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ON LATOUR

Actor-Networks, Modes of Existence and Public Relations

Piet Verhoeven

Public relations plays a key role in the communication processes that forge alliances and coalitions in order to strengthen the position of the organization in society. Using the theories of the French sociologist/anthropologist/philosopher Bruno Latour, public relations practitioners can be studied as important participants in the construction of so-called actor-networks. The *Actor-Network-Theory* (ANT) of Latour is a theoretical perspective that has developed into a broader sociology of associations. Actors are studied "in action" while they are associating themselves to each other and to things (the material world), trying to form a collective with a shared definition of a common world. This often leads to controversies that are suitable circumstances to trace the history of the associations that are formed and map the present situation. The tracing of associations is the main task of the social scientist, according to Latour (2005b).

The sociology of associations has been further extended by an investigation into the modes of existence in our contemporary world. Latour and his team developed an extensive research protocol to investigate what he calls "the Moderns" and their traces (Latour, 2013a). Modern is used here in the philosophical and sociological meaning of the word, as in the modern society that came into being after the scientific revolution in the 16th century, the industrial revolution in the 19th century and the cultural revolution in the second part of the 20th century. Continuous modernization and rationalization are central to the modern world. Modernization and rationalization mean a transition from a rural traditional society into a secular, urban industrial society (Inglehart, 2001), which has not only been theorized by Latour, but also for example by Beck (see Chapter 5) and Giddens (See Chapter 10). According to the Moderns, the modern world and its inhabitants are rational and reasonable, individualized, secular, and they make clear distinctions between nature (facts) and culture (values) and between humans

and nonhumans. Latour wonders whether this modern world is so clear cut as it is presented by the Moderns. Is it only rational? Are facts and values separated? Is the division between humans and nonhumans tenable? In the framework of the AIME-project (An Inquiry into the Modes of Existence), an anthropology of the Moderns was developed to investigate the plurality of truth conditions in our world today (see Latour, 2013a and www.modesofexistence.org).

As part of economic, administrative or social-cultural organizations, public relations practitioners have played an important role as protagonists, as well as antagonists of modernization and rationalization. They are accustomed to a boundary position between both sides and are confronted with the nuances of the modern world, the plurality of truth and the strategies that are being used by all the different actors. Although concepts like network, actor and controversy are used in public relations research, Latour has a different philosophical foundation. His anthropology can be seen as a form of *constructivism* not to be confused with *social constructivism* (see below) (Latour, 2005b). Constructivism relates to the construction of facts, particularly scientific and technological facts. In the field of social studies of science and technology, constructivism means that scientific knowledge is considered as constructive instead of descriptive and that social structure is "at best the consequence but never the cause of what people do" (Hagendijk, 1990, p. 44).

In the following section, some aspects of ANT or sociology of associations and its history will be introduced and explained, before the discussion is turned to the relevance for public relations.

On the Sociology of Latour

Latour started off in the field of Science and Technology Studies (STS) as an anthropologist doing participant observation of scientists at work (Latour & Woolgar, 1979). Gradually his work built up to a more general analysis of society or the Modern Constitution as it is called in *We Have Never Been Modern: A Plea for a Symmetrical Anthropology* (Latour, 1993). This plea concerned the recognition of the many hybrids that inhabit our world. Hybrids are mixtures of matter and human thought, of natural and social aspects, for example in environmental and technological issues and with diseases. Latour worked out a political philosophy of nature or a political epistemology in *Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy* (Latour, 2004b) and introduced a "travel guide" for researchers, in the form of a rich and comprehensive research protocol published as *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence: An Anthropology of the Moderns* (Latour, 2013a).

"Give Me a Laboratory and I Will Raise the World" (Latour, 1983)

ANT starts from the premise that nature and society are constructed in one process of attributing meaning. Phenomena are explained by the process by which they

are made and the strength and length of the *network* in which they are embedded and not by "Nature" or "Society". The representation of nature and the stability of society are the *result* (and *not* the *cause*) of the settlement of controversies around scientific facts and technological artefacts like machines. For example, the difference between a scientific fact and a non-scientific fact (e.g., the cause of climate change) can be explained by scale: scientific facts are large scale constructions, non-scientific facts are small scale constructions (Latour, 1987). Scientific truth is to be found in strong networks of *humans and nonhumans*, networks strong enough to resist criticism and time. The role of nonhumans (e.g., viruses and machines) is often ignored or taken for granted as if these nonhumans are neutral entities that do not influence the social processes in the network. Latour argues that the role of nonhumans, or *actants*, must be taken into account, although always in relation to their association with humans. Strong networks are large networks that include many actors that agree on a specific definition of a phenomenon, but actants like viruses, gases, computers or buildings should be recognized as active parts of the networks (sometimes ANT is also spelled out as *Actant*-Network Theory).

The construction of scientific facts is by definition a collective process: it happens within a network of actors that introduce, e.g., natural phenomena into the net–work, that can become actants as the network grows stronger (Latour, 1987). Scientists try to transform their own position into a *black box* that is taken as the truth. In the beginning of this process controversies might arise, dissidents (other scientists or outsiders) might question the position. To establish something as a firm scientific fact, scientists use many means to isolate dissidents. The key factor is *rhetoric*: texts in scientific media that will gradually become more technical, containing different levels and extended visualizations, to prevent contradiction and gather support in the form of citations (Latour, 1987).

Dissidents can either give up, go along with the assertion, try to open the black box or build a new one with a literal or metaphorical "counter-laboratory" (Latour, 1987). One of the most important questions therefore is: what is hap–pening inside the laboratory. Laboratory practices should be studied from an anthropological perspective following scientists and engineers *in action* (Latour, 1987), while they are in the process of constructing scientific facts, technological artefacts and as a result of that – the construction of reality. This process starts with capturing the interests of those outside for the work inside the laboratory (Latour, 1983). These interests are not a given; *translation* is necessary. Others will have to participate in the construction process of the scientist; their interests have to be translated in order to form alliances and to establish facts. Scientists have to become a compulsory and "logical" step in the problem-solving process of large groups of people (Latour, 1987). *Scaling down* and *scaling up* are important elements of a needed mobilization process. Problems, like diseases, are reformulated and scaled down to the level of a laboratory. There, because of the small scale, the problem can be varied, studied and solved (or partially solved). In order to

understand and to solve problems, laboratories become indispensable. But for the solutions to work, the solutions constructed in the laboratory have to be scaled up to the level of the world outside. As a consequence, laboratories destabilize or undo the differences of scale between the micro and the macro levels in society and between the inside and the outside of the laboratory (Latour, 1983). In this perspective, there is no micro or macro level in society, no inside or outside of the laboratories. There are only transformations, displacements and differences of scale produced by actors, not only by scientists and engineers but also by CEOs, politicians and journalists (Latour, 1983; Latour, 1987). Although not all scientists use laboratories, the construction process is exemplary for the sciences in general. Latour, for example, says that in sociology the *text* can be seen as a "functional equivalent of a laboratory" (Latour, 2005b, p. 149).

The notion of *translation* plays an important role in ANT. It is contradictory to the notion of diffusion (Latour, 1987; Latour, 2005b). In the language of diffusion, facts and machines are moving around by themselves, without people. Technical and scientific determinism are coupled here with the notion of discovery. Some actors are labelled as great inventors of facts or technical discoveries, and their ideas or inventions only need to be diffused to a society. Groups that resist the ideas or discoveries are invented in order to persuade them to accept the ideas, inventions or discoveries. It is obvious that this diffusion model does not account for the actions of the many people involved in the construction of facts and machines. Nor does it account for the negotiations between all those people and the associations and alliances between humans and nonhumans that are made through that.

The belief in the existence of a society and a nature separated from science and technology in the making, the belief in "Nature" or "Society" as the cause of the settlement of controversies between actors, is the product of the diffusion model. The translation model gives a very different picture (Latour, 1987).

The Nonmodern Constitution

By means of translation, the networks create all kinds of new mixtures of forms of being, the so-called *hybrids* of nature and culture. These hybrids (e.g., the material aspects of the role of carbon dioxide in climate change and the story about it combined) are at first a consequence of the network and then become a part of the network themselves. In debates about the world, three repertoires are used: one about facts (scientific knowledge of nature), one about power (politics in society) and one about language (the discourse that gained independence from nature and from society). Through concealing the connections between those facts, power and language and by splitting processes of translation and purification the *Modern Constitution* is created, a constitution where nature and society are two distinct zones; where objects and subjects become dichotomized (Latour, 1993). The Modern Constitution denies the production and the proliferation of hybrids,

simultaneously allowing them to expand. Latour says that as soon as we study in detail the production of these hybrids, as well as the way they are being eliminated, we will notice that we have never been modern (Latour, 1993).

Latour proposes to conceptualize global society as *nonmodern*, contrary to theorists like Beck who conceptualize the development of society as a new modernization phase (Latour, 2003). Latour proposes a radical shift: we have to study the world from a symmetrical starting point in order to state what the modernists always have denied. We must provide representation to the undividable *quasi-objects* and *quasi-subjects*, the hybrids of nature and society. We have to give room to the mixture of facts, power and stories about phenomena like carbon dioxide, viruses and technological artifacts. It then becomes clear that nature and society are the result of a continuous collective process of mediation and translation. That also opens up the possibility "to replace the clandestine proliferation of hybrids by their regulated and commonly agreed upon production" (Latour, 1993, p. 142). Hybrids then can become matters of democratic debate and democratic decision-making (Latour, 2004b).

In the Nonmodern Constitution, which is also called the *new* or the *ecological* Constitution, the collective of humans and nonhumans (a new name for the network, the heir to the old nature and the old society which were divided) gets room to compose a common world (Latour, 2004b). In this new Constitution, the indisputable matters of fact from the old Constitution will always first be disputable matters of concern, because it is acknowledged that all beings are manufactured and are part of a public life where humans and nonhumans become associated. In the new Constitution, the sciences can be made compatible with democracy (Latour, 2004b; Latour, 2005a) by acknowledging the mixture of scientific facts, power and the language in which they are put so that democratic debate can take place.

A Sociology of Associations

A sociology is needed that traces the associations between what is being assembled in the collective and what kind of associations are made between heterogeneous elements. Latour thus proposes a *sociology of associations* as a resumption of the *sociology of the social*. The later seeks to explain all kinds of activities by "the social" or by "society," where according to Latour the explanation is confused with what should be explained (Latour, 2005b). A sociology of associations, as a synonym for ANT, follows the actors themselves while they are associating and moving.

This sociology feeds off controversies about "*what* this universe is made of" (Latour, 2005b, p. 21). The sociology of associations is constructivist theory, not to be confused as Latour (2005b) warns with "social constructivism". Especially not with the meaning social constructivism got in the critique that came after the notion the "social construction of scientific facts" had been used. This expression has been misunderstood as meaning that scientific facts were not real, could be

made up or were not true. "Unwittingly, constructivism had become a synonym of its opposite number: deconstruction" (Latour, 2005b, p. 92). Because this was never intended in ANT Latour reclaims the term linking it to an "*increase* in realism" (Latour, 2005b, p. 92):

> When we say that a fact is constructed, we simply mean that we account for the solid objective reality by mobilizing various entities whose assemblage could fail; "social constructivism" means, on the other hand, that we replace what this reality is made of with some other stuff, the social in which it is "really" built. . . . To bring constructivism back on its feet it's enough to see that once social means again association, the whole idea of a building made of social stuff vanishes.
>
> *(pp. 91–92)*

Other contemporary philosophers are also working on restoring the link between constructivism and realism (see e.g., Ferraris, 2014, 2016). Latour develops the link to an increase in realism further in his project of the inquiry into the modes of existence.

Modes of Existence

In the AIME project (An Inquiry into the Modes of Existence) Latour reconnects the modern to the real and also makes room for values. Like many other contemporary social theorists and philosophers, he is trying to find an answer to the question of how the world of the Moderns can be combined with other forms of knowledge, values and experiences other than science. That quest is comparable to the work on different "worlds" of Boltanski and Thevenot (see Chapter 13) and the "autopoeietic systems" of Luhmann (see Chapter 3). Latour reports about this quest in the 2013 book *An Inquiry into the Modes of Existence* in which we follow a fictitious anthropologist in her empirical research into the state and the position of the Moderns. *Inquiry* takes up the questions about the (non)modern constitution raised in *We Have Never Been Modern* (Latour, 1993), but can also be read as a new and extended version of *Science in Action* (Latour, 1987), where the ANT-perspective was introduced. The book is a very rich and comprehensive ethnographical description and analysis of today's people and the world that they construct. In the book both the empirical inquiry is followed and the philosophies underlying it are discussed. It "aims to provide a better, richer view on our values, on who we are and how we live, and to provide a platform for a fair diplomatic exchange with other peoples" (De Vries, 2016, p. 166).

The anthropologist finds fifteen modes of existence that the Moderns encounter when they move around in the world. Latour does not define the term "mode", he uses it loosely and in general terms, especially to specify what is specific for other institutions than science, "to better contrast them" (De Vries,

2016, p. 113). The fifteen modes are summarized in a pivot table at the end of the book (Latour, 2013a, pp. 488–489). They consist of groups of three; some groups are elaborations of terms used in earlier work. In this way, the quasi–objects from the non–modern constitution are divided into three modes of existence: technology [TEC], fiction [FIC] and reference [REF]. (These abbreviations are used by Latour to identify the modes of existence.) The quasi subjects of the nonmodern constitution consist of the modes of politics [POL], law [LAW] and religion [REL]. These six modes are completed with nine more. Some of them have no proper place in the vocabulary of the Moderns, but are introduced to make an inquiry into the modern world possible and to keep the conversation going with people that have another worldview than the Moderns have. There are three *inquiry* modes of existence: network [NET], preposition [PRE] and double click [DC]. The *conversational* modes, which could be compared to a psyche in a lifeworld, are reproduction [REP], metamorphosis [MET] and habit [HAB]. These six modes make it possible to account for experiences that the Moderns have no words for or ignore. The final three modes of existence have to do with the *economy*, the most modern and rational parts of all. The economy is divided into organizations [ORG], attachment [ATT] and morality [MOR].

This anthropological analysis of the contemporary world shows that there are more modes of existence and experiences than the Moderns suggest. There are no clear distinctions between facts and values, nature and culture or between reason and feelings. Each mode of existence has its own characteristics and a code of operation, e.g., for law this is *means*, for science it is *reference* and for religion it is *love*. Each mode has to relate to the other modes of existence in order to survive. That is called *being-as-other* and is the central concept in this description of the contemporary world, a call to start an ongoing *diplomatic conversation* between the different modes of existence (Latour, 2013a).

Together the modes of existence are a collective of actor-networks through which content circulates or passes. In his earlier work, Latour focused on how actor-networks are set up; in this book he tried to register *what* is passed in the actor-networks in order to show the different values that are at stake in the various modes of existence (De Vries, 2016). Latour advocates that it is time to rethink modernity in a broader perspective than that of the Moderns only and that modernity can and has to be reset (Latour with Leclerq, 2016) to give room to values, reality and the different modes of existence.

The Critique of Latour

In 2004 Latour published a paper himself where he seems to question some fundamental premises and starting points from his own work. Under the title "Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern" (2004), he formulates a critique of his own work especially addressing his worry that his work is used to criticize science and technology in a relativistic

way. He never meant his work to be understood like that. Critical research into science and technology should not be mistaken for a relativistic view of science. An important criticism on Latour's work is that it opens the door to relativistic attitudes toward science and technology and criticizes the role that science and technology plays in our society. Especially the fundamental constructivist starting point of ANT has been understood radically by some and therefore critics believe that ANT is too relativistic. This criticism applies especially to his earlier work, until the middle of the 2000s.

De Vries (2016) criticizes the inquiry into the modes of existence. Although it offers a clearer sense of what we are as humans and of the world we live in, we should not have high expectations that "the Moderns will accept and adopt the re-descriptions of their values that Latour offers" (De Vries, 2016, p. 191). The most important reasons are the complexity of the approach and the investigative work that still has to be done. Latour's earlier work was firmly founded in his own empirical research into the practice of science and technology but some other modes of existence need more convincing evidence that they operate as described. The same applies to the values that are part of the approach; further investigations about those are necessary (De Vries, 2016).

Relevance for Public Relations

Latour never writes about public relations or the role of public relations people in the collective. In his work, PR means *public representation* (Latour, 1999). Although he never pays explicit attention to processes of mass communication or the role of journalists in the translation process, public representation is described as a very important loop for scientist. "Thus," Latour (1999) says, "far from being a marginal appendage of science, this loop too is part and parcel of the fabric of facts and cannot be left to educational theorists and students of media" (p. 106). The Moderns do of course communicate, especially in the new digital world. Latour refers to digital communication as the mode of existence of Double Click [DC], a mode in which communication is instrumentalized. This kind of communication ignores or does not want to know the translations that take place in communication. It acts as if communication is a neutral act of information transmission (Latour, 2013a). These remote remarks about public relations and public representation might be one of the reasons why Latour's theories are almost completely ignored by public relations theorists in the international English literature, with the exception of Somerville (1999), L'Etang (2012) and Schölzel and Nothhaft (2016). Somerville suggested that when actor-network theory meets public relations new perspectives may open up for public relations theory, especially by resisting and disputing some presuppositions in the current theories and by including nonhuman actors or actants which are being ignored (Somerville, 1999). L'Etang (2012) introduces an anthropological research agenda for public relations, and Schölzel and Nothhaft (2016) use ANT as a methodological approach to analyze

the establishment of facts by active publics in the case of plagiarism in the PhD dissertation of former German Defense Minister Karl-Theodor zu Guttenberg. Other authors have used concepts from Latour indirectly, for example translation as part of communication management and crisis communication in public relations (Fredriksson et al., 2014; Pallas et al., 2016; Fredriksson & Pallas, in press). Other reasons for not using Latour's ANT in public relations are, in line with the abovementioned critique of modern thinkers, that public relations sees itself as an inseparable part of the modern (economic) world and that you have to buy the whole (critical) approach to the world to use it. The ever-increasing complexity of the theory over the decades might be another reason.

Latour does write quite a lot about other actors in organizations though, especially since organization [ORG] is a mode of existence, grouped with attachment [ATT] and morality [MOR]. Apart from scientists and engineers, CEOs and other people with managerial tasks frequently appear in his studies (e.g., Latour, 1987, 1996, 2013a). That might be the reason that the theories of Latour have been used more frequently by scholars of organizational communication especially by the so-called Montreal School and its most prominent representative James R. Taylor. Latourian concepts like translation, interobjectivity and mediation are here used to theorize about "organizations-in-communication" (Taylor et al., 1996; Cooren & Taylor, 1997). The Montreal School is one of the three schools of so-called CCO-thinking, the idea of the Communicative Constitution of Organizations. The theories of Latour are even qualified as the theoretical base of the Montreal School (Schoeneborn & Blaschke, 2014) and used as theoretical avenues in the CCO perspective (Cooren, 2015; Meisenbach, 2016). In recent years some communication cases have been studied from an ANT perspective, for example the Columbia Space Shuttle accident of 2003 (Marsen, 2014), the changing writing style in the Craft Beer industry (Rice, 2016) and the conviction of scientists for manslaughter in Italy for failing to properly warn the people of an impending earthquake (DeVasto et al., 2016).

In the rest of this paragraph public relations will be looked at through the lens of actor-network theory and explore the question what the relevance of a Latourian approach might be for public relations.

Studying public relations in action. First and foremost, ANT can be considered as an analytical perspective to study public relations-people in action on the analogy of following scientist and engineers through society. At the end of his book *Science in Action* (1987), Latour warns that "bureaucrats, managers, paper-shufflers or, in brief, this tertiary sector that completely dwarfs the size of technoscience" (Latour, 1987, p. 255) should not be despised and should be studied with the same method as scientists and engineers were studied there. By technoscience he means science and technology in the making. The bureaucrats, managers and paper-shufflers, as Latour ironically calls them, should be studied with the same method as well because "a stable state of society is produced by the multifarious administrative sciences exactly like a stable interpretation of black holes is

provided by astronomy" (Latour, 1987, p. 256). The administrative networks should therefore not be overlooked in the role they play in the construction of facts and in the stabilizing or destabilizing of the sciences. Their position seems to be strengthened in the last decades, a time wherein science has invaded our daily lives; science and technology are everywhere. They have become banalized and are even better connected to all kinds of other elements in the networks.

The administrative networks are, also in the last decades, increasingly populated with public relations-professionals. Of all these public relations-professionals we can ask what they contribute to the construction of reality in the collectives they participate in. What associations do they form? With what kind of humans and nonhumans do they associate themselves and why? Are they mere Double Clicking their way through the collective without problematizing the contribution of communication strategies, content and consequences to the process of reality construction? How are they situated in the modes of existence, and what do they do there? What values do they bring into circulation and why? Answers to these kinds of questions about the relative position of public relations-professionals in the collective could be found with a research program using participant observation as a methodology and ANT as an analytical perspective, like the anthropologist in the AIME project using ethnography, network theory and the detection of values (Latour, 2013a). Studying public relations from an ANT and AIME perspective first of all moves debates and controversies about societal issues and values to the heart of public relations research. After all, public relations practitioners often play an important role in these debates, on stage or behind the scenes. It can shed light on the tension between public relations' epistemology and ontology (Brown, 2012), by investigating the practice empirically and showing what really happens in the practice of public relations. Ethnomethodological methods can help to show what public relations practitioners actually do in debates on societal issues instead of having to rely on what public relations practitioners report themselves about what they do.

Secondly, a Latourian perspective can help to show how the tensions between the interests and values of different actors are created and handled by public relations-professionals. The tensions between partisan and non-partisan interests are difficult to overcome for many in the field of public relations. That is why "ethical relativism is a common moral stance among practitioners" (Pearson, 1989, p. 67). Since the objective moral standards are not to be known or do not exist, ethical relativism or pragmatism seems the only frame of reference for public relations actions. Pearson (1993) suggested a way to move beyond this relativism; focus on the ethical dimensions of the communication processes themselves with concepts like co orientation, communication rules and the idea of communication symmetry (Pearson, 1993). A Latourian perspective on public relations can also help to move beyond the ethical relativist position. It will make the construction of partisan and non-partisan interests and values visible and the way they are brought into the collective. It will show the role of public

relations-professional in those processes. Here also participant observation from an ANT perspective can help to gain new insights, for example about how public relations practitioners help organizations with boundary spanning activities to create borders between the different modes of existence or the other way around, how public relations practitioners help to build bridges between the organizational mode of existence and the others.

Thirdly, studies from a Latourian perspective will show how public relations-professionals create and handle public representation; how they work with values and concepts like openness, public opinion and democratic decision-making. These classical concepts of public relations connecting with working in the public sphere (Van der Meiden & Fauconnier, 1994) can get a central position in research into public relations (again). This can link to other public sphere theories like the one from Habermas (see Chapter 15). A Latourian perspective can help to extend the theories of reflective (Van Ruler & Verčič, 2005) and post-reflective communication (Johansen & Valentini, 2013) by taking a micro sociological perspective to study public relations in action.

Controversies. Tracing associations is the main task of a scholar working from a Latourian perspective, and that can be done by asking questions about five types of controversies that take place. Latour calls them the five major uncertainties (Latour, 2005b): the nature of groups, the nature of actions, the nature objects, the nature of facts and the nature of the study itself. The first source of uncertainty is the *nature of groups*; there are no fixed groups, there is only *group formation*. All kinds of members of the collective assemble and contribute to the process of composing the common world. There are contributions from scientists, politicians, economists and from moralists. With regard to public relations, the question will be what the role of public relations-professionals is in such a formation of different groups and of a collective: how do they contribute, are they group makers, group talkers or group holders? Who do they enroll in the groups that are formed, or are they themselves enrolled in certain group formation processes? Public relations professionals can be considered one of the mediators in the group formation process and the question can be asked what they are mediating in these processes; what do they transform, and how are they themselves being transformed (Latour, 2005b)? How do they circulate messages through the collective and through the different modes of existence (Latour, 2013a)?

The second source of uncertainty is the *nature of actions*; who are the acting agents and when they act, who else is acting? In the sociology of association action cannot be taken over by a social force, as in sociology of the social; actors are made to act by many others, by the associations that are produced. The central question about public relations here will be how public relations-professionals are made to act and what kind of other actors they make to act. How do they produce associations with other actors?

The third source of uncertainty is the *nature of objects*; what type of agencies are participating and can objects have agency too is the central question in this

controversy. It is about the role of nonhumans and about symmetry. As we have seen not only humans act, nonhumans can be made to act as well, and we have to be symmetric in the analysis. Latour (2005b) stresses that ANT is not to be understood as "some absurd 'symmetry between humans and nonhumans'. To be symmetric . . . simply means *not* to impose a priori some spurious *asymmetry* among human intentional action and a material world of causal relations" (p. 76). In that sense objects do have agency and can be seen as part of the network. A central question here will be if and if so, how public relations-professionals produce associations with objects. What is their role in making objects talk for example?

The fourth source of uncertainty is the *nature of facts*: what scientific facts about nature (and also about society) are constructed, and how did they become facts? In an ANT perspective, the matters of fact of the old modern Constitution are replaced by matters of concern of the new Constitution (Latour, 2004a; Latour, 2005b), constitution meaning the way we think about the world and conceptualize it. These matters of concern are "highly uncertain and loudly disputed, these real, objective atypical and above all, *interesting* agencies are taken not exactly as object but rather as *gatherings*" (Latour, 2005b, p. 114). The traces of these matters of concern are everywhere; since scientific facts are no longer only made in laboratories, "it is hard to follow a course of action anywhere in industrial societies without bumping into one of their outcomes" (Latour, 2005b, p. 119). Not only their outcomes are to be found everywhere, also their production is often debated publicly in intense "controversies over 'natural things'" (Latour, 2005b, p. 119).

The fifth source of uncertainty in an ANT-account is the *uncertainty about the study itself*. The texts produced by social scientists, also by sociologists of associations, are "the social scientist's laboratory" (Latour, 2005b, p. 127) and they can fail like experiments in the natural sciences often do too. Since in the sociology of associations the word social is defined as "a trail of associations between heterogeneous elements" (Latour, 2005b, p. 5), the social is a trace, a good ANT text is, according to Latour, a text that "traces a network" (Latour, 2005b, p. 128). A network is, as we have seen, not a thing out there but a concept, a tool to help describe something. A good ANT account is therefore a story about actors that are doing something, that are treated as mediators and thereby making the social visible by showing the movements of the mediators. An ANT study of public relations actors should do the same.

These five uncertainties, the nature of groups, of actions, of objects, of facts and of social science, are debated by actors and as the controversy ends the uncertainties are stabilized in a collective. Often this stabilization is temporary; until a new controversy starts.

   The basic principles of ANT and the study of public relations. An ANT perspective on public relations practices not only means to follow public relations practitioners in action; it means to accept the basic principles of ANT, most of them being incommensurable with the functionalistic and normative perspectives

that are dominant in the field. In the following section, a few of those principles will be discussed.

The most important principle is that ANT is a *constructivist* theory; it starts, as we have seen, from the premise that phenomena have to be explained by the process by which they are made. Concepts like nature, society, the social, but also facts, truth, being right or being wrong are the result and not the cause of the settlement of controversies. The stabilization of the uncertainties explains what a collective holds for a fact and what not. Furthermore, in the collective not only humans, but also nonhumans can be made to act; this possible role for nonhumans is an important part of ANT in contrast with functionalistic and normative accounts of public relations where nonhumans are not considered problematic or are ignored and are always about actors, people. As is the central role of science and technology; an ANT account of public relations places the collective process of constructing reality by the sciences, politicians, economists and moralists together at the heart of studying public relations. Central questions then are what role public relations-practitioners play as accomplices in the construction of reality, why they are playing such a role and how they did acquire their role in the network? That does not mean a relativistic and idealistic account of public relations research and practice. The ethnomethodological protocol of the AIME project specifically not only shows the construction process of, for example, facts, but also shows how those facts relate to values and to what they mean in the different modes of existence (Latour, 2013a).

The *notion of diffusion* often used in public relations theory and practice (Rogers, 2003) loses much of its meaning in an ANT and AIME account of public relations. The Double Click mode gets special attention as mode of existence to point to the problematic side of the notion of instrumentalized communication (Latour, 2013). Interest, facts, machines to name a few examples are not a given to be diffused to different target groups; instead the interest, facts and machines are the results of *translation processes*, as are the target groups that are said to resist or embrace the new ideas or inventions. We can ask by means of what kind of translations public relations–professionals became enrolled in the networks and what kind of translations do they use themselves? Pallas, Fredriksson and Wedlin (2016) assessed this notion of translation instead of diffusion in institutional contexts, especially for media logic, a core concept for public relations.

The same loss of meaning applies to the *notion of intermediaries*; also, often used in public relations theory and practice, not only as the means of producing the social, but also as a conceptualization of all kinds of different communication media. One of the main differences between the sociology of associations and the sociology of the social lies in the conceptualization of the *means* to produce the social: are they to be seen as *mediators* or as *intermediaries*? In the sociology of the social those means are often taken as intermediaries while in ANT they are taken as mediators. An intermediary can be defined as a black box; it transports meaning without transforming it, and the input equals the output. Mediators, on

the contrary, "transform, translate, distort, and modify the meaning they are supposed to carry" (Latour, 2005b, p. 39) and can therefore not be seen as a black box where the input predicts the output. In the context of public relations, we can think of the role of consultants. They often function as mediators of communication concepts, which then might gain popularity in organizations. The same applies to some scholars that present their theories as concepts, for example the excellence approach from Grunig, Grunig and Dozier (2002) and the concept of reputation by Fombrun and Van Riel (2004). The contrast between mediators and intermediaries is big as Latour (2005b) says:

> To sum up the contrast in a rudimentary way, the sociologists of the social believe in one type of social aggregates, few mediators and many intermediaries; for ANT, there is no preferable type of social aggregates, there exists endless number of mediators, and when those are transformed into faithful intermediaries it is not the rule, but a rare exception that has to be accounted for by some extra work – usually by the mobilisation of even more mediators!
>
> *(p. 40)*

In an ANT-perspective, there are many more *mediators* than there are intermediaries; transforming, translating, distorting and modifying meaning, as mediators do, seems to be the rule rather than the exception. The question could be raised when do public relations-professionals have the position as mediators, and when do they have the position as intermediaries in the networks. The same question, for that matter, can be raised about the position of journalists and other actors in the realm of the mass media in the collective. How and when do they mediate? Are they ever an intermediary?

Finally, in an ANT and AIME-perspective of public relations the *Nonmodern Constitution* or, better, the different modes of existence, have to be acknowledged instead of the Modern Constitution as many public relations theories do. The modes of existence could be the basic principles to analyze the construction processes done by the collective, with an open eye for the hybrids, quasi-objects, quasi subjects, the inquiries done, the economy and the life world. What is the role of public relations-professionals in the different modes of existence and the communication between the different modes? Do they play a role, and if so what role, in for example the articulation of the propositions made by scientists, politicians, economists and moralists? What is their role in public life where humans and nonhumans become associated in the debates about matters of concern? And last but not least what is their role in the democratic debate and the democratic decision-making about the sciences and issues? How do they use values, and how are they connected to reality? All these questions can be raised and answered taking a Latourian perspective on public relations.

Conclusions

The sociology of associations, actor-network theory or the AIME protocol from Latour has, as an analytical perspective, a lot to offer to public relations theory and practice in addition to the functionalistic and normative theories that are more common in public relations (Ihlen & Verhoeven, 2012). First of all, it promises a more complex and a more detailed insight in the practice of public relations and its role in the collective. On top of that the basic principles of ANT give room for a more realistic picture of the construction site of the nonmodern Constitution and within the different modes of existence where public relations practitioners play their part in the construction of reality, associating themselves with other humans and nonhumans. It has the chance to reconnect public relations to values and to realism. That will also be the main relevance of this social theoretical perspective for practitioners; a better c.q. a more realistic understanding of their own acting and a possibility to connect their profession to values and to recognize that. It moves science and technology and controversies about related issues to the heart of the analysis of public relations activities. This could give scholars and practitioners a better insight in how public relations activities contribute to the construction of reality, in controversies and after closing the controversies. In such a perspective, public relations is not perceived as something that follows strategy or already determined policies of organizations; it will show that public relations and communication activities are constituent to these strategies and policies. It will also show the political dimension of public relations activities and could shed a light on how practitioners create circumstances to engineer consent (Bernays, 1955; Ewen, 1996) while they participate in a democratic process. After all, a Latourian perspective could make public relations more reflective, more connected to values and it could make studies of public relations more real, what might help to move the discipline beyond ethical relativism.

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LIFE AND WORK OF BRUNO LATOUR

Bruno Latour was born in Beaune, Burgundy in France in 1947. He studied philosophy and anthropology is now professor-emeritus at *Sciences Po Paris* in Paris. He also was professor at the *Centre de Sociologie de l'Innovation* at the *Ecole Nationale Supérieure des mines* in Paris. Central to his work is the study of scientists and engineers at work and controversies about scientific and technological questions in democratic societies.

Three works can be considered as his key works: *Science in Action* (1987), *We Have Never Been Modern* (1993) and *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence* (2013a). Other important works, in which he proposes his theoretical perspectives and which are translated into English, are *Laboratory Life: The Construction of Scientific Facts* (1979) in cooperation with Steve Woolgar, *The Berlin Key* (2005), *Pandora's Hope, Essays on the Reality of Science Studies* (1999), *The Politics of Nature* (2004b) and *Reassembling the Social* (2005b) and *On the Modern Cult of the Fetish Gods* (2010b). Important works describing empirical research into specific cases or essays are *The Pasteurization of France* (1988), in which Louis Pasteur plays a central role, *Aramis or the Love of Technology* (1996), about the rise and fall of the guided-transportation system Aramis intended for Paris, *The Making of Law* (2010a) and *Rejoicing* (2013b). In 2002, 2005 and 2016 Latour was curator of three major expositions in the ZKM (Center for Art and Media Technology) in Karlsruhe, Germany: *Iconoclash (* Latour & Weibel, 2002), *Making Things Public* (Latour & Weibel, 2005) and *Reset Modernity* (Latour with Leclerq, 2016).

In addition, Latour published many chapters in books about science studies and social theory, books and articles in French about the consequences of science studies for other social scientific topics and an electronic book, *Paris Invisible City* (Latour, 2006). A comprehensive and very clear introduction to his philosophy and work has been written by the Dutch philosopher of science and technology Gerard de Vries (2016).