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After the Break

Television Theory Today

Edited by Marijke de Valck and Jan Teurlings

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Unblackboxing production

What media studies can learn from actor-network theory

Jan Teurlings

In this chapter, I argue that actor-network theory, or ANT as it is commonly referred to, has much to offer media studies. I am not the first one to suggest so. A growing number of media scholars have commented upon ANT, or have used some of its concepts in their analysis of media (e.g. Couldry 2001 and 2008; Hemingway 2009; Kendall and Wickham 2001; De Valck 2006; Muecke 2009; Bennett 2005). This chapter aims to make a contribution to this burgeoning intersection of actor-network theory and media studies, and also explain why ANT seems to be such a productive framework for understanding contemporary media. The main argument is that ANT's highly original ontology of the social yields insights into how our contemporary media 'function', and can thus help us grasp them, especially regarding media *production*. In parallel, the article argues that ANT can bring together questions and issues that previously had been scattered across the divide between political economy and cultural studies.

Within cultural studies the category of production is something of a newcomer. The reason for the late arrival of production can be explained by cultural studies' feud with political economy during the 1980s and 1990s, exemplified by Grossberg (1995), Garnham (1995), or the essays collected in the *Cultural studies in question* reader (Ferguson and Golding 1997). The arguments are well-rehearsed and only need to be mentioned in passing. Based on different readings of Marx, both approaches constructed different analytical tools for understanding media. Cultural studies foregrounded the centrality of ideology or hegemony, a textualist approach to the media, and the interpretative freedom of the audience. Political economy, on the other hand, underscored questions of ownership, institutions and regulations, and was generally less attentive towards textuality and the reception side of things. This led to a division of labour: political economy studied production, whereas cultural studies focussed on texts and reception.

However, since 2000, we have witnessed a lull in the hostilities between the two approaches. This, in turn, has led to a resurgence of production as a field of study within cultural studies. From different theoretical and political perspectives, several strains of cultural studies started to study cultural production. Roughly two main approaches can be distinguished: neo-Foucaultians and the cultural economy tradition. The neo-Foucaultians draw mostly, but not exclusively, on the latter's governmentality period, e.g. Bennett (1995), Miller (1993), Bratich, Packer, and McCarthy (2003), Ouellette (2002), Nixon (1996), Carpen-

tier (2001) and Teurlings (2004). In Foucault they found a way to break with political economy's insistence that production was, first and foremost, an economic process, determined by property relations. So-called cultural policy analyses study how culture in general, and media in particular, are used as a means to govern populations at a distance by shaping their subjectivity (e.g. Bennett, Ouellette), thus focussing on how production takes place within institutions that have the explicit aim of 'improving' the population. Others drew on Foucault's work on disciplinary power in order to study the act of production as such, without falling back on the language of political economy. Thus, Carpentier (2001) analyzes how talk shows manage their 'guests' into a discourse about participation, whereas I have analyzed how the production team of dating shows manage the participants into performing 'strong identities' (Teurlings 2004). The second cultural studies approach to media production is what has come to be known as the cultural economy tradition. Like political economy, it studies the economic and institutional context in which media production takes place but it tries to avoid the latter's tendency towards reductionism, determinism and functionalism. Examples of this tradition include the work of scholars like du Gay (1996), Nixon (1996), and Hesmondhalgh (2002). In short, in the debate between political economy and cultural studies we see two reactions from the side of cultural studies scholars. One – the neo-Foucaultian approach – has been to twist the theoretical construction around Marxism towards an essentially Foucaultian problematic of power and governmentality. The other – the cultural economy approach – largely remains within the confines of an economic approach but complements it with terms like meaning and discourse. It is in these fields of study that I want to make my intervention.

The argument will proceed as follows: first I will describe ANT's unorthodox ontology of the social, followed by a section on ANT's qualities as an analytical tool. Next, we move to the media and describe them from an ANT perspective, which differs substantially from the 'transmission model' that has underpinned research in media studies. The last two sections then focus on what the introduction of ANT could mean to media studies.

1. ANT – a very short introduction

It is impossible to do full justice in the space of this chapter to the entirety of work that can be brought together under the rubric of actor-network theory. Nor is ANT as coherent a paradigm as I will present it here.¹ This introduction will, therefore, necessarily remain sketchy, and it will often gloss too easily over topics that require better explanation. The interested reader can turn to Teurlings (2004) for a more detailed description as well as a more thorough critique of ANT.

ANT starts from, and elaborates upon, the work of Bruno Latour, a French science and technology scholar, who published his first book in France in 1978, later translated as *Science in action* ([1978] 1987). Other scholars in the field, most notably Michel Callon and John Law, soon took up his work and fur-

ther developed the theoretical framework. Once the theoretical foundations had been consolidated, ANT attracted the attention of scholars from other disciplines that used its concepts in order to study topics that were not strictly scientific or technological. By 2000, ANT had mutated into a particular ontology as well as a mode of analysis that could encompass phenomena as diverse as the similar preparations music lovers and drug users make when engaging in their preferred activity (Gomart and Hennion 1999), or the way measuring devices and economic theory work together to produce strawberry markets (Garcia 1986). We can find ANT's influence in disciplines as diverse as organization sociology, art criticism, and metaphysics.

At the core of ANT is the idea that every existing phenomenon consists of actors that operate within a network. A network is not a given but is something that has to be established. It needs to be kept together; in other words, it is a *precarious achievement*. The reason for this is that the actors in the network work together but they also have the tendency to 'drift off', or go their own way. Even those phenomena that seem very solid and unshakeable consist of bits and pieces that have to be kept together. As John Law explains:

Just occasionally we find ourselves watching on the sidelines as an order comes crashing down. Organizations or systems which we had always taken for granted – the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, or Continental Illinois – are swallowed up. Commissars, moguls, and captains of industry disappear from view. These dangerous moments offer more than political promise. For when the hidden trapdoors of the social spring open we suddenly learn that the masters of the universe may also have feet of clay (Law 1992: 379).

Insisting on the precarious nature of what appear to be 'solid structures' is not the only characteristic of ANT. It also does not distinguish between different types of actors – at least not a priori. It prides itself on being a *symmetric* approach: because, in principle, it treats all actors in the same way. Differences of scale (bigger/smaller actors), differences of kind (human/non-human actors), differences of power (more powerful/less powerful actors) are wilfully neglected and all types of actors are lumped together and analyzed as if they were all the same. The reason for this is that explanations that make a priori distinctions between actors are in danger of presupposing what has to be explained. For instance, if we presuppose that captains of industry are more powerful than a labourer that works in one of her factories, we do not understand exactly *how* this captain of industry becomes more powerful than the other.

Insisting on the fact that the less powerful also have agency within a given system or situation is a proposition most cultural studies scholars would not find difficult to agree with. After all, that is what the Fiske-de Certeau tradition has been arguing for a long time (e.g. de Certeau [1974] 1984; Fiske 1987, 1989). More controversial, however, is the argument that not only humans 'act' but that also non-humans (objects, theories, ideas, knowledges, competences) are actors in their own right. A moving car, for example, is usually seen as being driven by the driver behind the steering wheel. But think about that driving car and elimi-

nate the gasoline from the actor-network² ‘driving car’. It is clear that the driver would not be doing much driving if there was no gasoline in the gas tank. Hence, for ANT, gasoline is an actor: it *does* something within the actor-network ‘driving car’, and this actor is indispensable in order for the actor-network to function. The same goes for the wheels: they are equally important actors, because without wheels the car would not be able to move forward (although wheels and gas do entirely different things in the network). Similarly, the embodied knowledge of how to drive a car is also an actor: if the driver would be a three-year old child, or a medieval journeyman miraculously transported to 2011, an otherwise perfectly capable car would not ‘be driven’. In short, the actor-network ‘driving car’ consists of several actors, human and non-human alike, who all ‘collaborate’ and play their part. Networks are therefore always *materially heterogeneous*: they consist of humans and objects, but also of embodied knowledges or competences (knowing which pedal does what, coordination of hands and feet, ...).

The example of the driving car is simple but effective in that it shows how non-humans play their part in human activities. Moreover, it shows that every actor-network is a precarious achievement, since actors tend to drift off: gasoline has the tendency to be consumed while driving the car (destructive consumption), tyres are subject to wear and tear or need to be inflated, drivers tend to get tired, and engines require maintenance in order to remain functional. In other words, a driving car is not only an accomplishment, it also requires *work* in order to remain ‘functioning’.³ In ANT terms, this means that mobilization of actors is never final, and that even relatively stable actor-networks require work in order to keep their actors aligned. ANT’s ontology comes close to an *entropic* viewpoint, in that it sees the world as being composed of bits and pieces that can be mobilized but they also have the tendency to drift off, dissent or form part of alternative actor-networks.

2. A mechanics of power

Apart from its surprising ontology, ANT has also developed a vocabulary that is particularly apt for describing how networks are kept together. The symmetrical approach should not be confused with the idea that every actor occupies equal power positions – to do so would make ANT a pluralist approach, which it is not. Instead, ANT uses concepts that analyse *how* certain actors are able to impose their definition of the network, thus keeping the other actors aligned. Because of this preference for how questions, rather than why questions, John Law describes ANT as ‘a mechanics of power’ (Law 1992: 380): it is a method that allows us to analyze and describe power relationships. For the purpose of this paper, we will examine three terms: the *translator-spokesperson*, *obligatory passage points* and *immutable mobiles*.

The *translator-spokesperson* is any actor who ‘translates’ other actors and tries to mobilize them in an actor-network. Translation is best described as the process of defining other actors, attributing roles to them, and the subsequent attempts to enrol them in a network. Examples of translator spokespersons are

the researcher writing a proposal and formulating some hypotheses on the readings audiences make of *Six Feet Under*, the doctor explaining a patient how the cancer cells will react to chemotherapy, or a US president claiming to speak for the oppressed Iraqi people. In each of these cases, we have an actor (a researcher, a doctor, a US president) claiming to speak for other actors (*Six Feet Under* viewers, cancer cells, the oppressed Iraqi people), and in the process the translator-spokesperson attributes roles to them: audience members need to be interviewed, cancer cells need to be treated, and oppressed Iraqi people need to be liberated.

From the translator-spokesperson's point of view, however, translation is a difficult and uncertain process, the outcome of which is not guaranteed. Therefore, translator-spokespersons will develop a number of strategies to reduce uncertainty and realize their programme. The construction of *obligatory passage points* (Callon 1986a, 1986b) is one such strategy. It is the processes through which certain actors make themselves indispensable in the network. Put simply, an actor will try to structure the network so that the other actors have to pass through it, thus making the obligatory passage point indispensable in the network. For example, the researcher will posit herself in the research proposal as an obligatory passage point ('if you want to know something about *Six Feet Under* viewers, I can provide it'), just like patients have to pass through the doctor's office if they want to do something about those cancer cells.

Another strategy that an actor can follow in order to maintain or set up a network is the use of what Latour (1987) calls *immutable mobiles*. These are knowledge technologies (surveys, questionnaires, accounting forms) that enable an actor to conquer time and space. Indeed, larger networks are often confronted with the spatial segregation of the different allies, so that it becomes impossible to directly control or manipulate them. The use of immutable mobiles then helps 'centres of calculation' (Latour 1987: 235) to monitor the state of the network, or as Latour puts it, they work by 'representing [the world] in its absence' (Ibid.: 247). What is important about immutable mobiles is that they are a) mobile, meaning that they can travel time and space easily; b) that they are immutable, meaning that they are standardized so that they give the calculation centre data that can be dealt with in a uniform way; and c) that the data gathered can be combined or aggregated. Immutable mobiles thus allow a centre of calculation to see a reality that was ungraspable before the advent of these knowledge technologies, and in this sense they do not merely represent reality but *enact* it.

3. Media from an ANT perspective

What would the media look like from an ANT perspective? The first point to note is that such an approach differs from the current models we – often implicitly – use for thinking about media. Despite the many criticisms of Shannon and Weaver's (1948) communication model, the extent to which the basic categories of media communication are already present in that first model are surprising: we have a sender, who sends a message, and this message arrives at a receiver. Although the terminology and theoretical concerns have considerably changed

over the last six decades the same categories have persisted throughout media studies in general, for example in the difference between textual analysis versus reception analysis, or in the categories of encoding and decoding. In other words, although many of the Shannon and Weaver's ideas about communication have been criticized (Hall's remarks in the encoding/decoding paper (1980) about 'perfectly transparent communication' were clearly aimed at them) there is nevertheless some categorical persistency on how we have thought about communication in the last sixty years. I will call this the *transmission approach* to media, because the underlying idea is that 'something' (a message, an impulse, a meaning, an ideology) is being transmitted between two partners, namely a sender and a receiver.

From an ANT perspective, with its insistence that actors need to be kept together, things look quite different. Communication is not so much the transmission of a message or an ideology; it is conceived as the establishment of a network. Or, to put it more precisely, *media communication entails the establishment of an actor-network between heterogeneous actors*. This sentence requires some explanation. First, the word 'actors'. We will focus first on what Amanda Lotz (2007) has called 'the network era' (although later on we will move to the post-network era as well). That network era is characterized by ad-funded media, a relatively low number of distribution channels and relatively large, undifferentiated mass audiences. In such an environment five types of human or organizational actors have to be patched together: a) broadcasters; b) producers; c) shows; d) audiences; and e) advertisers. Moreover, these actors are heterogeneous, or different in kind, because they differ in scale. Audiences, for example, are often counted in the hundred thousand or even millions and thus comprise many more individuals than the average production company, which typically averages around the fifties. Moreover, ANT reminds us that not only human actors play a role, and that we should also pay attention to the non-human actors, like money, shows, or audience ratings. Moreover, the actors also differ in what they *do* in the network: advertisers, for example, give money in return for contact with the audiences (or their representation in the infamous audience ratings), whereas production firms produce the programmes that consecutively attract audiences. In other words, every actor has a particular function within the network, and taking one out would change the dynamic of the network. Figure 1, below, displays schematically what the network approach looks like.

The third term that requires explanation is the idea that a network has to be *established*. Indeed, it is not a given that programme X will be able to attract large audiences – a wisdom reflected in the industry's dictum that 'you are only as good as your last success'. Similarly, if a broadcaster is unable to attract large audiences, advertisers will flock to the competition, and the broadcaster will not be able to pay a premium price to production companies, and so on. This is what I referred to earlier as the tendency of the bits and pieces of a given network to go 'their own way'. In this sense, the network-approach to media differs from a functionalist flow-chart. The latter represents a system without friction – every element 'miraculously' cooperates in the whole – whereas in a network, actors can cooperate but there is always the possibility of betrayal, as when viewers flock to the rival broadcaster, or producers sell a format to a higher bidder. In other

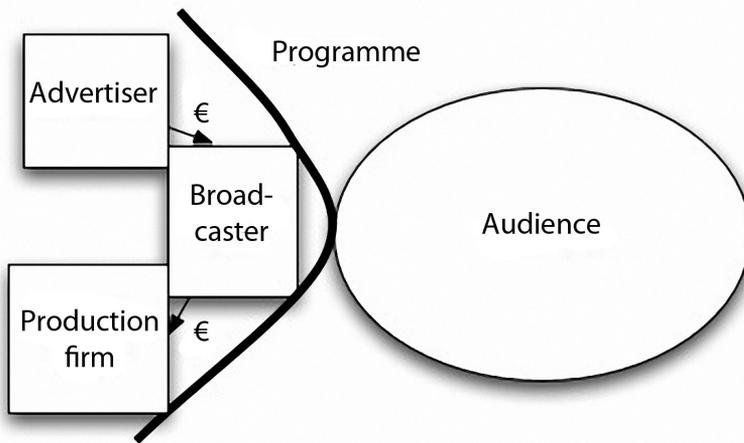


FIG. 1: A network approach to media.

words, the network approach to media production stresses that ‘communication’ is a precarious achievement that is easily disrupted.

4. The media’s mechanics of power

If, up until now, we have *described* media from ANT’s perspective, it is now time to explore what analytical purchase the theory has, and more specifically how it can help us media scholars in analyzing the relation between media and power. Take, for instance, the term *translator-spokesperson*. It is clear that Figure 1 is full of translation attempts and attempts to enrol actors. An executive producer doing a sales pitch in front of the programming director is actually constructing a programme (in the ANT meaning of the word), in which she tries to enrol, for example, the broadcaster and the audience. That is, she launches a programme in which she attributes roles to the audience (‘such and such a demographic will love this show’) and to the broadcaster (‘if you broadcast this show you will be able to sell them to advertisers’). As said, the end result is not guaranteed: translation is first an endeavour, and only later might it become ‘real’. Indeed, the history of television is scattered with shows that remained pilots and never made it onto the screen, or were never able to reach ‘acceptable’ audience ratings – acceptable to the broadcaster, that is. The broadcaster also functions as a translator-spokesperson, ordering shows that will fit the target demographics of a time slot (see Ellis 2000 and Einstein 2002 for detailed descriptions of how scheduling is done in commercial television), thus attributing not only roles to the viewers, but also to production companies and advertisers. In sum, the media network is full of *attempts at translation*, and actors habitually construct themselves as translator-spokespersons, claiming to speak for other actors.

However, if we look at the capacity to translate the other actors in the network, it is clear that not all actors are equal. Viewers, for example, only have two possibilities if they do not like a show: to change channel, or to switch off the TV. In other words, their translation capacity is very limited, or more precisely: it is merely reactive as they are not able to impact upon the show's 'content'. The broadcaster, on the other hand, is much more resourceful in translating the other actors. For example, it can force production companies to make changes to the content of a show that is low in the ratings. Similarly, advertisers have a more direct influence on the content of a show, in the form of product placements or pressure on broadcasters when a programme is deemed offensive.

The above description shows how the concept of translator-spokesperson brings differential power relationships in the media network to the fore. If it is true in principle that every actor translates the other actors in the network, it is nevertheless clear that the *institutional* actors (the broadcaster, the advertisers, the production companies) are far more successful in actualizing their projects. The non-institutional actors (mostly the dispersed viewers), to the contrary, have been assigned a place in the network that limits their capacity to translate and thus act upon the others. Already in 1974 Raymond Williams ([1974] 2003) commented upon this fundamental asymmetric structure of 'our' mass media – a structure that gives ownership of the network to institutionalized actors while limiting the options for viewers. Focusing on translation attempts, as well as the way some actors are muted at the same moment they are 'being spoken for', foregrounds these differential power relationships, and it all shows the contingency of such arrangements: there is nothing inherent in 'making television' that necessarily makes viewers into passive receivers who can only switch channels.

ANT also provides us with the means for distinguishing between the institutional actors: the concept of *obligatory passage points*. Although there is a fair degree of cooperation between the three institutional actors in Figure 1, it is clear that the broadcaster has positioned itself as the obligatory passage point through which the other two institutional actors must pass. The advertisers who want to reach viewers have to pass 'through' the broadcaster, who 'owns' both the content to attract these viewers, as well as the means for reaching them (a frequency on the analogue cable or digital network). Similarly, the production company that wants to sell its shows to viewers lacks the means to do so: the distribution channel that reaches into the homes of the viewers. What such a description shows is that the *broadcaster* occupies a particularly powerful position within the network. Through its different translation attempts it has managed to manoeuvre itself into position as the point through which the other actors have to pass.

Immutable mobile, finally, is another ANT concept that can be put to good use when analyzing production. In the media network, there are many immutable mobiles, but one in particular is rather interesting: the infamous audience ratings that are so important to broadcasters, production companies and advertisers alike. Remember that immutable mobiles are knowledge devices that allow a calculation centre to monitor the state of the network, conquering space and time and bringing the periphery into the centre. That is precisely what audience ratings do: they tell the institutional actors in the media network how many viewers are watching a show.

Moreover, audience ratings provide them with *standardized* and thus *combinable* data: rather than writing, for example, an ethnographic report of how the Jones family watched *Dexter* last night, it provides the media institutions with quantitative information on the audience (mostly the number of viewers and their social demographics) that later on can be aggregated at the level of ‘the population’. And indeed, it is exactly because the information is gathered in a standardized way that it can be combined: the information retrieved from the Jones family can be combined with those of the Carpenters, allowing the institutional actors to aggregate the data and use them to extrapolate to the entirety of the population.

Note also how the audience ratings are indeed an expression of ‘the will of the centre’: they only produce the kind of knowledge institutional actors are interested in, namely whether viewers are watching a channel or not. Any other consideration, like likeability, irritability or democratizing potentiality of the content is relegated to the domain of useless information – useless, since it is not relevant for the advertisers, who are only interested in either the sheer quantity of viewers, or specific target groups. Ien Ang’s *Desperately seeking the audience* (1991) already made this point twenty years ago, and the concept of immutable mobile allows us to better analyze how audience ratings function within the network, and what knowledge effects they have.

5. A teaching moment

The above description shows that ANT has a number of conceptual tools to offer to both political economy and cultural studies, allowing them to extend or deepen their respective analyses. For political economy, this would mean that it could use terms like obligatory passage points for analyzing what it now already does very well: investigating how the media industry ‘functions’ (in economic and organizational terms), how it is structured in such a way that some actors benefit from an arrangement more than others, as well as how they accomplish this. Stated less abstractly: consider the contemporary debate on technological convergence and how this affects the media industry (which many chapters of this book comment upon). Using ANT’s vocabulary, it is clear that the impact of technological convergence is likely to come at the detriment of the broadcaster, whose position as an obligatory passage point is challenged. The increase in distribution channels – not only their number, but also the types – deprive broadcasters of the one thing in which they excelled during the network era: exclusive access to the homes of the dispersed audience. Consumers can still ‘watch TV’, but they can also do so on their computers, on their iPods, or through websites like Youtube.com or Hulu.com. As a consequence, the broadcasters lose their position as an obligatory passage point, and in this restructuring of the network dynamics all actors try to renegotiate (in ANT speak: translate) their position within the network, and new actors enter the field. This fundamentally alters the relationship between broadcaster and content producers: the role of the latter is no longer limited to the mere supply of content to be distributed (having no influence, for

example, on the place in the schedule); they now exert far more control, not only in the editorial sense but also in terms of packaging or scheduling.

The dispersed audience gets a less reactive role in the converged media landscape. For starters, digital technology allows audience members to escape or disrupt the planned flow of broadcasters in ways that the VCR did not allow (see Gray 1992). Not only can consumers now 'timeshift', that is to say, watch their favourite TV shows at a time of their liking, they can also circumvent the media industry's system of 'planned scarcity'. P2P file sharing software does exactly that: it allows audience members to watch TV shows from the moment they have been broadcast once, neglecting geographical barriers that underpinned so many of the artificially created and maintained markets. Everybody owning a broadband connection can watch the latest TV series only hours after it has been broadcast, allowing, for example, Europeans to watch *Heroes* instead of having to wait the extra year till the US market is saturated and the European one can be conquered. Software also allows cultural consumers to cut out 'those pesky advertisements', undermining the traditional broadcaster/advertiser model where advertisements are the main source of revenue. Finally, convergence also allows audience members to more easily produce and manipulate their own content, effectively obliterating the (carefully created and maintained) gap between producers and consumers.

Youtube and P2P software demonstrate that technological convergence indeed gives audiences more capacities to translate the products of the cultural industry into their own agenda (the processes of appropriation cultural studies scholars are so fond of). But it also shows that the institutional actors are aware of the threats as well as the opportunities, and they are busy devising strategies for retaining control – and profits, of course. One such strategy is a reorientation from the traditional broadcasting-advertising model towards a multimedia/advertiser integrated model (Magder 2004). Because digital technologies allow audiences to remove the advertisements, the importance of *product placement* is on the increase, since this form of advertising cannot be removed from the content.

Within a converged media industry, then, institutional actors have more difficulties in constructing themselves as obligatory passage points, and the industry is fully aware of this new state of affairs. What broadcasters and production companies alike are trying to do instead is to construct themselves as *full-spectrum gateways*: by using as many distribution channels as possible, the aim is to attain full dominance in the popular imagination. These attempts to establish oneself as a full-spectrum gateway are accompanied by the use of *branding* as a marketing strategy, since brands are about creating loyal customers (who find their way to the branded company *despite* the increase in channels). Moreover, brands are also about the creation of a community around a common interest or 'style,' (Arvidsson 2005) which combines well with converged media's interactive properties.

What can cultural studies learn from ANT? Perhaps the single most contribution ANT has to offer is an approach that combines a view of audiences as ‘resistant’ or as not automatically complying with the roles attributed to them, while also paying attention to the *institutional* settings in which the media conduct their business. Indeed, the symmetric approach that characterizes ANT’s ontology starts from the assumption that audience members are not fundamentally different from the supposedly powerful institutions they confront, and thus it fits well with those strands of audience studies that emphasize audience activity. But ANT is also attentive to the ways that the institutional actors try to mould and shape that behaviour, to the ways that these institutional actors structure the media network and how this allows for certain interactions while blocking others – all of this happening in a provisional, non-final way. Cultural studies has often been criticized for neglecting the institutional, and thus ANT allows it to fully engage with the latter while not reducing the audience to the status of ‘cultural dupes’ of the media industries.

More specifically, I think ANT can make a valuable contribution to *production studies*, the emerging field within cultural studies that this paper started with. It is no coincidence, I think, that those cultural studies scholars who turned their attention to the production side of things either engaged in a debate with political economy (the cultural economy tradition), or took up an entirely different theoretical tradition than the structuralist-Gramscian framework that dominated research at the time (see Bennett (1998: 60-84) for an eloquent elaboration of the differences between Gramscian and Foucaultian cultural studies). The neo-Foucaultians, as I have called them above, turned to Foucault precisely because his work allowed them to break with the Marxist tradition (see, e.g. Nixon 1998: 12-13). In other words: there is within cultural studies an already-established space for studying media from an institutional perspective that is not strictly political-economic, at least not in a straightforward way. And it is within this space that ANT should thrive well.

We have seen already some examples of how these neo-Foucaultians can benefit from ANT concepts: Ien Ang’s work on audience ratings can be reread from an ANT perspective and expanded with the concept of immutable mobile; in a similar vein, ANT can and has been used to analyze the way media professionals maintain the differences between ‘the ordinary world’ and ‘the media world’, or between ‘ordinary people’ and ‘media people’ – namely by constructing themselves as an obligatory passage point (Couldry 2001; Teurlings 2004). *Governmentality* scholars like Tony Bennett or Laurie Ouellette can make good use of ANT in their analyses of governmental programmes, the ideals inscribed in them, and how they are implemented, as recent work on museums by Bennett (2004, 2005) illustrates. Indeed, what else is the museum than an immutable *immobile* that tries to translate sections of the population according to the ideals of the progressive reformers? And if *Judge Judy* tries to instil neoliberal subjectivity into its viewers, is this not a translation attempt by Judith Scheindlin to ‘govern at distance’ and thus keep several actors aligned (see Ouellette 2004)? The same goes for those television shows that explicitly aim to educate and elevate its viewers, either in a public service context (Ouellette 2002) or in the context of com-

mercial entertainment (McCarthy 2002). In all these studies, ANT can make a contribution to understanding what the ‘programme’ is, how it is being achieved (or fails to do so) and what role human and non-human actors (the studio space, the museum space and art objects, the television text) play in it.

6. Conclusion

This chapter has argued that political economy and cultural studies can make use of ANT’s concepts without having to drastically change their respective theoretical assumptions. But ANT has a potentially more radical contribution to make in that it could make the debate between political economy and cultural studies irrelevant. In such a scenario, ANT would redefine media – and thus also how we study them – in entirely new terms, not unlike my description in sections 3 and 4. It showed that ANT’s ‘flat ontology’ can be fruitfully applied to media, and that such an approach has the potential to incorporate ‘the best of both worlds’. To be more precise: such an approach is particularly suited for analyzing power relations in *institutional* settings — the reason why production studies has most to benefit from the encounter with ANT. The attention to the institutional also combines well with political economy’s tendency to focus on institutions. It does so, however, without privileging certain actors above others (powerful institutions versus weak viewers), since one of the basic assumptions of ANT is that even those actors that seem most powerful are dependent upon the will of others, and hence their victories are never final. Moreover, ANT does not discard the economic as a force structuring relationships in the network, but it does so without making it into the sole focus of attention. By doing so, ANT effectively incorporates and neutralizes the reciprocal critique of cultural studies and political economy. Making such a ‘new and improved’ media studies work, however, will require much theoretical and empirical work, and this article is intended as a first step towards it, mapping the terrain and the interconnections between approaches.⁴

Whether ANT will be taken up by media studies or not, I do not think it was picked up by accident in the current conjuncture, and that there is more to it than the latest theoretical fashion, having to do with the dramatic changes in the television industry during the last decade. Perhaps the most important of these is the proliferation of reality formats, since ordinary people often play an important role. But their participation stimulates viewers at home to question their behaviour, in terms of sincerity, authenticity or acceptability (Hill 2004; Ellis 2009). What is less noted, however, is that the very same suspicious viewer position makes viewers focus on the production process of the shows, a phenomenon I have elsewhere called ‘seeing production through the text’ (Teurlings 2010: 363-365). As a result, the television production process is opened up and made transparent, and viewers have become quite knowledgeable about how television works. If we add to this other changes in the wider culture industries, like the shifting of the burden of content production towards the users on websites like Facebook or Youtube (Van Dijck 2009), it is clear that the *zeitgeist* is focussed

on ‘how media are made’. It is in this climate of increased attention for media production that ANT’s *mechanics of power* thrives well.

Notes

1. Hetherington and Law (2000) distinguish between first and second wave ANT: whereas the first is rather managerial in orientation – the core question driving research being ‘how are networks kept together?’ – the second tries to soften ANT’s ‘male-like, hairy gorilla-like character’.
2. Every actor is always at the same time an actor-network in its own right: gasoline is composed of molecules, wheels are composed of alloy wheel hubs, rubber tyres, and so on.
3. It is for this reason that ANT scholars have a preference for case studies in which the project does not succeed, or when things disintegrate. As long as things work, actor-networks present themselves as a single functioning unity – an actor-network is then ‘punctualized’, as Law (1992) calls this. Put simply, a punctualized actor-network looks like a single entity by hiding from sight the different bits and pieces of which it is made. However, when things go wrong – e.g. the engine of the car stops functioning – what once seemed singular becomes complex: we wonder whether it is the carburettor, or the water-cooling, or the valves... In other words, the moment actor-networks disintegrate they expose the bits and pieces of which they are composed, and they reveal their heterogeneous nature. For examples of such studies, see, for instance, Latour 1996 or Law 2002.
4. This does not mean, however, that media studies *should* embark upon such a project. If this article appears to argue for the productivity of the encounter with Latour, I also want to stress that the project does not come without its dangers and pitfalls. This is not the time and place to elaborate upon these, but I hope that future work will take up the limitations of the Latourian approach, more specifically his rejection of ‘critique’ as a valid enterprise (see Latour 2004), which might sit uneasily with political economy and cultural studies’ political stance. The future will show which scenario will be able to mobilize the most and more enduring allies.

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