

Chapter 7

Actor–Network Theory and Media Studies: Performing the Story of Local Television

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ABSTRACT

This chapter will narrate a complex story of a current process of innovation within a particular newsroom. A series of empirical observations will reveal how Actor-Network Theory can be effectively engaged in reading media processes and media innovation. The chapter will also provide a separate hypothesis as to the nature of how and why some networks are able to stabilize whilst others remain in constant transition. The innovation at the centre of this ANT study is a recently established local television station launched in England within a university setting. It will be argued that by using ANT as a methodology for exploring innovations, one can recognize more easily the precarious positions of actors in any network, both during its construction and also after it has been more or less successfully stabilized. It can also reveal why a network may not achieve stabilization or become successfully operative over time.

INTRODUCTION

To understand the path taken by an innovation, we must evaluate the resistance put up by the successive actors that it mobilizes or rejects. Explanation does not follow on from description; it is description taken much further. (Latour, 1991, p. 121)

The focus of this chapter is a complex story of a current process of innovation within a particular newsroom. It will demonstrate that to explore the path of a techno-social innovation it is necessary to first of all recognize contingent, haphazard and co-evolving actor associations as they are taking place and to map each and every one of these translations wherever they occur on specific nodes of the network. It is for others to make the hermeneutic case for Actor-Network Theory (ANT) as a relevant and effective

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method for reading media processes and the sociologists amongst these pages have adroitly fulfilled the demands of this task. What this chapter endeavors to provide instead is the opportunity to perform an actor network story of translation. By so doing it will offer empirical observations which reveal why ANT is so skillful at reading media processes and media innovation, as well as provide a further hypothesis as to the nature of how and why some networks are able to stabilize whilst others remain in constant transition. The innovation at the core of this ANT study is a local television station launched for the first time in Nottingham, England within an already established university setting. Certain key actors and actor constellations will be mapped at specific points to reveal the on-going processes of network translation and its- as yet unsuccessful- attempts to achieve stabilization. It will be argued that by using ANT as a methodology for exploring technological and social innovation, one can recognize more easily the precarious positions of actors in any network, both during its construction and also crucially, after it has been more or less successfully stabilized, or alternatively, reveal why it may *not* achieve stabilization or become successfully operative over time.

It is worth noting for those familiar with ANT terminology, that this particular innovation process has not managed to achieve stabilization as not enough actors have travelled through the same obligatory passage points and key actors are not yet fully mobilized or enrolled within the network. The empirical observations will reveal just how and why this is the case, and demonstrate how ANT analysis can assist the ethnographer in revealing specific points within a network where both mobilization, enrollment and translation are still necessary to bring unruly actors into line if any innovation is to achieve black box status.

Central to any successful ANT account is the recognition of the specificity of actors within the network. By analyzing the determining and associative effect of specific network points and actors, explanation can steer clear of grandiose generalizations, and provide instead particular empirically observable and practically relevant processes. This chapter provides further evidence of the insistence that ANT makes in exploring the specifics of actor positioning, alignment and translation within different network positions. To read media without addressing the specificity of the news environment being observed is to misread the contingency and ad hoc nature of news practice (Hemmingway, 2008).

In this single case study of the local TV project we will once again concentrate on the specificity of particular network locations and actor positions. Television news production and routines are located neither in the social nor in the individual but in the permutations of a heterogeneous and ever changing network of associated actors, located on specific points within that network. There are subjects and there are objects, but they never remain stable and in fixed opposition to one another. They alternate, they are enrolled and translated, they come into being and they are dissolved. By recognizing the causal agency of the network, and by closely analyzing how that network operates, news practice can be liberated from ill-fitting generalized definitions that have hitherto plagued much of the field of media and journalism studies.

ACTOR TRANSLATION: SOME KEY CONCEPTS

There is no other way to define an actor but through its actions, and there is no other way to define an action but by asking what other actors are modified, transformed, perturbed or created by the character that is the focus of attention. (Latour, 1999, p.122)

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