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## Actants without actors: Polydimensional discussion of a Regional Conference

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### Keywords

*Actor-network*

*Discourse*

*Legitimacy*

### Abstract

The Atlantic Schools of Business conference is an ethereal entity. It has no solid form or home, comes together for a brief period each fall. Many papers in the past have explained pieces of this puzzle. This paper examines the non-corporeal actants in the network which brings ASB together.

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### Introduction

The Atlantic Schools of Business Conference (ASB) is an academic conference in the eastern most region of Canada. This paper examines the study of this conference and themes surrounding the history of the network. Throughout the ASB History Project the emphasis has been on the unlikely nature of the success and durability of the conference (Barragan & Mills, 2008; Bell Crawford & Mills, 2006; Campbell, 2007; Durepos, 2006; Haddon, 2008; LeCoure, 2006; Long, 2006; MacAulay, Mills, & Durepos, 2008; McLaren, 2007; McLeod, 2006; McMurray, 2006; Murray, 2007; Pyper, 2007; Rostis, 2007; Shengelia & Mills, 2006; Yue, 2007) These papers have focused on the non-corporeal existence of the conference. It has persisted for nearly forty years without a physical location or allocated human resources. ASB exists as an ephemeral interaction among changing individuals and groups. ASB is a cooperative enterprise of the member business schools which does not require or enforce any level of cooperation or participation. “They just had a conference and it happened another 35 times.” (interview quote) (Barragan & Mills, 2008).

For the first 35 years ASB did not have a standing committee, and even after an executive was formed in 2004 there were no paid staff, or even an ongoing membership register. Each year a school would accept the responsibility to organize the conference following an informal rotation. As a result, the ASB conference has been held at almost every university in Atlantic Canada over the past 35 years (Mills, 2005). This durability in the face of ephemeral assets leads one to surmise that ASB maintains a value within the community of practitioners in the Atlantic Canadian region of postsecondary educators (Murray, 2007) The astoundingly long duration of the Atlantic Schools of Business conference, both with an executive and without, is a testament to the importance and value it holds for the region and regular attendees (McLaren, 2007).



The goal of ANT is to aid in the understanding of how the world of the social is connected within itself (Callon, 1991). Therefore, ANT “is not a theory of the social, but rather a way in which one can study the social” (Czarniawska, 2007). In this work ANT is situated within social constructivist ontology rather than an interpretation of phenomena. Networks cause actors to construct varying meanings influenced by their relations with other actors (human, non-human, corporeal or otherwise). This “Social” is found in the relations among a group or network. The process of ANT exposes the most mundane aspects of the social as composed of complicated webs of relationships (Akrich, 1992). A complex mode of ordering (Law, 1994, 2001) has emerged which both enables and constrains the actions of the various actants involved. We ascribe fixity to effects of social processes which enable us to draw on reductionist simplistic accounts of what otherwise would be chaos to order our existence (Chia, 1996; Law, 1994). The ongoing nature of social ordering belies any fixity and enforces a need for complex analysis.

In ANT, the role of human actors is not superior to the role of collective or group actors, non-human actors or other roles in the network which facilitate the development and maintenance of the network. In this way ANT is termed a symmetrical form of analysis, the nature of human and non-human is equal and therefore symmetrical. Non-human actors are given the designation “actant” (Latour, 1987). However, in most recent discussion all interrelated nodes are referred to as actants. The symmetrical nature of the network is challenged in critical forms of ANT where the power of some actants is explored in relation to others. These forms discuss asymmetrical power relationships within the network (Calás & Smircich, 1999). To ignore relative power of non-human actants appears naïve, however, ANT may best be approached from a “blank slate” perspective. Power relationships can later be interpreted from the nature of the discovered negotiations.

A network analysis employing ANT acquires a visual nature through its relationship with web drawing or patterns of interaction. However, the theoretical base pushes the researcher toward a mono-planer description of the network rather than a multidimensional model. As the network becomes more complex the nature of the interconnections may more appropriately approximate the multidimensional descriptors of String Theory (which requires more than 20 dimensions in some forms). The complexity of the network does not lend itself to visual representation. Therefore any description is suggestive rather than definitive. Any attempts at accurately “representing” or “mirroring” that which the theory entails is entirely futile (Chia, 1996).

This complex and emergent nature of the network studied using ANT is always in a changing state (Law, 1999). In the literature this flux and flex is described as: a social ordering best understood as in a constant state of becoming as opposed to one of being (Chia, 1995, 1996); and ‘emergent’ (Law, 1991). Furthermore, networks cannot be understood as ‘last instances’ (Callon, 1991; Law & Mol, 1995). A last instance would imply that the network would no longer change; new members enroll, old members de-enroll and non-human actors are rejected or accepted. They are not “tied up”, but evolve as patterns formed via the effects of other ongoing patterns (Latour, 1992; Law, 1991, 2001). As stated above the interrelationships between the internal and external, context and network are continuous and therefore the network is not only so complex as to defy visualization but also amorphous.

However, these amorphous networks do consist of replicable patterns. Not unlike the complexity of fractals, the forms of network interactions: “circuits that tend to reproduce themselves” (Law, 1991). These replications can be discussed in terms of the nature of each actant and the manner in which it tends to act. With human actors we can discuss mobilization as a pattern of action which tends to replicate. In non-human actors there are forms which repeat and those forms are developed through the nature of the actant and its naissance.

To successfully understand the network, we must focus on actors, their relations and associations, which inscribe, impute and shape the make-up of all other actors involved; the way they translate others interests to that of their own (Callon, 1991; Latour, 1986). The process of performativity refers to how actors are shaped by being part of a set of relations. The various ways they are shaped emphasizes the notion of ‘strategy’ implied in ANT (Durepos, 2006). ANT proposes an emergent and processural explanation of a patterned network of the social, made of heterogeneous bits and pieces which through their alignment have erased themselves from view, thus created a false extantcy of a misplaced concreteness (Whitehead, 2007). ANT is described as an approach focusing on relations between materially heterogeneous actants celebrating the complexity and multiplicity of precarious modes of ordering (Law & Mol, 1998).

As described above, actor-network theorists look relationally, such that they are concerned with the displacement, movement, translation, alignment and enrollment of the parts making up the social (Callon, 1986, 1991; Law, 1992; Law & Mol, 1998). The focus is transactional, in that it looks at negotiations among actors, how they engage in exchange and

agreement as well as how they coordinate their activities. From whence does the preformed spring, what relationships initiate the preformed and how? It looks at actors as products of diverse sets of forces, who engage in political acts to enlist other actors in furthering their cause (Callon, 1999).

Actants may act as actors and networks simultaneously. An actor in one network may be a collective formed from another network (punctualized). These actors also interact in multiple networks some with common actors. As self-interest in some form is basic to the participation in any network the actors move among networks “or shifts actions around itself” (Akrich & Latour, 1992; P. 259) and contribute to multiple networks in differing ways (Callon, 1999; Latour, 1999).

The analogy of string theory from quantum physics (Srednicki, 2007) is uniquely applicable to ANT. The complexity of the models mirrors the multidimensionality of each other. In Bosonic String Theory twenty six dimensions are postulated. Some of these dimensions are hidden and only can be inferred by the actions of the detectable portions of the strings. Similarly in ANT the interactions among the actors/ actants and individualized movements cannot always be directly detected. Concealed actions or motivations can only be inferred through detectable interaction (Latour, 1987). This is particularly recognizable in politically motivated action/inaction. However attributed these concealed events cannot always be detected.

Much like matter as described in string theory, the network as explored through ANT is a “black box.” Inputs and outcomes can be observed but the interworkings are hidden (Akrich & Latour, 1992; Latour, 1987) ANT attempts to reveal the components of the box. Due to the aforementioned nature of the network, this exploration is not definitive. Observations within the black box focus on performativity and process. We examine the actor/actant performance as a “consequence of the relations in which they are located” (Law, 1997). As the “black box” is opened the researcher becomes a close observer of the process and may participate in the understanding. As a result written analysis using ANT becomes a performance (in story form) of the researcher as much as a summary of the observation (Law, 1999).

As this explanation of ANT has no doubt made it very clear what ANT is or is not in the context of its complexity, one may wonder how it can be applied to ASB or any other interactive process. Like all complex systems the simplicity of ANT is in its complexity. In order to bring order to the process some basic terms are used in the analysis of each “Black Box”:

Network represents the structure of interrelationships related to the matter at study. Networks are built and torn through a series of actors engaging in interest work, enrollment, alignment and translations (Law, 1992). Networks are effects of heterogeneous modes of ordering (Law, 1994) This reproduction is precarious, dependent on a multitude of relationships becoming stabilized (Law & Mol, 1995). These relationships change and destabilize, therefore we can describe networks as “topography and as performance, rather than as a final or original state” (Calás & Smircich, 1999; P. 663). In the case of this analysis, network will be used to refer to ASB but may also refer to other group actants which negotiate with ASB.

The analysis of a set of negotiations describes the progressive constitution of a network in which both human and non-human actors assume identities according to prevailing strategies of interaction. Actors' identities and qualities are defined during negotiations between representatives of human and non-human actants. In this perspective, representation is understood in its political dimension, as a process of delegation. The most important of these negotiations is translation, a multifaceted interaction in which actors (1) construct common definitions and meanings, (2) define representativities, and (3) co-opt each other in the pursuit of individual and collective objectives.

The word actors is commonly as a term for individual humans. Non-human participants in the network which are reified have motivated the coining of the term actants. There is no difference between the value of these two forms and the terms are used interchangeably in recent ANT literature. The ability to influence is symmetrical regardless of perceived sentience. However, it is simpler to discuss when the humans and non-humans are delineated more clearly. In the actor-network theory, both actors and actants share the scene in the reconstruction of the network of interactions leading to the stabilization of the system. These actors had to be drawn together in a “centre of calculation” (Law, 2001). Durable actors are actors or actants whose role and relationships within the network are stable and continuous. When a group of individual, heterogeneous actors have come to act as one, that is to engage in same causes, act in unison towards the same goals, share a program of action, they become known as punctualized actors (Callon, 1991). Since they have come to act and represent one cause, they can be understood as actors. The process of punctualization converts an entire network into a single point or actor into another network (Callon, 1991). It is in this sense that we can understand actors as networks and networks as actors (Callon, 1999; Latour, 1999). ANT tells tales of unity among actors (enrollment) and difference

(counter-enrollment) (Law, 1999). Enrolled actors become punctualized within a collective, however they may fall out of the collective through disenchantment or other processes of the counter.

“Translation is the process of making two things that are not the same, equivalent” (Law, 1997), they are not irreversible. Once an actor’s interests have been translated, that translation makes up and becomes part of that actor’s sense of becoming. Actors are defined by their lists of trials and successes, their attempts at translating others interests and being translated by others interests. Actors are made of a series of translations that “shape and determines subsequent translations” (Callon, 1991) thus they become effects of those translations.

The network becomes visible through the use of inscription devices (Latour & Woolgar, 1979). These devices commonly referred to as inscriptions are the texts and traces left by the network (Durepos, 2006) When inscriptions are produced the network acquires durability. Those traces generate legitimacy for the network which leads to reproduction. As such, we must follow the trail or the chain of inscription to illuminate or describe the process by which it has become black boxed (Akrich & Latour, 1992; Latour, 1987).

Instigator refers to events or centres of calculation which cause throughput or action within the network (Durepos, 2006) Instigating activities are those initiatory declarations made by actors of collective punctualized actors which cause other actors to commence. An instigator may reify a non-human node in the network to actant status.

For the purpose of this paper a sub group of actants termed non-corporeal actants is coined. This group refers to reified values, beliefs, concepts, and ideas which have no physical entity (corpus) but interact with the other human or non-human actors/actants of the network. Both the classic form, the “and after” and most works claimed as “Post-ANT” seem to situate these actants within “relationalism”. This does not seem to adequately provide for the role of non-corporeal actants in enrollment, de-enrollment, translation, or mobilization in actor-networks. As a source of influence and power non-corporeal actants seem to be symmetrical with other actors and actants.

## ANT as applied to ASB

In past papers, the concepts of ANT have been applied to ASB with reference to the role of the call for papers as an instigator (Durepos, 2006), the role founding members and choice (MacAulay et al., 2008). The purpose of this paper is to examine the nature of actants as describe by past participants in the ASB History Project and the roles of non-corporeal actants (Barragan & Mills, 2008; Bell Crawford & Mills, 2006; Campbell, 2007; Durepos, 2006; Haddon, 2008; Long, 2006; MacAulay et al., 2008; McLaren, 2007; McLeod, 2006; McMurray, 2006; Murray, 2007; Pyper, 2007; Rostis, 2007; Shengelia & Mills, 2006; "Wallace v. United Grain Growers Ltd.," 1997; Yue, 2006, 2007).

The first step in this process has been to review each of the papers submitted to ASB and elsewhere from the history project. Each paper has studied some aspect or aspects of the nature of ASB. From those studies, actors (durable and transient), actants, punctualized actants, non-corporeal actants, instigators/ centres of calculation, and inscriptions can be identified. Each of my predecessors has in some way reified and identified actors within the network that is/was ASB.

The words which represent these forms have been collected using a deconstructive approach to the papers themselves. Simple word or phrase counts were employed to produce concepts and themes which were clustered (Notelars, Einarsen, DeWitte, & Vermunt, 2006; Silverman, 2005). The prominent themes found are presented below in table form as per the nature of the entities. Where clusters appear to be divisible, they are.

Human	Non-human	Punctualized	instigators	inscriptions	non-corporeal	Participant	Schools
35 founders	# of papers	ASB	dates	ASB Online	ASB	friendship	age
deans	administrative	ASB Executive	call for papers	awards	collective	collegial	isomorphism
younger faculty members		(ASAC)	title (conference)	brochures	peer interaction	observation of senior faculty	internal isomorphism
chairs	internet		themes	curriculum vitae (CV)	pragmatic	networking	absence in the literature
founder (none)	federal funding	divisions	words (gender diversity)	mission statements	regional conference	discover identity (individual)	structure (none)
host	leadership		methods	narratives	# of female authors	experience	attendance /non
presidents	peer review			mythology	place maker	social responsibility	comparison
researchers	presentation			proceedings	publication	refereed	competitive
reviewers	search results			program	uniqueness	regional pride	conference every year
scholars	site			renewal project	upstart	tenure	Does ASB exist?
speakers	technology			stories	variety of topics	advice	farm team
sponsors	web			internet fragments	faculty development	love	first
					regularity	inexpensive	innovation
					multiplicity	choice	insignificance
					legitimacy	confidence	quality
					prestige	formal	
					social construction	friendliness	
						future	
						inclusive	
						new	
						obligation	
						openness	
						promote	
						supportiveness	
						youth	
						gender	
						working ideas	
						questions	

Figure 2. Cluster diagram of the concepts and themes found in papers about the conference.

ASB has changed in the past five years. In 2004 an executive was formed. This punctualized actor changes the nature of the conference. In the preceding years the conference continued solely because of the non-corporeal actants listed in the last three columns. These actants reference the motivation of the conference itself as a network, individual participants as actors and the business schools/universities to continue the conference. The rationale for an executive is described as due to lower participation (LeCoure, 2006) and fear that the lack of structure endangered the future of the network. The history of ASB since the instigation of an executive is not sufficient to develop a contrasting analysis but warrants observation and future research may surface comparisons in the network between the pre-executive and post-executive periods. For the purposes of this analysis the role of the executive is seen as flowing from the network's perceived need for it as defined by the non-corporeal actants.

This formalization is postulated to be the result of the non-corporeal actants at the individual level. Those individuals who formed the executive were motivated by these actants and the fears played the role of instigator. In effect the success of the network for the previous 30+ years instigated its preservation. The humans enrolled in the punctualized actant which is the ASB Executive. The power of these non-corporeal actants to negotiate the performance which led to the centre of calculation in the ASB executive demonstrates the importance of this form of actant.

If we understand ASB as a verb that is as a mode of organizing (Law, 1994, 2001), rather than a noun or collective noun, we can more easily see how the form changes. ASB is a mode of action. The motivators for that action have caused the development of a formalized leadership in the executive. That executive has changed the activity which is ASB but only in the manner in which the actor ASB has chosen. We cannot escape the description of ASB as a noun as well as a verb in the same sense that the word "house" is both. ASB as a network houses the activities of ASB the action.

At the conference each scholar speaks, presents his/her paper but that action is fleeting. The spoken word evaporates into thin air but the written word persists (Latour, 1991, 1999). Legitimacy is found in rationalized formal structures, the "elements of formal structure are manifestations of powerful institutional rules which function as highly rationalized myths that are binding on particular organizations" (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). For the scholar legitimacy is found in inscription, critical to the career therefore they seek inscribed traces of the network in their negotiation of the choices they have.

Each individual actor in the punctualized actor, ASB, participating in the action, ASB, has been enrolled in the ASB network, they form the ASB network (Law & Mol, 1995). In order to enroll the actors ASB must provide some form of reward to these actors/actants. From the chart we find these values and rewards in the inscriptions and the motivators among the non-corporeal actants. By uniting the strategy of the researcher or scholar with that of the conference the inscriptions enroll the actors in the network (Callon, 1991; Law, 1991; MacAulay et al., 2008). The negotiation of a common agenda instigates the performativity of the network. The topography of the network is extended in this manner. Each actant co-opts the other into a joint representation.

From our list of inscriptions consider the two most powerful as motivators for enrollment: the conference proceedings and ASB online. These inscriptions appeal to the non-corporeal actants from our table, particularly the actants: legitimacy, prestige, publication, faculty development, regularity, multiplicity, social construction, refereed, promote, and quality. These actants have an important role in those words we noted from the Wordle plot: university; business; and theory. Each of these actants plays a role in the career development of a young scholar. ASB is populated by young scholars and more experienced faculty who are interested in the development of young scholars (Barragan & Mills, 2008; Star & Power, 1991). The acceptance of publication in the ASB proceedings by business school search committees fosters the legitimacy of the conference and reifies each of these non-corporeal actants to a place in the network.

These actants work together with the ASB Executive, chairs of divisions and themes to shape the conference. This shaping occurs through the call for papers. The call for papers acts as a spokesperson as well as a marketer (MacAulay et al., 2008) It begins the process of 'selling' the conference to academics; it generates "intéressement" (Callon & Law, 1982). The marketing occurs through the non-corporeal actants as described above as well as others such as friendship, inclusion, social, observation of senior faculty, experience, supportiveness, working ideas, questions, confidence, obligation and peer interaction. Some of these actants reinforce the motivation for new scholars to participate while others may enroll experienced faculty to see old friends or repay the experience ASB provided them through a sense of obligation. Each form reinforces the legitimacy of the conference and enhances reproduction of the form. The call for papers to "persuade the human actors to play the roles proposed for them" (Akrich, 1992, p. 214). These roles vary by tenure and experience but each human is enrolled by ASB to its needs.

The call for papers travels geographically, temporally and spatially (Latour, 1991, 1992) through the network of chairs and themes as instructed by the executive and hosting group provides an opportunity to market the conference (Durepos, 2006) It is this inscription which punctuates the power relationships within the network. In order to enroll senior faculty and experienced researchers the network must give relative power to those actors. The call for papers is the performance of this power. As a centre of calculation, this powerful inscription has the potential for shifting action around itself (Akrich & Latour, 1992).

The nature of the interaction of the physical and non-corporeal actants returns us to the concepts of string theory. In string theory the multiple dimensions play a variety of roles. This analogy can be extended to the non-corporeal actants. The human actants, punctualized actants, and physical actants can be observed in the visible world of four dimensions. Each has a location and time which can be plotted and if chosen lines could be drawn to represent the physical network. But the concealed interactions cannot be drawn, they take place in unseen dimensions and like strings they are sometimes visible and other times invisible and may only be detected through the traces they leave through interaction. Time taken while travelling in concealed dimensions is time lost from the observable world. The throughput of the network also performs lost time, delays in activity which are not explicable by observable actants. The non-corporeal actants persist in these unseen dimensions of the network. Traces of legitimacy and comparison are found in delays. If ASB is, in the universe of an actant, less legitimate than another network, then that actant may delay action, ASB travels in an invisible universe labeled legitimacy for a period of lost time.

The nature of the instigators and the power it hold within the universe of the enrolled actants shapes this form of visible and invisible activity (Waiting is an activity). This shape is formed through the perceptions and motivations of the various non-corporeal actants in the universe of each enrolled member of the network. Physical actants play a role in this universe but only as a result of the power they hold from the non-corporeal forms. In many ways this extends the understanding of unintended consequences or unplanned effects of action. Each actant can be described in terms of height, width, breadth, and time in real terms but also in the other dimensions of legitimacy, quality, friendship, pride, and etcetera. Each actant has many dimensions; their location in those dimensions determines the strength of the network.

The complexity of the network as described using ANT is cannot be graphically reproduced because of these complexities. The Network can only be described in a narrative form. Each narrative of ASB reproduces a portion of the story. Past descriptions have enabled us to see this narrative, the narrative of perception and motivators as actants within the network. These concealed actants operating in dimensions beyond the normally described four surface the themes of proximity and time within the network. Networks are seen as intersections of paths, paths among human and non-human actants forming and reforming throughout time.

The flaw in the drawing of a physical network is the depiction of the paths. In some forms the path become shorter as interaction increases, but the nodes (human and non-human actants) do not usually move closer. A scholar at Memorial University does not move closer to Mount Allison University because they regularly interact. The links between the actants are strengthened not by being shorter but by being faster. Time spent in the alternate dimensions is reduced by the increased interactions. In physical terms the path widens and the speed of interaction is increased. In the same way a wider highway is built and speed limits increased when travel between two towns is more popular, the return of emails is quicker and the number of available modes of communication increases when scholars work together more often. Network connections are facilitated by the modern world through technology.

## Conclusions

In keeping with the storytelling nature of ANT, we have discovered a story of ASB as a performance of non-corporeal actors through a multidimensional space inhabited by physical human and non-human actants. The discovery has led to a partial understanding of the enrolment of the network as a function of those non-corporeal actants. In many ways the scholars, administrators and technologies which form the visible network exist through the negotiations of these non-corporeal actants. Networks are usually described by their physical aspects, the resources they command and the people who participate. Unplanned actions are labeled coincidences or the unforeseen results of relations or invisible (to the observer) physical actants, but they seem to be somewhat foreseeable when the power of non-corporeal actants is accepted. Symmetry of human and non-human actants is extended to include those values, beliefs, concepts and ideas with which human and non-human actants share relations in an Actor- Network. In this analysis the understanding of the network has been extended to surface the possibility that a networks existence requires the participation of the concealed



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