

Editorial Preface

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Dear Readers,

The second number of the journal 2016 edition is in your hands. It comprises four articles applying Actor-Network Theory to different fields of study – technology embedded university education policy (dropout of first year B.A. students), the governance of information technologies in particular organizational setting interacting with ‘global actors’ (out of control of the local ones), the active role of communication technologies in the process of emergence and development of critical social movements (Spanish protests from 2011), and the appreciation of famous 1981 Pulitzer awarded book of Tracy Kidder among the general public and academic communities during the last thirty years.

The papers are ordered according to the time they have arrived to the editor in their final form, after the authors have revised them according the suggestions and remarks during the review process. This may look a rather strange way of structuring, but in the absence of the special topic of the issue there is a deeper sense in it. It indicates the degree the authors have succeeded to cope with the subject matter of their analysis – the most elaborated and ready for publication papers received higher remarks by the peers hence required fewer comments and suggestions, while others needed more additional work.

Those of you who already have looked at the Table of Contents might be surprised by my claim that all four articles place the ‘actant-ness’ (or agency) of technology and materiality in general in the focus of their analysis. This is a feature of technology by its own that is always difficult to grasp and maintain through the accounts of the people who designed and worked with it without falling into various type of reductions (socio-cultural, economic, natural scientific, etc.). Let me try to prove this claim starting with the second paper – that of Lebene Soga telling us about the ‘lost soul’ of Tracy Kidder book.

The author offers us an appealing analysis of the appreciation of Kidder’s book on Tom West and his team of young graduate engineer rookies that have beaten the other team the Data General Corporation established for the design of its new 32-bits minicomputer – a team that was larger, more experienced and much better financed. This was remarkable research choice of Soga, because it is not exaggeration to say that since the early 1980s Kidder’s book embodied the ‘spirit’ of STS as newly emerging field of study. Now, more than thirty years later, it still holds much of this spirit – with its new way of looking at technology, with the deep cognitive and emotional involvement of the author in what he was observing and studying, and with the feat to write *readable* and *interesting* story away of then dominant (and still wide spread) reflexive and methodologically overloaded post-modernist style.

Collecting 228 ‘reviews/analysis/commentaries’ of the book written between 1981 and 2013 and analyzing them through the lenses of sound qualitative methodology,¹ Soga reveals some persisting patterns in this appreciation, including the clear difference between reviews written for general public literature and those in the specialized academic journals. There is much to be added in or discussed about Soga analysis, but the piece of gemstone is there – do not fully believe to the great commentators and academics when they are explaining us what the author (Kidder) is really telling us; do not fully believe when later on Kidder himself is telling us what he has really written about. The great novel, similarly to the great new machines, is always hiding something inside and often the most trivial and banal things about it surface first. Why, asks Soga, it was only Bruno Latour and fewer ANT students who for more than thirty years saw in Kidder’s book a story about the proper agency of a machine? And why for the most of the reviewers it remained a story about the ability of US company to respond to growing pressure of Japanese productivity and innovations, about the invention of new

practices of corporate management, and most of all about human (individual or collective) heroism and the refusal to be defeated by a machine... Yes, the agency of machines submerges deep enough indeed, and it is not easy to grasp it.

Strangely, this claim is even more pronounced in the first article of this issue, devoted to the impact of B.A. students 'first year experience' (FYE) on the retention in or dropout of the university. Applying ANT methodology in amazingly skillful, convincing and somewhat provocative way, the Australian researches reveal the persistent lack of sensitivity and particular 'blindness' the majority of academic analysis on FLY demonstrate towards the vast realm of materiality of students' first year experience and the forms of sociality arising around them ("relations that are formed by those with language as well as those without"). Based on recent ANT studies and particularly of John Law idea about 'performativity' of social researches, Rowan, Bigum and Larkin were able to question 'FLY hinterland' and ask what it was 'disallowing, othering and rending invisible'. Reflecting their own practices in studying FLY, as well those of other researchers, the authors arrive at what they call 'a modest proposal for reassembling FLY studies'. It is worth reading these pages, because they reach well beyond the particular interest in this field. In fact, borrowing from analysis of Law, Mol and related researchers, but also from latest writings of Howard S. Backer, Fenwick and Edwards and others, they elaborate their original methodology for studying areas like education and policy that traditionally are considered relatively away from main-stream ANT research.²

The third paper analyses the important role the communication technologies played in the establishment of what the authors call 'horizontal democracy' during the protest movement in Spain in 2011 and the years that followed. Simone Belli and Juan Aceros use the category of 'trust relationships' to frame the core processes in the Spanish social protests and to unveil and trace the unique intertwining of 'attachment and technology'. The protestors begun with skillful use of capitalist corporations designed technology (Facebook, Twitter), move to SMS, then the P2P based networking and sharing of resources, to find eventually its proper tool in open-source software - Mumble, initially designed for gamer's communities. Although not directly related, an attentive reader could find interesting parallels with ongoing project, presented in the article of Fernando Toro and Arthur Tatnall in the previous issue in the journal, and analyzing how Mapuche students in Chile have shaped information and communication technologies to meet their cultural, educational, in work or other needs (IJANTTI, Vol. 8, Issue 1).

Belli and Aceros study is also based on qualitative methodology combining ANT approach (especially Latour's latest idea about technology as 'unexpected detour we have to take in order to exist') with Schraube analysis of the role of subjective first-person experience in assessing new technology. Among the interviews with the leaders and ordinary members of the protest movement, the authors had the chance to meet a person who was in the center of the protests since its earlier days. He played important role in implementing and adapting number of communication technology during the months and years that followed. Thus the core of the paper looks like a Goffman style micro analysis, where by analyzing the recollections of their informant Belli and Aceros were able to draw a detailed and intriguing story about 'technology & social movement in the making'. Taking up on him the local coordination of protests and facing the challenge of ever increasing communication and information load, the informant became self-made expert in communication technology. Together with people around him were able to respond to the ongoing challenges by experimenting and tinkering with different 'on the shelf' communication tools, adapting and even co-designing them to match both the needs and core values of protest movement.

The last paper of the volume studies the governance of information technologies in particular organizational setting interacting with 'global actors'. Hsbollah, Simon and Letch depart from the persistent division between IT governance (ITG) with its various arrangements and the problems of IT infrastructure as such they observed in the analyzed literature. Concluding that 'there have been little attention given to the link between ITG arrangements and IT infrastructure' and that the studies have adopted rather static perspective on ITG implementation, they use ANT approach to

elaborate a common theoretical framework for the analysis of the dynamic relationships between ITG and organizations' information technology investments. The paper discusses the ways to study the mechanism of possible alignment of interests between relevant actors with the key assumption that ITG 'embodies the characteristics of the social and material assemblages that continuously emerge over the time'. The authors claim that ANT allows explaining the efforts of ITG actors "to maintain their networks of association, as well as highlight how management deals with the changes in the business environment".

In fact, the paper can be viewed as an attempt to further develop one of the popular theoretical model in the field of ITG, that of Van Grembergen and De Haes by incorporating both the material (IT infrastructure) and social (actors' interactions) perspectives. To his end it combines three different ideas of ANT literature: Latour's classical definition of actor-network as group of heterogeneous actors with alignment of interests and firmly attached together; Law's notion of 'punctualisation', i.e. the reduction of complexity in the process of interaction, when an entire network is considered as single actor; and Callon and Law local/global network analysis developed in their joint paper from 1992. Thus by studying the negotiations and alignment of interests between global and local actors the authors offer a framework for identifying the milestones of ITG implementation and to map the ongoing ITG trajectory, that takes into account 1) how global network provides resources for an expected return and 2) the ability of local actors to develop their IT project based on these resources, as well as the project's capacity 'to establish obligatory passage points that link global and local networks'.

I will end this introduction with the conclusion that the four papers of this issue demonstrate once more both the scope and the power of ANT approach. And I would like to make a more general remark by stating that there are signs of new challenges emerging to the actor-network theory and its application in the studying technological innovations and in other fields. Challenges that stems from new philosophical and theoretical developments – for example the open challenge to ANT coming from the rising speculative realism & object oriented philosophy or the renewed interest to the ideas of Marshall McLuhan, to mentions just a few. There are challenges stemming from the newly and rapidly developing technology fields such as artificial intelligence, additive technologies, renewable energy, aerospace, etc. However, it is worth to test the explanatory power of ANT in the description and analysis of the growing societal challenges such as global migration, persisting alienation of the global financial system from some basic social and human values that it adhered during the earlier centuries of modern era, the new rise of authoritarian/totalitarian regimes, of populist, xenophobic and racist movement.

IJANTTI welcomes papers addressing these topics, including the proposal for special thematic volumes on it.

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ENDNOTES

¹ I do appreciate his excellent arguments about *Homo fabulans* and the crucial role the good, well written and well told, stories play in our constitution as human being and of the collectives we live in. I do believe this is exemplified by ANT community (and more generally the community of STS scholars) with the paradigmatic stories written by the ANT founding fathers. Many years ago, referring to sociological community, Robert Merton also pointed at it in his famous introduction to '*Social Theory and Social Structure*.'

² I would like to mention here the important works of Jonathan Tummons, who also applied ANT approach in his ethnographic studies in the field of university education.