

# Television & New Media

<http://tvn.sagepub.com>

---

## **Networks, Institutions, Translation**

Ned Rossiter

*Television New Media* 2009; 10; 138 originally published online Nov 17, 2008;  
DOI: 10.1177/1527476408326602

The online version of this article can be found at:

<http://tvn.sagepub.com>

---

Published by:



<http://www.sagepublications.com>

**Additional services and information for *Television & New Media* can be found at:**

**Email Alerts:** <http://tvn.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts>

**Subscriptions:** <http://tvn.sagepub.com/subscriptions>

**Reprints:** <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav>

**Permissions:** <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav>

**Citations** <http://tvn.sagepub.com/cgi/content/refs/10/1/138>

# Networks, Institutions, Translation

Ned Rossiter

*University of Nottingham, Ningbo, China*

Sociality is always immanent to institutional arrangements. This was the analysis of Althusser and later Foucault. The state, family, school, prison, hospital, madhouse. During the time of Western modernity, as it is commonly understood, we can add the firm, the union, the university. Foucault's tendency was to see these institutional fields as technologies of discipline. My interest is to consider technologies of invention. What institutional form might such technologies assemble? What are the conditions of their emergence? What are the technics of governance that distinguish new institutions from their modern counterparts? How do they connect to other institutions, and what is their economy? What is the relation between the construction of the common—understood as processes of translation constituted through struggles of labor—and its differential potential or multiplying affects?<sup>1</sup> And how might this relation constitute a new institutional form?

In the past few years, I have been codeveloping the political concept of “organized networks” in an effort to think of the possibility of new institutional forms immanent to the culture of networks. My curiosity about social-political organizations within networked settings might be understood in terms of the invention of new institutional forms. Along with the influence here of the work of Antonio Negri and Paolo Virno and insights gained from the history of *operaismo* more broadly, there is also a debt to medium theory, particularly the work of Canadian political economist and communications theorist Harold A. Innis. Collaborative practices within network cultures can be understood in terms of formation and form. Formation corresponds with the processual relations through which expression emerges. Form, on the other hand, furnishes the contours of expression as it subsists within the social-technical dynamics of digital media. How these relations coalesce as distinct networks situated within and against broader geopolitical forces becomes a primary challenge for networks desiring scalar transformation—a movement that also consists of transinstitutional, disciplinary, subjective, and corporeal relations whose antagonisms define the multiple registers of “the political.”

Transinstitutional practices are practices in translation. Neither linguistic equivalence nor “co-figuration” (Sakai 2006), translation is understood “as a mode of social praxis rather than a mode of epistemological mapping” (Solomon 2008). The process of invention is a practice of translation. Translation is the “common” from which methodological iterations emerge. As an assemblage whose spatial and temporal

coordinates undergo constant transformation, the relation between inside and outside is subject to processes of translation. We are always in translation. This is the differential potential of the common.

The problem of translation across and within a network of networks becomes one of the key difficulties for transnational collaboration. An organized network is one that instantiates the political in the moment of transversal engagement with seemingly antithetical institutional forms: the state, the firm, the nongovernmental organization, the union, the university. It is through such confrontations that the temporal rhythms and spatial coordinates of a network are made most clear. The tensions that ensue in this transversal encounter constitute new subjectivities.

Within the porosity of institutional borders subsists a potential for new economic interventions. The question of economic autonomy is a key issue for organized networks and is a matter that has to be taken seriously. The social-technical endeavors in institution formation might operate as what Fabian Muniesa and Michel Callon (2007) term *economic experiments*, which shape the construction of markets. The communication of relations between emergent institutional forms and their invention of markets is underscored by the technics of mediation.

Mediation, in turn, is registered in the following key ways: systems of governance, rituals and materialities of practice, discourses with uncertain borders, and technologies of collaborative constitution. The arrangement of these elements produces new territories for potential exploitation by capital. The political and economic challenge is to produce interventions into markets that enable economic resources for experiments in organizing networks and living wages for participants. How, for instance, might resources created within any particular network be adapted and recombined by another? Not only are there distinct linguistic-cultural differences that delimit one network from another, but, to recast Virno, there is also the grammar of networks to consider: socialities of communication, formats of code, techniques of governance, materialities of investigation, and so on.

Spatial distributions and temporal rhythms further complicate the capacity for networks to undergo scalar shifts. The network-institution nexus is not one that corresponds with what Mary Kaldor (2003) and Chantal Mouffe (2005) loosely term *global civil society* networks. The singular qualities of network cultures underpin my contestation with political theorists invested in reinvigorating democracy as we know it. I have serious doubts about persisting with models of democracy, especially when they are simplistically grafted onto the Internet. E-democracy? No thanks. Given that representative models of democracy frequently correspond with modern institutions of the nation-state—institutions arguably in crisis—I continue to wonder how appropriate the burden of democratic theory is to describe the political culture of embryonic institutional forms within networked settings. My preference is for a nonrepresentational politics constituted through relations rather than procedures. This poses significant challenges for the governance of networks, and the way these are handled play out on a case by case basis.

It would be too crude to say neoliberalism generates new institutional forms. But if precarious labor and life are the norm, and not the exception, then it follows that the institutional spaces of precarity subsist as the common within a neoliberal or post-Fordist condition (Neilson and Rossiter forthcoming). So how to explain the social impulse to invent new institutional forms at the current conjuncture? Why now, in other words? In many ways, the type of institutions I am speaking of is internal to the logic of capital. Certainly, it would seem they cannot exist outside of neoliberalism. By way of conclusion, I wonder if the incessant peer-to-peer drive to collaborative production—exemplified most starkly by the advent of web 2.0 and social networking sites—is not symptomatic of capital’s quest for new economies of scale that minimize the cost of labor. Perhaps the invention of new institutional forms needs to be accompanied by a reassertion of wage labor and modes of collectivization. Maybe that will be the specter that comes to haunt neoliberalism and its “will to outsourcing.”

## Note

1. This definition of the common draws on Mezzadra and Neilson (2007; see also Neilson and Rossiter forthcoming).

## References

- Kaldor, Mary. 2003. *Global Civil Society: An Answer to War*. Cambridge, UK: Polity.
- Mezzadra, Sandro and Brett Neilson. 2007. *Border as Method, or, the Multiplication of Labor*. Unpublished paper.
- Mouffe, Chantal. 2005. *On the Political*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Muniesa, Fabian and Michel Callon. 2007. Economic Experiments and the Construction of Markets. In *Do Economists Make Markets? On the Performativity of Markets*, edited by D. MacKenzie, F. Muniesa, and L. Siu, 163–89. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Neilson, Brett and Ned Rossiter. forthcoming. Precarity as a Political Concept, or, Fordism as Exception. *Theory, Culture & Society*.
- Sakai, Naoki. 2006. Translation. *Theory, Culture & Society* 23 (2–3): 71–86.
- Solomon, Jon. 2008. *Re: <edu-factory>A Hierarchy of Networks? or, Geo-Culturally Differentiated Networks and the Limits of Collaboration*. Posting to edu-factory mailing list, January 23. Accessed July 28, 2008, from [http://listcultures.org/pipermail/edufactory\\_listcultures.org/2008-January/000129.html](http://listcultures.org/pipermail/edufactory_listcultures.org/2008-January/000129.html)

**Ned Rossiter** is an associate professor of network cultures at the University of Nottingham, Ningbo, China, and an adjunct senior research fellow in the Centre for Cultural Research at the University of Western Sydney.