



## Lost in delegation? (Dis)organizing for sustainability

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### ABSTRACT

Using actor-networks as our conceptual lens for appreciating complex sociomaterial interdependencies, we explore how a vision to “do things differently” for sustainability becomes enacted and significantly diluted at a major brownfield development project in the UK. We show how visions for sustainability can become substantially delegated into a range of specialised and functionally differentiated practices, with nonhuman mediators producing significant agency. Additionally, extending actor-network approaches, we develop the concept of localised hybridity to consider how the possibilities for progressive sustainability practices are interdependent with mediators in other ‘locals’ across times and spaces. We suggest that greater reflexive attention and inquiry to the types of relational work required to form alliances with nonhuman mediators is crucial to realise visions for sustainability.

### 1. Introduction

The commitment of people in leadership roles to respond to sustainability challenges, such as climate change, is frequently seen as the key ingredient for organizations to become sustainable (for example, Kiron, Kruschwitz, Haanaes, & Reeves, 2015; Metcalf & Benn, 2013). Given this there has been growing interest in understanding the possibilities for more organizational action by considering how senior managers construct and articulate their identities in relation to environmental challenges (for example, Allen, Marshall, & Easterby-Smith, 2015; Carollo & Guerci, 2017 Phillips, 2013; Wright et al., 2012). In these studies, the concept of identity is drawn upon as a way to explore “managers’ agency and to gain an understanding of potentials for change” (Allen et al., 2015, p. 329). However, whilst identity can be understood as a useful ‘bridging concept’ to help outline the potential interplay between a person and society (Ybema et al., 2009), an identity lens has substantial limitations for showing how ideas about organizing for sustainability become enacted, particularly, as there tend to be significant gaps between leaders’ rhetoric and organizational action on sustainability (for example, Bowen, 2014; Ehrenfeld & Hoffman, 2013; Ihlen, 2015).

In this article we look beyond leaders’ and managers’ identity performances and the associated disconnections, contradictions and paradoxes which are often expressed. We achieve this by exploring how a vision from senior leaders for sustainability to be a key part of the design and operation of a major brownfield development project in the

UK is translated into actions. We call this project ‘Brownfield’. Our research tracked the Brownfield initiative, which brings together businesses and public sector organizations, over a year. We take a socio-material perspective because it helps us to explore the complex interdependencies between people, technologies, societies and ecologies which are implicated in enacting sustainability (Allen, Cunliffe, & Easterby-Smith, 2017; Dyck & Greidanus, 2017; Heikkurinen, Rinkinen, Järvensivu, Wilén, & Ruuska, 2016). To do this we develop an approach informed by actor-network theory as it opens up possibilities in organizational studies of sustainability to explore how human actors are interwoven within sociomaterial networks, with significant consequences for understanding how (in)action in relation to sustainability can occur. Consequently, actor-network theory informed approaches help to explore how human intentionality, in this case senior leaders’ vision for sustainability, does and does not translate into organizational action.

We add to debates in three main ways. Firstly, we contribute to understandings of possibilities for organizational transformations by showing how visions for sustainability can become substantially delegated into a range of specialised and functionally differentiated practices, with nonhuman mediators producing significant agency (Bled, 2010; Magnani, 2012; Newton, 2002). Consequently, by using an actor-network perspective to bring visibility to the significance of human-nonhuman interactions, we help to address under-researched aspects associated with the difficulties of maintaining and extending a vision of sustainability as something different from existing forms of organizing.

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Secondly, we extend actor-network approaches by developing the concept of localised hybridity (Bergstrom & Diedrich, 2011; Durepos & Mills, 2012; Sage et al., 2013). We achieve this by noticing how in our study new practices are interdependent with the strength of existing actor-networks, particularly where new visions are weakly constructed in other networks. Given this we consider how new visions and practices around sustainability are translated into existing actor-networks with a range of effects; some of which organize sustainability and some of which disorganize sustainability. Finally, by developing researcher reflexivity in processes of researching and interpreting, we show how actor-network informed analysis can make a virtue of methodological modesty to respond to some key criticisms (Farias & Bender, 2010; Gibson-Graham, 2011; Whittle & Spicer, 2008). In doing so, we also indicate how notions of reflexivity in action-orientated research can benefit from actor-network appreciations of the potential significance of non-human mediators in how action unfolds.

We begin by discussing key concepts and challenges associated with actor-network theory. After reviewing how existing organizational studies of sustainability informed by actor-network theory tend to overlook the possible agency associated with nonhuman entities, we particularly identify the concept of delegation as key to following how ideas can become translated into actions. We then present our iterative processes of analysis into which we incorporate a reflexive account as a data stream, showing how the research engagement associated with our challenges of following the action became reflective of the dynamics of enactment we sought to understand. We next begin to explain our findings by describing the communicated leaders' vision to "do things differently" for sustainability at Brownfield and give two examples to show how the vision becomes diluted and dispersed.

Our analysis informs a mapping of networks of mediators which are understood to be entangled in transforming the cleared piece of land at Brownfield into a space where organizing for sustainability could occur. In particular, we show how our actor-network approach enables us to specifically notice and categorise a range of nonhuman entities, key aspects of which we explore through two vignettes to extend the explanation of vision dilution, and rhetoric-action gap which was explored in the two earlier examples. Our findings show how visions for sustainability at 'Brownfield' can be seen to have become substantially delegated into a range of specialised and functionally differentiated practices, with the core actors being predominantly nonhuman. Finally, from our findings we develop the concept of localised hybridity which informs our argument about how greater reflexive attention to the types of relational work required to form alliances with (non)human mediators can be crucial to realising visions for sustainability.

## 2. The value and challenges of actor-network theory

In this section we review briefly some of the core ideas related to actor-network theory which helps us analyse how intentions about sustainability can and cannot become translated into actions. More extensive descriptions of the origins of actor-network theory, associated with Science and Technology Studies, and also known as the 'sociology of translation', and its relation to Management and Organization Studies are reviewed elsewhere (see for example, Alcadipani & Hassard, 2010).

We understand actor-network to be an approach which foregrounds hitherto neglected actors, things and processes. A central assumption associated with actor-network theory is that "society, organizations, agents, and machines are all effects generated in patterned networks of diverse (not simply human) materials" (Law, 1992, p. 380). Hence, actor-network approaches understand human actors to be embedded within relational networks of human and nonhuman actors, and seek congruent methods of analysis (Latour, 1986, 1987; Law, 1994). Sayes suggests that "the term 'nonhuman' is intended to signal dissatisfaction with the philosophical tradition in which an object is automatically placed opposite a subject, and the two are treated as radically different"

(2014, p. 136).

Actor-network theory approaches challenge constructions of 'subjects' as active, knowing and influencing and 'objects' as passive, knowable and formable (Law, 2004). The method emphasises that agency is not premised on actors understood as having an essence, but on agency as a relational effect, a hybrid of human and nonhuman actors (Latour, 2005). This shifts analytical attention to the network and the heterogeneous ordering that goes into forming and maintaining a stabilised network. Notions such as 'leadership' become moderated and contextualised within such framings. Importantly however, these approaches do not seek to abandon all distinctions between human and nonhuman actors, by for example extending intentional capabilities to non-living things. Rather actor-network approaches challenge traditional humanistic notions of action in which intention is understood to be the only significant ingredient (Bruun & Hukkinen, 2003; Sayes, 2014). This is achieved by an insistence that "nonhuman actors make a contribution to outcomes that are traditionally treated as social" and so, with humans, need to be brought into analytical attention (Elder-Vass, 2015, p. 102). Or, as Bruun & Hukkinen explain:

"Action should, in other words, not be seen as a simple implementation of an intention, but rather as a directed construction of real-world relations. Such relations form a network: a series of interconnections that constitute action. The best way to understand the term 'actor-network' is to think of it as a network constituting the agency (the capacity to act) of some actor rather than as a network consisting of actors" (2003, p. 104).

Consequently, by taking a relational approach that sees agency "as the effect of the process of building associations between humans and nonhumans" (Magnani, 2012, p. 131), a key feature of the actor-network approach is to decentre the human actor, in our case away from the idea of visionary, green-inspired organizational actors and leaders. An actor-network conceptual lens opens up possibilities to explore the sociomaterial entanglements of people, technologies, societies and ecologies involved in processes of organizing. Hence such a perspective can help to explore the dynamics of how visions and broad commitments can come to have little effect. This approach to research is achieved by focusing on interdependencies, networks and translations, and on how and why actor-networks emerge, converge or remain invisible, rather than on an actor's decisions, actions and communication. For example, by analysing the successes and failures of a water pumping device in different locations in Zimbabwe, De Laet and Mol (2000) show how the device is active in shaping varying configurations of actor-networks. They explore how the pump can be understood as an 'adaptable, flexible and responsive' actor, shifting between various identities such as being a mechanical object, a hydraulic system, a device installed by the community, a health promoter and a nation-building apparatus.

There are no prescribed methodological approaches to how actor-network theory and related ideas are deployed. As Sayes describes the overriding methodological attention is that "the action ... is the important thing to trace" (2014, p. 145). There are some prevalent concepts which have become important in the language of actor-network informed organizational analysis. In particular, Callon offers four processes<sup>1</sup> of translation, during which "the identity of actors, the possibility of interaction and the margins of manoeuvre are negotiated and delimited" (1986, p. 203). Consequently, translation can be appreciated as "always part of [a] slowly changing constellation of manifest and latent power processes in organizations" where "certain conceptions of reality are 'organized in' while other possible perspectives are

<sup>1</sup> These are referred to by Callon (1986) as 'moments' of translation. We are calling them processes as in trying to work with the languages associated with actor-network theory we want to distinguish them from the concept of delegation which is central to our analysis. As we will go on to explain we understand delegation as relating to 'crucial moments' of translation (Law & Hetherington, 2000).

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