzing media or media constellations respectively. Naturally, the separation of theory and application is a heuristic one, because most case studies offer theoretical insights and methodological discussions in the course of the description and analysis of their corresponding research object. In return, theoretical considerations of potentials and problems of Actor-Network Theory in relation to media theory need to be considered a certain kind of application as well. The list of research discussed in the following is by far not exhaustive, since the vast academic corpus of texts is steadily increasing and "increasingly variegated" (Engell & Siegert, 2013, p. 5), meaning that the research field is expanding into a variety of heterogeneous theoretical strands and research objects. This can certainly be explained by taking into consideration that "Media Studies" can neither be reduced to a single standardized theoreti-

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