

Rerouting the agency of technology-in-use – STS and the resurrection of the mundane

Prof Hans Glimell & Daniel Normark
Section for Science and Technology Studies, Göteborg University
P.O. Box 510, SE-405 30, Göteborg, Sweden

Since at least two decades, significant groups within computer science (HCI – Human Computer Interaction; CSCW– Computer Supported Cooperative Work) have taken on the challenge of transgressing our legacy of Cartesian separation between mind and matter, cognition and action, to allow for situated agents informed by practical action and everyday experience. STS, owing its foundational underpinnings to philosophers like Wittgenstein and Winch whose work rejected the very idea of a disembodied rationality or abstract reason and objective meaning, has with few exceptions been remarkably absent in this undertaking.

The paper set outs by tracing some reasons for this, outlining a genealogy of man-machine assemblages, one that is crystallized and reproduced in current attempts to 'configure the user' along the crossroads between the social and computer sciences. The current almost iconic influence exerted by the notion of 'ethnomethodologically informed design' in these circles is addressed, sharply contrasted by a recapitulation of Lynch's thought-provoking inquiry about how ethnomethodology has fallen into oblivion within STS.

Next, 'roads' in the literal sense are approached. From being thought of as a plain physical infrastructure, roads have become reconceptualised as information systems and now, since the advent of mobile technology empowering and rerouting the agency of road users, increasingly also as interactive tools or media. Excerpts from two recent ethnographies display some of the interpretative flexibility, interactivity and articulation work involved in calibrating the codes of road use, while at the same time displacing or violating them. In this way, they illustrate the never-ending translations knotting together the 'centres of calculation' and situated agency in sustaining road governance. Refuelled by these observations, the paper concludes by advocating the potential of an increased intercourse between the two portrayed communities in pursuing the thorough-going mundane 'socialness' permeating technology-in-use; furnishing ourselves to better capture a shift towards dispersed agency.