

Learning from Documents: Applying new theories of materiality to journalism

Gina Neff

Journalists, like many other creative and cultural workers, find that they must rapidly make sense of changing conditions of within the digital economy. New digital technologies change old organizational routines and workplace practices in ways that can be surprising and unexpected, and in most workplaces the transition to digital is far from a straightforward, one-to-one substitution of one set of tools for another. Instead, it entails changes in work practices and organizational routines along with changes in medium.

My aim here in this essay is to suggest how to apply the theories of materiality emerging in the subfields of communication technology studies and organizational communication to scholarship on news media and journalism. I argue that scholars can use these emerging theories of materiality to describe how journalists work, how journalism is shaped within newsrooms, the ways the news industries are changing, and ultimately, the impact on the products of the news industry. Materiality theories can help scholars explain the impact of this transition both the news industry and the work and practices of journalists.

Newsroom ethnographies, like other qualitative studies, have been very good at assessing how people assign meanings to everyday objects in social settings. What the new literature on materiality affords scholars are tools to extend these socially constructed meanings of things to their social functions and in the process highlight the social roles that these everyday objects play. These new theories emphasize what things do, rather than what things mean to people. Materiality theories can therefore help scholars uncover the less apparent functions, processes, and roles that these objects can support in social settings. Materiality, done right, helps scholars see the physical evidence of social structure, or in the words of Bruno Latour (1991), “society made durable.”

Communication scholars have rediscovered materiality because theorizing the process of digital change has required it. “The unfinished project” for communication technology studies, according to Leah Lievrouw (2013), has been to find a path between the social construction of technology’s multiple meanings while veering clear of strongly deterministic accounts of technology’s power to change society. With new theories of the importance of materiality in communication, technology scholars are beginning to recognize “the social *and* material character of communication technology [are] equally definitive and co-determining,” as opposed to previous paradigm that viewed technology from a broadly constructivist and culturalist lens, holding that material objects are dependent entirely on the humans around for social meaning (Lievrouw, 2013). In other words, the return to studies of materiality suggests that the medium matters after all. Journalists, like other knowledge workers, produce meanings for a living. But the tools that shape their work and the material properties of the media through which they

communicate can have an enormous impact on how they do that work. Part of the challenge for communication scholars is to wrest objects away from our disciplinary tendency to connect them to the production of intended meaning of human communication. As Lievrouw puts it scholars have been more likely to see technology as the “outcomes or *products* of abstract social forces, cultural discourses or economic logics” rather than as having material properties that influence their social roles and functions (2013). This requires a bit of intellectual courage within a field that has positioned humans squarely in the center of meaning-making. Anthropologist Ian Hodder, who has written about the “entangled” sets of relationships and dependencies between humans and things, shows the degree to which this is challenging for social scientists and humanists: “It is one thing to say that humans identify with things. But it is another to say that humans only exist in their relation to things” (Hodder, 2012, p. 27). Qualitative research in media and communication is quite good at examining the human meanings invested in things. But the field has yet to develop a rich theoretical language and methodological tool kit for studying the things of social settings on their own terms. For an example of material studies consider Gupta’s striking ethnography of the state violence inflicted on India’s poor through “red tape.” Forms and other bureaucratic writing don’t just communicate messages, though they do that. They also form a “constitutive role as that which defines what the state is and what it does” (Gupta, 2012). In other words, how documents circulate, who has access, and how they are stored may be as important for the social role that they end up playing as the messages written on them are. Documents “materialize” organizational communication (Ashcraft, Kuhn, & Cooren, 2009).

Thinking through Documents

Documents are particularly interesting objects because they are ubiquitous in practically every workplace and the basis of almost all knowledge and bureaucratic work. As Lisa Gitelman has written, “Documents are important not because they are ubiquitous. . . but rather because they are so evidently integral to the ways people think and live” (Gitelman, 2014). Yet, media and communication scholars have until recently treated documents literally as products and process of human meaning making rather than as material that shapes how organizations work. Documents, broadly defined, have three main roles that arise from their material affordances 1) recording actions, 2) circumscribing the organization, and 3) supporting conversation (Neff, Fiore-Silfvast and Dossick, 2014). The change of a medium, say from paper documents to digital documents can have an enormous impact on how these roles play out.

The stability of the medium for a document can provide a record of a “meeting of minds” (Kaghan and Lounsbury, 2006). The flexibility of the medium of documents can support brainstorming among “communities of conversationalists” (Taylor & Van Every, 2000, p. 32). The mobility of the medium of documents carry information across different contexts and also “enforce humans to follow specific organizational pathways” (Cooren 2004, p. 388). Documents serve to materialize thoughts, literally helping shape the process that Kuhn and Jackson call “accomplishing knowledge” in which people frame, reframe and resolve problematic situations in order to realize a capacity to act (2008, p. 461). Documents make certain problems and

solutions visible and thinkable, functioning as “epistemic objects” (Knorr Cetina 1999). The question remaining for scholars who watch people work documents is how to analyze these multiple uses, functions and roles in ways that neither seep into technological determinism nor ascribe all of documents’ power to the intended meanings of their authors. In other words, can we bring thoughtful ways of considering the role of media and technology to the work that people do every day with documents and how might this be applied to journalism studies?

Applying Materiality Theories to Journalism Studies

What follows are three suggestions how to bring materiality to journalism studies. First, things matter because of the social settings that they are embedded in. One does not need to ascribe to the ideas of agency within Actor-Network Theory in order to take seriously the set of interconnections between things and people. By extension, sets of relationships in newsrooms can be studied through the “objects of journalism.” How are newsroom practices structured through particular kinds of databases, workflows, physical configurations? When do changes to these objects reconfigure journalists’ practices easily and which are the “sticky” older practices when new tools and objects appear? Scholars can use the objects of journalism to map out the contours and boundaries of new production and this will become increasingly important as the “where” of journalism shifts with digital production. Second, the objects of journalism serve to mediate authority, routines, and practices. Focusing on objects can help to show the lines of authority, the contexts of routines, and the richness of practices within organizations, including news organizations. All bureaucratic functions are mediated at least partially through objects. Analysis of the objects of journalism can help show scholars how decisions are made, what work is done, and who collaborates. In this way, objects stand in as the actors playing the part of social structure: authority, hierarchy, and power are all enacted through, with, and sometimes despite objects. Social scientists should pay attention to them. Third, the materiality of what counts as evidence will change, but not necessarily in the short run. Professional codes, legal regulations, and industry standards all take time to adopt and adjust to new kinds of objects. In our own research, virtual teams struggled to recreate the “messy talk” practices of face-to-face meetings around paper documents when digital technologies made online meetings possible (Dossick et al., 2014; Dossick and Neff, 2011; Neff, Fiore-Silfvast, and Dossick, 2011). The “imbrication,” to use Paul Leonardi’s (2012) term, the social and the technological means that social practices take time to change to new technologies even though they co-constitute one another. For journalism studies this means the move to digital will come with all sorts of residual practices geared toward paper even as those practices are increasingly and seemingly dysfunctional in a digital environment. The sanctity and protection of the reporter’s notebook has long legal precedent but not the smartphone, even though it increasingly functions as such. What counts as evidence, or legally protected, or organizationally manageable takes time to shift through different sets of objects.

On a concluding note, journalism scholars who want to study the organizational processes of news production, distribution, and consumption should consider including an analysis of objects.

The challenge for qualitative scholars closely attuned to finding meaning is to account for objects' social functions in these settings as well, and the field of communication has a growing theoretical and methodological toolkit to borrow. Including objects in our analysis does not diminish the role for human agency. Rather, scholars can more fully account for it with attention to the roles that objects play.

References

- Ashcraft KL, Kuhn TR and Cooren F (2009) Constitutional amendments: 'Materializing' organizational communication. *Academy of Management Annals* 31: 1–64.
- Cooren F (2004) Textual agency: How texts do things in organizational settings. *Organization* 11(3): 373–393.
- Dossick CS, Anderson A, Azari R, et al. (2014) Messy talk in virtual teams: Achieving knowledge synthesis through shared visualizations. *Journal of Management in Engineering*. Available at: <http://ascelibrary.org/doi/abs/10.1061/%28ASCE%29ME.1943-5479.0000301>
- Dossick CS and Neff G (2011) Messy talk and clean technology: Communication, problem solving and collaboration using building information modeling. *Engineering Project Organization Journal* 1(2): 83–93.
- Gitelman L (2014) *Paper Knowledge: Toward a Media History of Documents*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Gupta A (2012) *Red Tape: Bureaucracy, Structural Violence, and Poverty in India*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Hodder I (2012) *Entangled: An Archaeology of the Relationships between Humans and Things*. Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, Inc. Available at: <http://doi.wiley.com/10.1002/9781118241912>
- Kaghan WN and Lounsbury M (2006) Artifacts, articulation work, and institutional residue. In: Rafaeli A and Pratt MG (eds) *Artifacts and Organizations: Beyond Mere Symbolism*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, pp. 259–278.
- Knorr Cetina K (1999) *Epistemic Cultures: How the Sciences Make Knowledge*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Kuhn T and Jackson MH (2008) Accomplishing knowledge: A framework for investigating knowing in organizations. *Management Communication Quarterly* 21(4): 454–485.
- Latour B (1991) Technology is society made durable. In: Law J (ed.) *A Sociology of Monsters: Essays on Power, Technology and Domination*. London: Routledge, pp. 103–131.
- Leonardi P (2012) *Car Crashes without Cars*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Lievrouw L (2013) Materiality and media in communication and technology studies: An unfinished project. In: Gillespie T, Boczkowski P and Foot K (eds) *Media Technologies: Essays on Communication, Materiality, and Society*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, pp. 21–52.
- Neff G, Fiore-Silfvast B and Dossick CS (2010) A case study of the failure of digital media to cross knowledge boundaries in virtual construction. *Information, Communication & Society* 13(4): 556–573.
- Neff G, Fiore-Silfvast B and Dossick CS (2014) Materiality: Challenges to communication theory. In: Lievrouw L (ed.) *International Communication Association Theme Book 2013: Challenging Communication Research*. New York: Peter Lang, pp. 209–224.
- Taylor JR and Van Every EJ (2000) *The Emergent Organization: Communication as Its Site and Surface*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

- Ashcraft, K. L., Kuhn, T. R., & Cooren, F. (2009). Constitutional amendments: “Materializing” organizational communication. *Academy of Management Annals*, 31, 1–64.
doi:10.1080/19416520903047186
- Cooren, F. (2004). Textual agency: How texts do things in organizational settings. *Organization*, 11(3), 373–393. doi:10.1177/1350508404041998
- Dossick, C.S., Anderson, A., Azari, R., Iorio, J., Neff, G. & Taylor, J.E. 2014. “Messy Talk in Virtual Teams: Achieving Knowledge Synthesis through Shared Visualizations.” *Journal of Management in Engineering*. In press.
- Dossick, C. S., & Neff, G. (2011). Messy talk and clean technology: Communication, problem solving and collaboration using building information modeling. *Engineering Project Organization Journal*, 1(2), 83–93. doi:10.1080/21573727.2011.569929
- Gitelman, L. (2014). *Paper knowledge: toward a media history of documents*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Gupta, A. (2012). *Red tape: bureaucracy, structural violence, and poverty in India*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Hodder, I. (2012). *Entangled: An Archaeology of the Relationships between Humans and Things*. Chichester, UK: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd. Retrieved from <http://doi.wiley.com/10.1002/9781118241912>
- Kaghan W. N. & Lounsbury, M. Artifacts, articulation work, and institutional residue. In A. Rafaeli & M.G. Pratt (Eds.), *Artifacts and organizations: Beyond mere symbolism*, Mahwah, N.J: Lawrence Erlbaum.

- Knorr Cetina, K. (1999). *Epistemic cultures: How the sciences make knowledge*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Kuhn, T., & Jackson, M. H. (2008). Accomplishing knowledge: A framework for investigating knowing in organizations. *Management Communication Quarterly*, 21(4), 454–485.
doi:10.1177/0893318907313710
- Latour, B. (1991). Technology is society made durable. In J. Law (Ed.), *A Sociology of Monsters: Essays on Power, Technology & Domination* (pp. 103-131). London: Routledge.
- Leonardi, P. (2012). *Car Crashes Without Cars*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Lievrouw, L. (2013). Materiality and media in communication and technology studies: An unfinished project. In T. Gillespie, P. Boczkowski, & K. Foot (Eds.), *Media Technologies*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Neff, G., Fiore-Silfvast, B., & Dossick, C.S. (2014). “Materiality: Challenges to Communication Theory,” *International Communication Association Theme Book 2013: Challenging Communication Research*. New York: Peter Lang, 2014. Pp 209-224.
- Neff, G., Fiore-Silfvast, B., & Dossick, C. S. (2010). A case study of the failure of digital media to cross knowledge boundaries in virtual construction. *Information, Communication & Society*, 13(4), 556–573. doi:10.1080/13691181003645970
- Taylor, J. R., & Van Every, E. J. (2000). *The emergent organization: Communication as its site and surface*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.