

# Chapter 12

## Negotiating the Socio–Material in and about Information Systems: An Approach to Native Methods

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### ABSTRACT

*Recent moves to more explicitly account for the relationship between the social and the material in the Information Systems discipline, under the banner of socio-materiality, also imply the need for a closer examination of practice. Using John Law's (2004) exposition of "method assemblage" as foregrounding and backgrounding a re-reading of Jonathan Grudin's (1990) account of the various delineations of the computer interface is attempted. It is offered as a preliminary orientation to some of the native "ethno-methods", (discursive and embodied practices) which might be deployed to negotiate sociality and materiality in IS and other technical arenas.*

### INTRODUCTION

This paper is motivated by the observation that references to the idea of socio-materiality are scant in the Information Systems (IS) academic literature, especially when compared with cognate fields. Recent moves to more explicitly account for the social and the material, their relationship and significance in different situations, in IS and other technical arenas, also imply the need for a

closer examination of practice. Orlikowski (2007, p. 1444), for instance, proposes that "*all* practices are always and everywhere socio-material, and that this sociomateriality is constitutive, shaping the contours and possibilities of everyday organizing". Or we might recognise the opposite, that practice in its particulars is constitutive of the social and the material (and much else). Just how to characterise "practice" is not uncontested and, as with any term, will relate to a host of theoretical and practical considerations (Bourdieu, 1972).

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As a way of explicating these proposals I use John Law's (2004) discussion of "method assemblage", and offer a re-reading of Jonathan Grudin's (1990) account of the extension of the computer interface as it "reaches out". I do this to provide an *orientation* to some of the native "ethno-methods" (discursive and embodied practices) used to negotiate notions of sociality and materiality, and which seem relevant to a discussion about IS. I wish to retain the modes of expression used by practitioners themselves. The intention is to avoid the situation where the observer, drawing on an unfamiliar (to practitioners) social theory framework, always "gets the last word", perhaps even imputing "self-deception to the natives who do not acknowledge or recognise the [alternative] analytical explanation" (Lynch, 1993, p. 32).

The line of thought in this paper owes a great deal to the many discussions and demonstrations I have overheard among those who bravely attempt to work according to *Ethnomethodology's Program* (Garfinkel, 2002). The outcome is a practical suggestion as to where to look for contrasting modes of IS practice; and there may be parallels also in other technical fields.

## **CRAFTING PRESENCE AND ABSENCE**

In his exploration of "mess in social science research", John Law, in post-ANT mode, resorts to an idea of "method assemblage", defining it as the bundling or crafting of "ramifying relations" that shape, mediate and separate representations and objects into the visible "in-here", and the seen and unseen "out-there". Foreground implies Background. Some things are highlighted; some things receive little or no attention, or are deliberately forgotten. The characterisation is reminiscent of and has antecedents in the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl (1938, 1970), and in much earlier debates (Shapin, 1996). In the "praxiological

coupling of material relations with mathematical forms" Galileo's perfect curves have a forgotten genealogy, "indifferent to human historicity and purpose" (Lynch, 1993, p. 119). The actual work involved is made invisible, and tricky to reproduce.

Law then draws on post-structuralist vocabulary to characterise method assemblage further as "the enactment of *presence*, *manifest absence*, and *absence as Otherness*" (Law, 2004, p. 84):

*Method assemblage becomes the crafting or bundling of relations or hinterland into three parts: (a) whatever is in-here or present; (b) whatever is absent but also manifest in its absence; (c) whatever is absent but is Other because, while it is necessary to presence, it is not or cannot be made manifest.*

Both the Other and the Manifest Absent are necessary to Presence, but sometimes that which is evident disappears in Otherness "because what is being brought to presence and manifest absence cannot be sustained unless it is Othered" (p. 85) – much of the social and cultural context, perhaps.

Another way of putting it is that any assemblage is the result of considerable collective effort, some acknowledged (brought to Presence), most of it not, most of the time. The precise nature of this effort is a matter of some interest. The process of assemblage is also about "crafting and enacting of boundaries" between categories and "normative methods [that] try to define and police boundary relations in ways that are tight and hold steady" (p. 85). This suggests that the *methods* through which categories are negotiated are important to be aware of.

What Law is after is social science Method but, from his examples alone, his discussion has a wider reach. To anyone aware of ethnomethodology, with its preoccupation with identifying the "immense variety of discursive and embodied practices" that constitute human affairs (Lynch, 1993, p. 297), this is familiar stuff. It directs us

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