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INTRODUCTION

Actor-Network Theory (ANT) was originally developed in the context of social theory and research concerned with the study of science. ANT’s most prominent and rather innovative claim is to include objects and other non-human entities as thoroughly acting social entities in such networks. Furthermore, the protagonists of ANT, most prominently represented by Bruno Latour, Michel Callon, John Law, Annemarie Mol and Madeleine Akrich, consider human and non-human actors as mutually shaping, transforming and translating each other. One of the central and most controversial methodological concepts of ANT is to treat the distinction between such categories as “social,” “nature” and “technology” as explanandum and not as explanans. Thus, in contrast to “classical” sociologies as represented for example by Émile Durkheim, Pierre Bourdieu or David Bloor, the premise of each Actor-Network Theory study primarily is to avoid an explanation of nature via social factors as well as an explanation of society via natural or technological factors. Instead, Actor-Network Theory insists on avoiding such a prioris and rather analyzes the translational processes in which such dichotomies and asymmetries are produced, established and (de)stabilized. In addition, the focus on “actors” and “action” requires the observer to take into account the processes of distributing agency between heterogeneous elements (or actors respectively) that take place in the practice of (actor-)networking Basing their research premises on such extraordinary theoretical and methodological premises and given the general nature of Actor-Network Theory, this approach caught the attention of various fields of research. A look at the International Journal of Actor-Network Theory and Technological Innovation (IGI Global) – a quarterly journal that gathers different subject-specific case studies based on ANT – proves the general and variegating applicability of ANT: studies on information systems, service innovation, healthcare, internet usage, E-banking, digital audio players, higher education, gender and technology, architecture, stock exchange, consumer culture, media theory, waste management – a list that can be expanded when looking at recent studies in such research fields as geography, design, medicine, literacy, anthropology – and last but not least various aspects of contemporary Media Studies such as film production, media theory or media aesthetics.

Interestingly, in recent Media Studies research the argument was made that Actor-Network Theory has always included an implicit media theory, because translational processes depend on mediators respectively media to communicate and to negotiate between entities. As a number of case studies and theoretical accounts show, Actor-Network Theory can serve as a productive theoretical approach to understanding media, its uses and the processes of mediation which constitute networks. This was also supported by the argument that a lot of the early representative ANT case studies actually deal with media, such as for example the laboratory studies by Bruno Latour and Steve Woolgar, which focus on the scientific media of representation. Consequently, Actor-Network Theory is predestined for a media theoretical reevaluation and application in case studies.
While some consider this new focus on ANT within Media Studies a mere “trend”, others even think of it as a “paradigm shift”. In any case, a large number of papers, conference topics, workshops and university classes are dedicated to the interactions, prospects and possible problems of ANT as a theoretical and methodological approach to Media Studies. Surprisingly the discussion on this topic has not yet been summarized and the different (national) strands of argumentation have not yet brought together in one comprehensive edited book.

In this respect the proposed publication will deal with this topic in detail: Besides an overview of the state of research on this topic, the publication will feature a range of case studies on different types of media and fields of Media Studies (Film Studies, Production Studies, Visual Cultural Studies, Games Studies etc). In addition to this it will feature theoretical and methodological implications of ANT for Media Studies as well as any discrepancies between the (diverging) fields of study. Discussions of internationally diverging approaches to Media Studies in relation to ANT will be covered as well, as there is no standardized international theory or approach to media. However, Actor-Network Theory is by no means unproblematic as far as certain theoretical (and implicit political or ethical) stances are concerned.

TARGET AUDIENCE

Applying the Actor-Network Theory in Media Studies provides the function of an introductory reading for advanced classes in Media Studies, Social Studies and Science and Technology Studies as it summarizes the state of research on Actor-Network Theory and Media Studies. However, the publication goes beyond an introduction to the topic as its featured contributors will reflect upon and test specialized areas of application of Actor-Network Theory that have not yet been researched in academic discourse and allow for new strands of discussion in the international field of Media Studies. It can thus also be used as a reference for state of research conferences, books, and university courses.

As Actor-Network Theory has proven to be an approach that can be used in a variety of fields of research and since Media Studies itself is a heterogeneous and interdisciplinary field of research the target audience of the book may include researchers in such fields as Sociology of Media, Communication Studies, Media Production Studies, Media Philosophy, Cultural Studies, Political Sciences and several areas of Media Studies dealing with certain types of media or the analysis of specific kinds of cultural artifacts (such as Film Studies, Visual Cultural Studies, Game Studies, Disability Studies). And, as there is no internationally standardized theory or method of Media Studies, the book is decisively directed to an international audience.

CHAPTERS

The book Applying the Actor-Network Theory in Media Studies, which includes 16 chapters, is divided into three general sections: 1. Introduction and Theoretical Concepts, 2. Case Studies, 3. Criticizing Actor-Network Theory and Media Studies. However, this categorization is merely a heuristic means. Not only do the theoretical and critical approaches to Actor-Network Theory and Media Studies include case studies or decisive objects of research, but also do the case studies locate their objects of research within certain theoretical and methodological concepts.
The first section inaugurates with an introductory chapter by Markus Spöhrer: “Applications of Actor-Network Theory in Media Studies: A Research Overview.” 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.

The second chapter by David J. Krieger and Andréa Belliger with the title “The End of Media: Reconstructing Media Studies on the Basis of Actor-Network Theory” deals with the network society and the age of media convergence: In contemporary culture and media theory, media production can no longer be isolated into channels, formats, technologies, and organizations. Media Studies is facing the challenge to reconceptualize its foundations. The authors therefore claim that new media are the last media. In the case of digital versus analog, there is no continuity between new media and old media. A new and promising proposal has come from German scholars who attempt the precarious balance between media theory and a general theory of mediation based on Actor-Network Theory. Under the title of Actor-Medien-Theorie (German, translates “Actor-Media-Theory”) these thinkers attempt to reformulate the program of Media Studies beyond assumptions of social or technical determinism. Replacing Actor-Network Theory with Actor-Media Theory raises the question of whether exchanging the concept of “network” for the concept of “media” is methodologically and theoretically advantageous.

The third chapter in the theoretical section is provided by Andrea Seier’s “From Intermediality to Intermateriality: Actor-Network Theory as a ‘Translation’ of Post-Essentialist Media Studies.” This chapter discusses Actor-Network Theory in the context of post-essentialist theories in Media Studies. In doing so, the similarities and differences between different models and concepts will be taken into consideration, such as assemblage and actant networks. The chapter argues that instead of replacing models of micro-political analysis of media with ANT, it should rather be combined with such in a productive way. This argument will be put to the test by using the example of the remote control.

In the fourth chapter, Joost van Loon discusses “The Subject of Media.” On the basis of the example of the rise of “the selfie,” van Loon critically considers the issue of the Subjects of (and in) Media Studies. He argues that the reason why Actor-Network Theory has thus far not been widely accepted within this field has been its adherence to the Latour’s and Callon’s “Principles of Generalized Symmetry” and “Free Association.” That is to say: Actor-Network Theory categorically refuses subsuming properties of entities to abstractions such as nature, society or technology. On the contrary, Media Studies have doggedly adhered to privileging “the Human” as its subject of analysis. On the basis of a critique of transcendental phenomenology, which has been specified by a critical discussion of McLuhan’s famous edict “media are extensions of man”, the chapter exposes the empirical fallacy of granting the human subject a status of exception and instead proposes an empirical metaphysics based on “prehension” as an alternative. This, it is argued, will enable forms of media analyses that can be both radically empirical and politically engaged.

In the last chapter of the first section, Jan Teurlings poses and discusses the question “What Critical Media Studies Should Not Take From Actor-Network Theory.” While supportive towards a certain rapprochement between Media Studies and Actor-Network Theory Teurlings identifies three main characteristics of the Latourian enterprise that critical Media Studies should avoid if it wants to remain its critical edge: firstly a methodological descriptivism that relies on the victor’s account, secondly a
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rejection of the notion of structure, and thirdly an innovative yet limited notion of intellectual work. The chapter next articulates a perspective on how a “weak” version of ANT can augment critical Media Studies while retaining the latter’s strong dedication to changing an unjust social order.

The second section begins with a chapter by Markus Spöhrer, discussing “A Cyborg Perspective: The Cochlear Implant and Actor-Networking Perception.” Spöhrer’s paper focuses on the man-machine relationships between the cochlear implant – a neural prosthesis designed to “cure” deaf or hard-of-hearing persons – and its wearers as a contemporary form of cyborgization. The research object will be Michael Chorost’s biographical account of his implantation and adaption to the implant. In a theoretical section of the paper Spöhrer argues that Actor-Network Theory can function as a “cyborg perspective,” which allows for describing the symbiosis between the implant and Chorost as a practice of reciprocal “tuning” and the processual production of perception as a complex relationship between technical object, human body and environment. Based on Actor-Network Theory’s concept of “symmetry,” technical object, the biochemical activities of the human body and their relation to a presumed “outside” environment are equally involved and constituted. Finally, the chapter suggests that this specific relationship can be paralleled with the concept of mediality as it has been discussed in the German-speaking academic context.

The seventh chapter of this book and the second chapter of the case studies section deals with “Actor-Network Theory and Media Studies: Performing the Story of Local Television” by Emma Hemmingway. In this chapter, Hemmingway narrates the complex story of a current process of innovation within a particular newsroom. A series of empirical observations reveal how Actor-Network Theory can be effectively engaged in reading media processes and media innovation. In addition, Hemmingway also provides 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. Hemmingway argues 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.

The next chapter in this section, “Applying Actor-Network Theory in Production Studies: The Formation of the Film Production Network of Paul Lazarus’s Barbarosa (1982)” by Markus Spöhrer, explores the possibilities of ANT as an approach to Production Studies. On the basis of a detailed production log written by producer Paul Lazarus, the coming-into-being of the film Barbarosa (1982) is described by Spöhrer. By applying ANT, the assemblies of the film production, the hybrid networks and interconnections, which are established by human and non-human actors alike, are dealt with. Spöhrer argues that production is not a one-sided process of inscriptions by humans on non-human actors. Rather, it needs to be thought of as a reciprocal process of inscribing and acting. Finally, Spöhrer discusses the “effects,” which are produced by approaching film with ANT and draws conclusions as to how the theoretical scope of Production Studies needs to be modified: Films can be understood as “epistemic things” that are produced and produce themselves in reciprocal processes. They translate themselves into other networks after postproduction and are thus constantly subject to translational processes and not endlessly stable.

Chapter 9, Sara M. Strandvad’s “Anaphoric Trajectories of Creative Processes: The Case of a Failed Film Project” can be considered an Actor-Network Theory inspired approach to Film Production Studies or Cultural Production Studies as well. Arguing that an application of a fixed ANT-approach fundamentally opposes the ambition of Actor-Network Theory, Strandvad outlines a different way of drawing inspiration from ANT. Based in the writings of the French cultural sociologist Antoine Hennion, who
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has been a pioneer in developing a cultural sociology inspired by ANT, and the recent writings of Bruno Latour addressing cultural production, the chapter suggests investigating the “anaphoric trajectories” of creative development processes. To illustrate this approach, the chapter analyzes the case of a failed film project and considers how the content of creative production processes may be incorporated into Cultural Production Studies.

The next chapter, “To Be as Real as Possible: The Actor-Network of Status YO! and the Production of HipHop Authenticity,” is provided by Markus Spöhler. In this chapter an effort is made to describe the film production network of the German “HipHop film” Status YO! (Till Hastreiter, 2004) and the related attribution and production of “authenticity.” However, film production will neither be considered a process in which human entities are the sole manufacturers of a stable cultural artifact. Nor will film production be reduced to the classical triad of preproduction, shooting and postproduction. Rather, from an ANT perspective, the production of a film is a continuous process of translation, inscriptions and negotiations that exceed postproduction. Additionally a multitude of heterogeneous actors are involved in this processual production of the film and authenticity respectively, such as academic writing, audience responses, film critical reception, historical and cultural discourses, and also other films.

The section continues with Harald Waldrich’s ANT inspired Game Studies chapter on “The Home Console Dispositive: Digital Games and Gaming as Socio-Technical Arrangements.” Waldrich focuses on the home console dispositive of the SONY Playstation in relation to digital games. The concept of the “dispositive” functions as a basis for the conceptualization of video games as an actor-network or a socio-technical arrangement respectively. This allows for an analysis and a description of various actors and their reciprocal relationships as well as the mutual process of fabrication of these actors in such video game networks. The historical development of the SONY Playstation system will serve as the primary example for these heterogeneous ensembles, whereby the main focus will be placed on one single-player game series, Grand Theft Auto, and one multi-player game series, the soccer simulations of the FIFA series.

The case studies section closes with a chapter “On Habit and Fiction in Latours’ Inquiry and Fictional Knowledge on Habit in Proust’s Recherche” by Michael Cuntz. Cuntz describes how Latour’s Inquiry into Modes of Existence undertakes a re-evaluation of both modern ontology and ANT: Adding qualitative differentiation to quantitative network analysis is tantamount to the outline of a pluralist ontology distinguishing a variety of different modes of being in the world. The aim is to make more space in order to provide proper accommodation for all entities, especially for those a monist ontology could not account for. Both habit [HAB], and [FIC], fiction, are modes that deserve a particular amount of space; [HAB] due to its all-pervasiveness in everyday courses of action, [FIC] due to its crucial role in anthropogenesis and its vital importance for many other modes. Nonetheless, there is an opposite tendency to restrict the possibilities of these modes. This is elucidated by Cuntz first by comparing [HAB] with other philosophical assessments of habit and [FIC] with Serres’ readings of works of art and literary texts, and second via a confrontation of [FIC] and [HAB] with Proust’s In Search of Lost Time, a work of fiction inquiring deeply into the workings of habit.

The third section and the last four chapters deal with criticism and potential problems of Actor-Network Theory in Media Studies. The section opens with Beate Ochsner’s “Talking about Associations and Descriptions or A Short Story about Asssociology.” In 1999, Bruno Latour advocated for “abandoning what was wrong with ANT, that is ‘actor’, ‘network,’ ‘theory’ without forgetting the hyphen.” However, according to Ochsner, it seems that the “hyphen,” which brings with it the operation of hyphenating or connecting, was abandoned too quickly. If one investigates what something is by asking what it is
meant as well as how it emerges, by (re-)tracing the strategy in materials in situated practices and sets of relations, and, by bypassing the distinction between agency and structure, one shifts from studying “what causes what” to describing “how things happen.” This perspective not only makes it necessary for Ochsner to clarify the changing positions and displacements of human and non-human actors in the assemblage, but, also question the role (the enrolment) of the researcher him/herself. Consequently, Ochsner asks: What kind of “relation” connects the researcher to his/her research and associates him/her with the subject, how to describe his/her own involvement, and, to what degree s/he ignores the relationality of his/her writing in a “sociology of association”? The section continues with “A Critique of Operativity. Notes on a Technological Imperative” by Dieter Mersch. The concepts of “operation” and “operational sequences” are central for Actor Network Theory. They have also become key-terms for Cultural and Media Studies and in specific the so-called German Media Theory. However – and this is the thesis of Mersch’s chapter – whoever starts with the assumption of operativity or privileges operational sequences in the context of cultural practices is already treading on the ground of the technical and thus has accepted what they set out to prove: the interpretation of culture solely on the basis of technical approaches and the prerequisite of an a priori of technique. Instead Mersch’s chapter insists on the difference between operation and practice which serve as a criterion for a cultural analysis beyond any universalization of technology.

In the next chapter, “Mind the Gap: On Actor-Network Theory and German Media Theory,” Veronika Pöhnl makes an effort to discuss the relationship between Actor-Network Theory and Media Studies from a national perspective. Pöhnl discusses similarities of and differences between the epistemological premises of ANT and “German Media Theory.” The applicability of ANT for media investigations and the compatibility of ANT concepts in Media Studies have been discussed intensively for several years now. The profound similarities as well as the critical differences in the study of the material conditions of human culture have also stimulated current reconsidérations and reformulations in “Cultural Media Studies,” as German Media Theory is most commonly called in Germany. The chapter gives a brief overview on most recently published approaches to cultural techniques and intersections of Media Studies and techno-philosophy that are increasingly being translated into English and therefore also internationally accessible, alongside with the discussion concerning their compatibility with ANT.

The book closes with a chapter by Michel Schreiber with the title “ANTi-Human: The Ethical Blindspot,” who takes into account the ethical problems that are inherent in ANT’s symmetrical methodology. According to Schreiber, in his writings on the gunman Bruno Latour paraphrases the anti-human ideology of the National Rifle Association of the USA (Bruno Latour, 1994). Amongst a long list of stances one can find nonsense such as: “One is born a good citizen or a criminal. Period.” Schreiber does not suggest that Latour is an advocate in favor of the NRA’s strange cause or in favor of their ideology. Nevertheless, Schreiber uses this example to point out the biggest flaw in the so called Actor-Network Theory – or at least Latour’s ANT: The absolute ignorance to ethical doubts towards that specific approach of describing our world and what ONE calls society. Schreiber brings forth this argument using not much more than this one example, this absolute negation of ethical philosophy and humane thought. He uses a very fundamentalist approach to ethics, as it was developed by Emanuel Levinas (1988). Within this framework, Schreiber discusses why ANT may be a good tool to describe technical processes within a society, but will always fail to explain the human side of things.
CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the publication will summarize and contribute to an ongoing debate in Media Studies and Social Studies of Science. It can be considered a response to the trend in international Media Studies of discussing, testing, and expounding the problems and possibilities of approaches of Science and Technology Studies, Philosophy of Science and Sociology (specifically Actor-Network Theory) as a new theoretical and methodological paradigm for the analysis and description of media, its production, and its cultural, political and ethical and effects.

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