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“Challenging the ‘New Descriptivism’: Restoring Explanation, Evaluation, and Theoretical Dialogue to Communication Research.”

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Given time constraints, I will cut to the chase. I’ve been asked to stir things up a bit, so I’ll see what I can do.

We’ve just heard two excellent ANT (actor-network theory) papers (Joshua Braun; Burcu Baykurt) and two excellent systems/institutional theory papers (Hannah Middendorf; Lucas Graves and Magda Konieczna).

This seems like a good opportunity to put these different approaches in dialogue. And to do so, I’d like to raise four big meta-questions:

First, where is the explanation?

Second, why should we care – what is at stake?

Third, how should we see society – as settled or unsettled?

And fourth, is it possible for ANT and institutional theories to work productively together – or are we faced only with the choices of mutual indifference or all-out-war?

Let’s start with the first question. Where is the explanation?

In other words, as we saw with some of the papers in this session, the research starts and ends with a descriptive account. We wait in vain for the explanatory analysis. Why? Why these findings and not others? The answers never arrive.

I call this the “new descriptivism.”

I can’t prove it with quantitative evidence, but I’ve begun to notice a widespread tendency of more and more research offering descriptions and nothing else: very detailed, very sophisticated, very interesting descriptions, but at the end of the day, just descriptions. What has happened to explanation? (And, related, as I’ll ask in a moment: what has happened to critique?)

I can think of several reasons, not necessarily good reasons, but reasons nonetheless for the lack of explanatory analysis in so much of our contemporary research:

First, people are overwhelmed with “big data” or they’re geeking out on the new computer tools they can use to map and track this data. In this context, it makes eminent sense to begin with description and get around to explanation later. But there is so much to describe – and so much to turn into nifty visual graphs and charts – that the moment for explanation never seems to arrive.

Second, there is a lack of variation incorporated into research design. To explain, you need variation. When we explain, usually what we’re doing is saying that more or less of x contributes to more or less of y. And if you don’t have variation built into your research design, you can’t do that.

Third, people are working with theories that are antithetical to explanation, understood as I’ve just defined it, such as:

- Holistic, totalizing theories, like Foucault’s neo-liberal governmentality – in this case, the description and explanation are basically the same; or
- Theories of contingency and chaos and flux, heterogeneity (to use the ANT term), and unpredictability – in which case, everything is so unstable and unpredictable that nothing can be explained; or
- Epistemologically relativistic theories, such as ANT: in other words, to explain, some accounts must be privileged over others, and this is precisely what ANT not only will not but cannot do, given its epistemology.

Let me expand on this last point about epistemology, specifically in relation to actor-network theory. As Joshua Braun mentioned in his talk, there is a strong link between ANT and STS “controversy studies.”

What does ANT mean by controversy studies? Well, it has a close cousin in sociology – and that cousin is what is called the social construction of “social problems” or “social constructionism” (or sometimes social “constructivism”) for short.

There are two broad strains of social constructionism:

1) Strict constructionism (represented most notably by Stephen Woolgar, who not coincidentally has co-authored with Bruno Latour): social reality in media and other public forums is constructed by discourses or in turn by interpretive communities; given that we know that all knowledge is constructed, no construction can be privileged over another; hence, the role of the analyst is to try to faithfully catalogue the array of constructions.

and

2) Contextual constructionism (represented most notably by Joel Best): social construction of public problems in media and other public forums has to be situated in a context. For example, the social construction of the immigration problem, as with research for my book *Shaping Immigration News: A French-American Comparison*, should be understood in relation to the economy, political events,

unemployment, immigration flows, etc. Of course, these kinds of official and expert discourses are also constructions, and contested ones, but nevertheless we privilege some of them (with all due skepticism) as part of the explanation of why some constructions win out over others in the public debate.

Now there are many varieties of contextual constructionism. There is the almost ad hoc kind favored by Best, the value-added model of William Gamson (social movement strategies, media logics, cultural resonances, objective factors), and there is the “structural constructionism” represented by institutional and field theories. What all of these “contextual” accounts have in common is that they do not “level” the social world and treat all accounts equally; they privilege some accounts over others in order to arrive at explanations.

So to bring this back around to ANT and institutional/field theories.

Clearly, ANT is a version of strict constructionism. ANT does not privilege one account over another. Latour, and John Law, are very explicit about this. It’s part of their credo of keeping the world flat. And this is one of the key reasons why ANT is so unsatisfying to anyone who reads it looking for anything in the way of explanation. It’s just not there and it’s not there by design.

On the other hand, institutional/field theories are versions of contextual constructionism – with the virtue of offering the kind of systematic “systemic” context needed for effective cross-national research.

ANT has the virtue of raising epistemological questions directly and of offering a consistent epistemology. ANT shifts the burden of justification to those who do want to explain, who do want to judge. If we want to explain and judge, we have to make the case for how any particular disposition from a position – how any socially-produced form of knowledge – is superior to someone else’s. Bourdieu makes the case with his notions of autonomy and reflexivity. Most of us simply bracket or ignore the question and carry on with our research.

For the moment, ANT-style relativism seems to be in vogue. In terms of epistemological consistency, again, there is an argument for such relativism. But, let’s be clear, there is a cost:

The cost is: First, no explanations – that would privilege some accounts over others. And second, no evaluations – nothing is better or worse than anything else.

Which leads me to my second big question, very briefly.

Why should we care – what’s at stake?

ANT studies don’t – won’t – answer this question. In return, one might respond: Why should we care about ANT?

(There might still be some reasons – I’ll return to this at the end.)

Moving on quickly, third big question: What is our basic understanding of society? Is society’s default position settled or unsettled?

Most institutional and field approaches presume settledness. What has to be explained is how things ever get unsettled.

There are periodic moments of crisis and contestation. Somebody’s solution wins out. The solution is anchored in institutions over time through path dependency; it gets naturalized so no one can imagine an alternative – until the next crisis appears and then there is the small possibility of change. Fligstein and McAdam (*A Theory of Fields*) are very explicit about this.

We see this presumption in the research question posed by Lucas Graves and Magda Konieczna’s paper: Under what conditions is it possible to “unsettle previously stable arrangements”?

Alternatively, ANT presumes unsettledness: society is fundamentally unsettled and the production of order is the miracle we have to explain.

Braun, quoting John Law: “How is it that some kinds of interactions appear to succeed in stabilizing and reproducing themselves”?

So is the glass half-full or half-empty? The two approaches differ in which half of the glass they want to call attention to.

This would be okay if there were occasional nods to the other half, but in fact, the accounts tend to be one-sided.

Which leads me to my fourth and final question: Can ANT and institutional/field theories play nice – or not?

Yes, I think they can play nice. We’ve played nice this afternoon and all of these papers in this panel stress the need to bring multiple strains of theory together.

I want to close by listing four possible ways in which ANT and institutional/field theories can be complementary to each other: 1) temporal, 2) spatial, 3) topical, and 4) analytical.

The first is a temporal division of labor. The argument is that historical conditions make one approach more appropriate than another. We hear this argument often made for ANT but actually I think it’s the weakest possible argument.

In effect, when times are settled, we need institutional theories; when times are unsettled, as they are now, we need an unsettled theory like ANT.

For instance, Josh Braun argues that ANT is the best model for studying certain kinds of media work that now seem on the ascendance, the kind described by Mark Deuze as “project-based” liquid journalism.

Again, I’m not convinced by this argument. Things seem unsettled – at least to some scholars and journalists - but are they really that unsettled, overall, for other people, for most people?

Several studies have shown in fact that journalistic norms and practices have not changed that much in the aggregate.

So we need to keep this question of the unsettledness of this historical moment “open” - and not let our theories prejudice the answers.

In fact, far from historical conditions demanding a certain theory, I would caution that the seeming appropriateness of some new theory might mask “ideological effects.” ANT may actually be the least appropriate theory to analyze new developments in media, precisely because it valorizes and legitimizes a view of the world – of rapid change, innovation, agency – consistent with the worldview and interests of powerful interests in Silicon Valley, Wall Street, and Washington, D.C.

Maybe, either way, we just find what we’re looking for – settledness or unsettledness. But going in, if possible, rather than presuming the correctness of one or the other theory, we should see ANT and institutional/field theories as competing hypotheses and then try to let the evidence speak for itself.

Now, second, to the spatial dimension – and I find this a much more compelling way to parse out distinct roles for ANT and institutional/field theories. Gil Eyal makes this argument in his essay “Fields and the Spaces Between.” He argues that society is composed of settled fields and unsettled actor-networks that are not fields or just not yet fields. I find this argument much more convincing, but we need more research to try to prove that there are actually such differentiated social spaces and that they operate according to different logics.

Third, we have the topical dimension. Fred Turner, Nick Couldry, Chris Anderson and Daniel Kreiss, and others argue that we need a theory like ANT because it calls attention to phenomena ignored by other theories, namely technical artifacts and objects, which have their own form of “agency.” I’m not entirely sure about the idea of non-human, object-based agency. But I am persuaded that ANT has played an important role in focusing attention on the power of new technologies, and in ways potentially quite useful and distinct from McLuhanist technological determinism.

Fourth, and finally, as I’ve already alluded to, there can be an analytical division of labor. We can use different theories for different purposes: descriptive, explanatory,

and normative analysis. ANT may only be descriptive, but as long as we are not relying only on ANT, this isn't a fatal flaw. We see this use of multiple types of theories in Chris Anderson's *Rebuilding the News*. He draws on ANT in the first part of his book, which has a more descriptive focus in order to call attention to the ways in which new technologies are transforming the ecology of media. Then, in the last half of the book, he uses institutional theory for explanation (explanation of persistence and lack of change in many cases) and democratic normative theory to make judgments about whether these developments are good or bad.

All such combinations of course presume heterodox rather than orthodox interpretations and uses of theory. I had a French colleague who was once introduced at some French conference as a "Bourdieu-sienne heterodox," the implication being that there was something almost wrong or weird about this. In America, maybe, we can more easily get away with being heterodox. Still, we need to be mindful of the kind of heterodoxy we pursue.

The danger with heterodoxy is taking theoretical concepts out of context and totally distorting their meaning.

The potential benefit of heterodoxy is putting theory to work so that it can open up rather than close down a dialogue with other scholars. To me, that makes a lot more sense than just staying inside our churches and speaking only to our co-religionists.

Thank you.