

Information Society CS4020

Assignment 1 – What is the Actor-Network Theory?

Roslyn Shaw-Kelly

21316414

Throughout this module we have explored the relationship between technology and society. The dominating question has been does technology affect society or vice versa? Well, different theories answer this question in different ways. Ultimately, I believe the Actor-Network Theory is the most relevant and sensible but to understand this, first I had to understand the ideas of Technological Determinism and Social Constructivism.

Technological Determinism is a narrow, far-fetched idea. It says that technology is what causes societal change. This made no sense to me at first because how can technology, which is created by and built for people, cause change without society to begin with? Wyatt (2023) explains technology as independent and powerful, shaping the way we live. Technology as an independent figure seems ridiculous as it is designed, built and controlled by people. It cannot do something it was not designed to do. Of course, technology is powerful, but it can only shape the way we live if society decides to accept it. When I read this paper, I thought of how technology has taken over people's lives in recent years and almost began to agree. However, when I watched 'The Social Dilemma', I was reminded that it is manipulative companies, designing apps to be addictive for financial gain, that were powerful, not the technology itself.

Heilbroner (1967) asked the question, "Do machines make history?" and suggested the answer was yes. He believed that new inventions (such as the Steam Engine and Computers) changed the way we lived. I can't help but agree with this as seen throughout history, these inventions had knock-on effects that did ultimately change and develop society. Langdon Winner (1986) suggested that technology can have politics. He gave examples including the low bridges built to separate classes in New York. However, I wouldn't view this as technology having a political stance but instead a tool for people to express theirs.

Overall, I found technological determinism a hard concept to grasp as it just seemed to give technology way too much autonomy and power.

Next was social constructivism which I found made more sense. This view is that society shapes technology. I like how this idea gives the power back to the humans and shows technology is the way it is because society decided on it. Haddon (2007) made some good examples of how people fit technology into their home. He gave the example of phones being part of someone's identity. This made me think of how my Dad uses his phone to call people and read the news while my Mom uses hers for social media and texting. That idea of two phones, having the same technology but people using it in

completely different ways made sense to me and showed that technology can be shaped by people. Eglash et al (2004) gave similar examples of how people appropriate technology to suit their own needs/desires, such as the Vietnamese farmers who turned bomb craters into fishing ponds.

Although social constructivism made more sense to me than technological determinism, it still felt like it disregarded technology's impact on society altogether.

My understanding of the Actor-Network Theory (ANT) is that both humans and non-humans work together and impact each-other. Society wouldn't be the way it is without technology and technology wouldn't be the same without society. I completely agree with this stance as the relationship between society and technology is very complicated. It seems impossible to trace things back to just one cause. I like how ANT describes this relationship as a "network" because this shows how complex it all is and how many things are connected in loads of different ways.

Latour described this concept well and helped me to understand by referencing real-life examples. One example he gave in "Mixing Humans and Nonhumans Together" (1995) was when driving a car, our actions and experience are guided by things such as the seatbelt alarm, traffic lights and the cars' design. I found this a good way to put it as driving a car is something I'd normally see as something much simpler; a human driving and the car just being used as a tool. I started to take more notice when driving my car and found that actually the car and environment actually did control how I drove (speed limits, changing gears when the screen suggested etc.)

For me, ANT is an exciting idea that has no answer. I like the idea of exploring connections without having to come to a definite conclusion. The world is so complicated and huge with so many things happening, so it seems impossible that just one answer is right. This is why I'm excited to use ANT for my case study. I plan to map out the stakeholders (human and non-human) and trace all connections between them that have affected the case study. I'll do this because the case study is a result of all these connections, actions and events between all the actors (human and nonhuman).