SESSION 6

(1) Actor-Network Theory (ANT)

What is ANT?

There are four things wrong with ANT: The word "actor", the word "network", the word "theory" and the hyphen.

                    -- Bruno Latour

What is ANT?

1. Like us, technologies are members of society and can have agency.

2. Society is a network, made up of more-or-less stable assemblages.

Approaches to studying technology

Historians and Sociologists of technology look especially at three phases of activity and debate about a particular technology:

1. When the innovation is under development (Bijker on the bicycle)

2. Just after it comes into the consumer market (Fischer on the telephone)

3. **When there is some sort of breakdown or black boxing (Latour and Actor-Network Theory)**

Approaches to studying technology

- By contrast to Winner 'Do Artifacts Have Politics?'

- By contrast to Fischer's User Heuristic

- By contrast to Social Construction of Technology (SCOT)

Each of these is critical of technological determinism, in their own way and tone.

Technology as a reflection of society

"The object does not reflect the social. It does more...."

Technology as a reflection of society

"The object does not reflect the social. It does more…."

- Winner: existing social biases (racism, ableism) can be further entrenched through tech design and deployment

- Fischer: social actors can develop their own uses for tech outside of what is intended by designers

- Bijker: design of tech can be explicitly guided by the social concerns of users and non-users

Technology as a reflection of society?

"The object does not reflect the social. It does more….

So what do objects do?

Technology as a reflection of society?

There is a crucial difference between technological development as a social process (Winner, Fischer, Bijker)

and technologies themselves as fully-fledged members of society

ANT as Critique of *Sociologism:* ANTs **symmetrical** treatment of humans and nonhumans

- Rejects "the bizarre idea that society might be made up of human relations" (Latour, pg. 239)

- **Alternately,** "…some materials last better than others. And some travel better than others. Voices don't last for long, and they don't travel very far. If social ordering depended on voices alone, it would be a very local affair." (John Law, 1994 <u>Organizing Modernity</u>)

- Shirley Strum and Bruno Latour on the limits of social ordering in baboon societies

Delegation from humans to non-humans
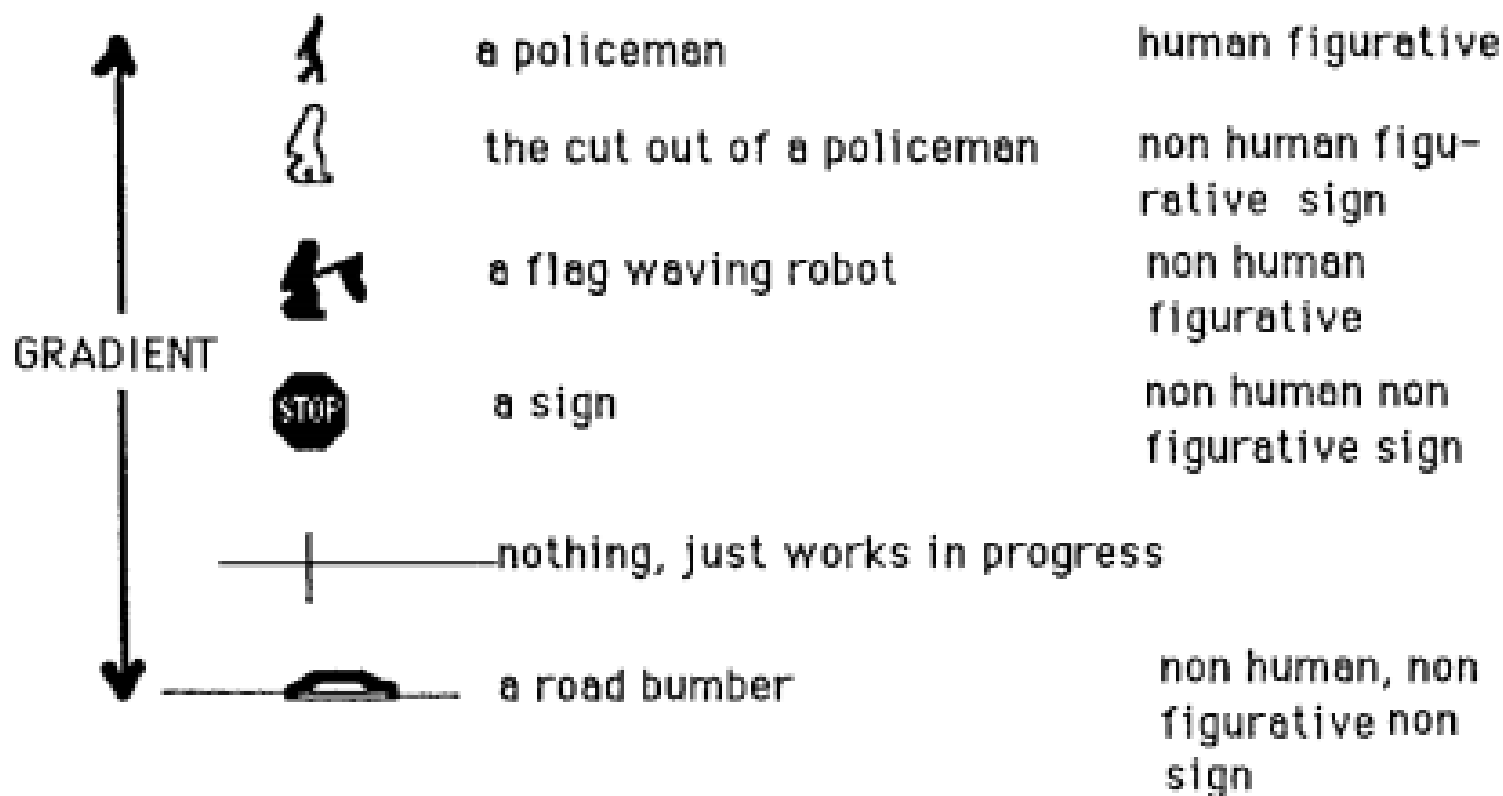
Figure 10.3

The consequences of delegation

When we delegate a task to a non-human, there are often far-reaching consequences:

Who configures and implements it?

Who maintains and fixes it?

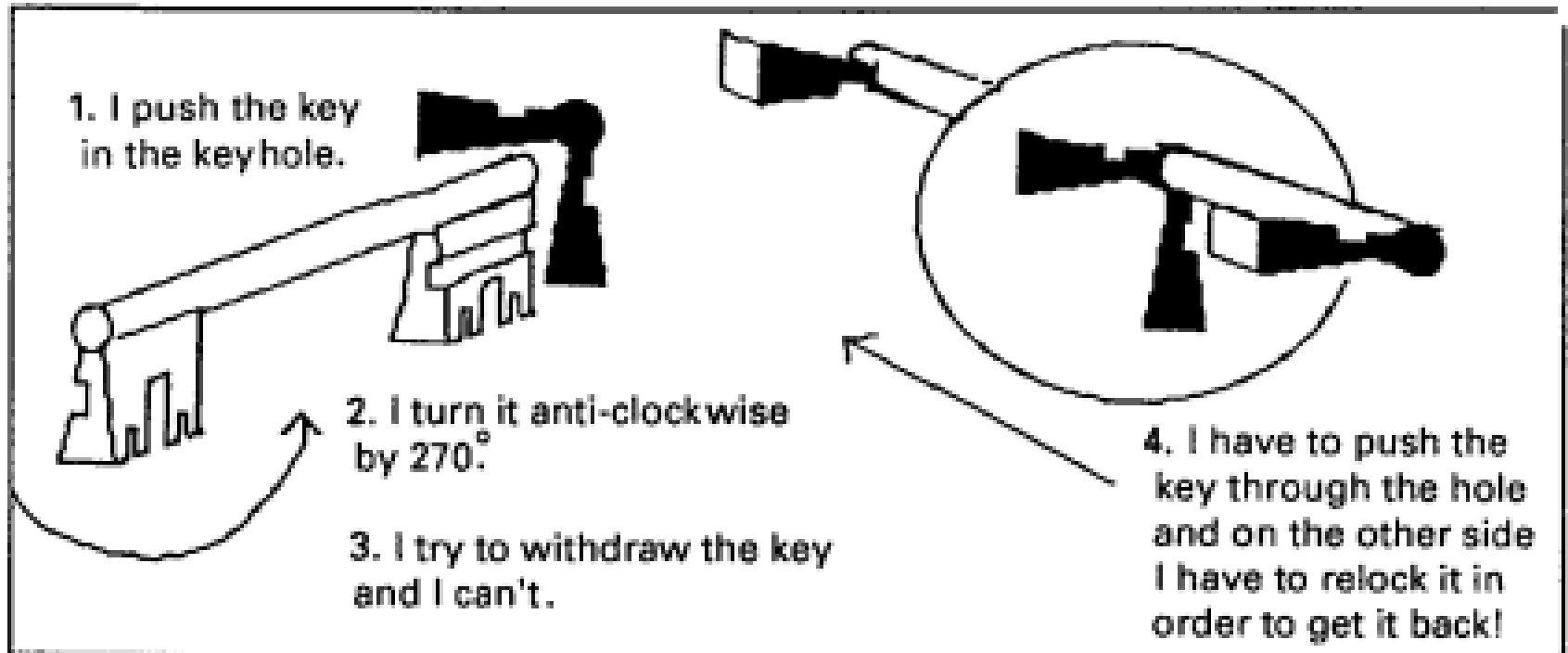Who is able to contest it?

Who even thinks about it anymore?

Delegation from humans to non-humans

Can you think of any cases of delegation gone wrong?

How could the problem have been avoided?

Go away or I will replace you with a very small shell script.

Programs and anti-programs

1. I push the key in the keyhole.

2. I turn it anti-clockwise by 270°.

3. I try to withdraw the key and I can't.

4. I have to push the key through the hole and on the other side I have to relock it in order to get it back!

Thinking like a network

U.S. Navy photo by Ryan McLearnon

Tracing networks in Wikipedia

Why has Wikipedia not completely succumb to the stupidity of the crowds by now?

Are social rules and norms enough to explain why some online spaces are full of nonsense, spam, and vandalism and others are not?

Tracing networks in Wikipedia

Tracing networks in Wikipedia

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In Summary

- Attention to **breakdowns** (of enrollment and what they make visible)
- **Chains, Assemblages** (of humans and nonhumans) generate effects
- Symmetry between humans and nonhumans as constituting society (and both have agency)
- **Programs** and **anti-programs** – material orderings are not fixed and permanent
- **Punctualization** of smoothly functioning assemblages into black boxes

Photo assignment

Photograph an artifact/entity (human or non-human) that is not in use in the way we typically expect (either **broken** or **enrolled** in an **uncommon** or **counter-intuitive** way).

Post to our Flickr pool by Feb 12th: http://www.flickr.com/groups/2170379@N23/ or e-mail to Stuart

Photo assignment

In the caption section answer one of these questions:

What (missing) entities must it be enrolled with to make it what it more typically is?

How is it enrolled in this particular case to make it what it isn't?

Photo assignment

The social norm: don't take up too much fridge space.

The bins don't stop anyone, but they do guide us into policing ourselves and others.