Chapter 4
Having a Say:
Voices for all the Actors in ANT Research?

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ABSTRACT

This article explores issues associated with giving non-human actors a voice of their own in actor-network theory based research. What issues arise in doing so? Does doing so increase understanding of the issue to hand, bring to life and make more accessible and interesting the stories of these actors? Or does this anthropomorphism detract from the issues at hand? The authors discuss these broader issues and then present findings from an ANT field study which investigated the implementation of institutional repositories and their relations with the spread of open access to scholarly publishing. This paper experiments with allowing some of the non-human actors to speak for themselves. The authors conclude with a discussion which opens the debate: does giving voice to non-human actors bring them to life and make them better understood as intimately entangled with each other and human actors in the socio-material practices of the everyday? And what are the challenges in doing so?

INTRODUCTION

Interpretive research endorses and legitimises the voices of people, the human subjects we study in the field. We hear what they think and feel what they feel. But what about non-humans we study, such as Information System (IS), databases, or-

ganisations, and other non-humans? In interpretive studies authors let human subjects speak about themselves and the non-humans in their world, make sense of them, and interpret them. As human subjects and researchers have specific goals and intentions and speak from the perspective of their particular situation, they often attribute different meanings to IS or certain types of technology, hence the concept of "interpretive flexibility"

(Orlikowski, 1992). The non-humans have no say. In the world of separated subjects (humans) and objects (non-humans), assumed in interpretive studies, our examination and understanding is subject-centered.

In the world of social materiality (Dale, 2005) where subjects and objects are seen as mutually enacting and co-producing, the gaze is changing. It is not the subject's perspective that is privileged but instead the world is seen as a flat constellation of relations among subjects, material objects such as technologies, and conceptual objects such as ideas. Rather than focusing on the impacts of technology on people and organizations, or the interaction of people and technology, the sociomaterial approach focuses on the subjects-objects and the social-material intertwining and co-enacting in practice (Orlikowski & Scott, 2008; Suchman, 2007). Objects are not passive things without agency. Instead they are seen as actors capable of action and affecting others through relations. The agency of actors, both human and non-human, emerges in their mutual relations through ongoing co-production and co-enactment (Cecez-Kecmanovic & Nagm, 2009). So, the question arises: How do we present objects' acting and how can objects have voice in our understanding and reporting from the field?

We aim to examine this question by adopting Actor-Network Theory (ANT) - one of the most vocal and perhaps most influential theoretical developments in the realm of sociomateriality. ANT was conceived by Latour and Woolgar (1986) while studying the work of scientists in the Salk Institute of Medical Research, and is deliberately agnostic about distinctions between 'social' and 'natural'. Instead ANT theorises the growth of 'hybrids', networks of people, tools and concepts held together by (sometimes unwilling) collaboration (Latour, 1993). ANT has generally been adopted by researchers keen to avoid the subject/object, nature/society dualisms (Vidgen & McMaster, 1996) and thus avoid both technological and social determinism. By proposing a symmetrical treatment of human and non-human actors ANT has a significant potential to contribute to better understanding of technology and information systems in organisations and life in all its rich complexity (Tatnall & Gilding, 1999).

In this paper we propose a conceptual and methodological extension of ANT to allow non-humans to have a voice. We aim first to show that humans and non-humans are co-acting and thereby co-creating each other in actor-networks. Actor-networks are brought together by relations among actors, attempting to enrol each other to enact desired scripts and achieve goals. To investigate the intentions and goals of human actors and their understanding of the emerging network, researchers often rely on interviews and texts (such as e-mails and documents) produced by the humans. This is how we identify and present voices of humans and let them tell their story. But this is only a partial story. The story of non-humans is missing.

On the one hand the humans realise their intentions by acting and interacting through material objects (e.g., technology) which simultaneously shape humans' agency and the ways their intentions are achieved. A non-human or object may be inscribed by the intentions of humans (oriented toward a goal) but such object inscription never acts alone and exactly as intended and continues to act beyond the intended domain and timeframe. The force of non-humans is thus felt everywhere: in a business process enabled by an ERP system, in a paper submission to an institutional repository, which can accept or reject it, when a virus invades your computer. The problem in an ANT study is to let them, the non-humans, speak, let them represent themselves and have a say. But how to do it, how to allow them to speak, is not well explained or practiced in ANT studies. In this paper we present and illustrate a technique of actors' speaking that was used to represent non-human actors (including software, processes and concepts) during a large study of the development of (possibly open access) institutional repositories

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