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On meshworks and other complications  
of portraying contemporary organizing

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Managing Overflow

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## On meshworks and other complications of portraying contemporary organizing



### *Abstract*

This text begins with a brief summary of problems resulting from the traditional framing of the term “organizations”. It ignores organizing without organizations, organizing between organizations, and the fact that organizations can be obstacles to organizing. The text continues with the analysis of the newly fashionable term “meshwork” as a possible new way of framing organizing.

### Keywords

Legal persons, networks, actor-network, action nets, meshworks.



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Organizations as entities were legal fictions – in reality they were sets of actions embedded in larger sets of actions. (Czarniawska-Joerges, 1992: 110, summarizing research results of Melville Dalton, 1959).

After a long period of anthropomorphizing organizations into some kind of SuperPersons (more on this topic in Czarniawska, 1997), various pivots in the social sciences reversed this way of looking at these entities. A narrative turn brought with it Actor-Network Theory and the realization that organizations, far from always being macro-actors, can best be seen as actants – units that, according to narratologists, simply do something or are having something done to them. As to what these actants were doing, the practice turn suggested that they can be seen both as arrays of activities (Schatzki, 2001; Gherardi and Strati, 2012) and as assemblages of actions (action nets, Czarniawska, 1997). Additionally, the narrative approach freed actions from the cage of intentionality: After all, as Kenneth Burke (1945/1969) has already noted, “motives” are but rhetorical expressions, and intentions can be ascribed to anything – humans and computers alike. Some conceptualizations of the role of information technology can be useful in depicting the hybrid character that organizational actants acquire. Organizations can be seen as “meshworks” (De Landa, 1995a), but they can also turn out into “notworks”<sup>1</sup>, hindering organizing. At present, a great deal of organizing happens outside organizations, from hooligan fights through Occupy Wall Street to Arab Spring (Shirky, 2008). Thus, as organizing flows over the “legal person” frames, new concepts are needed to grasp such new phenomena. As suggested by Boltanski and Thévenot (1991/2006: 18), what is needed is “... a new and systematic approach to organizations, construed not as unified entities characterized in terms of spheres of activity, systems of actors, or fields, but as composite assemblages that include arrangements deriving from different worlds”.

I begin by briefly summarizing problems resulting from the traditional framing of the term “organizations” (see also Czarniawska, 2010a; 2013), then inspect the newly fashionable term “meshwork” to see if it is helpful for dealing with those problems. As I see it, there are at least three reasons for studying “organizations” as units separate from their “environment”, which can obscure crucial instances of organizing: organizing without organizations; organizing between organizations; and organizing in spite of organizations.

<sup>1</sup> “A network, when it is acting flaky or is down. Compare nyetwork. Said at IBM to have originally referred to a particular period of flakiness on IBM’s VNET corporate network ca. 1988; but there are independent reports of the term from elsewhere”. (<http://www.catb.org/jargon/html/N/notwork.html>, accessed 2013-09-28)

## Three reasons why obsession with formal organizations is stultifying

### *Organizing without organizations*

Clay Shirky's *Here Comes Everybody: The Power of Organizing Without Organizations* (2008) has been dismissed by many readers as Internet hype. After all, he believes, like many others, that the Internet will revolutionize our lives – the standard prediction accompanying any new technology<sup>2</sup>. Shirky does not claim, however, that everything enabled by the Internet must necessarily be good – only that certain organizing attempts, once impossible without the support of a formal organization, are suddenly possible. His examples can be divided into three groups. The first group concerned the exchange of information and opinions, made possible by twitting and blogging. The second described the collaborative creation of knowledge, of which Wikipedia is the best example (a detailed description of the phenomenon is to be found in Jemielniak, 2014). Finally, he presented examples of organizing mass actions, such as political protests; the number of such cases of organizing is growing exponentially, and they vary from such small events as friends' meetings, through battles of football hooligans, Missing People groups, to Occupy Wall Street and the Arab Spring.

It must be emphasized that there is no a priori moral valuation in Shirky's presentation of the examples. After all, blogging may be contributing to a growing number of heart attacks (apparently bloggers do not get enough sleep), and it certainly contributes to information overload. Wikipedia contains a great deal of incorrect information, but so do most encyclopedias<sup>3</sup>— only the latter do not admit it, but hide behind the authority of formal organizations. Football hooligans use the Internet to organize their fights with hooligan fans from the opposing team. Even murder can be organized this way, as Günter Grass demonstrated in *Crabwalk* (2003). Thus, the point is not the moral superiority of organizing without organizations, and certainly not a point for individualism and against collectivism. The point is that, as Jacobsson said after Robert Michels (1949: 390) that “so often, from a means, organization becomes an end” (Jacobsson, 1994: 83). So why not eliminate this danger and dispense of formal organizations altogether?

This is because it is not certain that those spontaneous movements, organized with the help of the Internet, can achieve something concrete without becoming formal organizations. In his keynote speech at LAEMOS conference in Buenos Aires, Giorgio Alberti (2010) argued that the instability of governments in Latin American countries can be related to the fact that the participants in

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<sup>2</sup> For a biting critique, see e.g. Morozov, 2013.

<sup>3</sup> Historian Norman Davies came to this conclusion on the basis of a systematic comparison (Davies, 2011).

social movements continue to act in the same way when in power, without understanding that the state is a formal organization that works according to a different set of rules. One is reminded of the 1979 hesitations of Petra Kelly, one of the founders of *Die Grünen*, the German Green Party. Firmly opposed to the formal power system, the German Greens concluded that they would not be able to achieve any progress without joining it, although they were well aware of the necessary compromises. Thus Kelly served as a member of the Bundestag (German Parliament) between 1983 and 1990, and the Greens are now a regular party. Similarly, there are voices suggesting that if Occupy Wall Street will not formalize itself into “proper” organizations, with leaders, strategies, and hierarchies, it will simply vanish. It could be that organizing without organizations is ephemeral, and that it needs to be transformed into formal organizations in order to achieve results (Ahrne and Brunsson, 2010, would certainly be of that opinion), but this does not free us from the obligation to study organizing in its informal phase.

### *Organizing between organizations*

Much organizing happens between and among organizations, in the form of alliances and similar cooperative efforts (see e.g., Smith Ring and Van De Ven, 1992), networks (see e.g., Håkansson and Johansson, 2001), or mergers and acquisitions (see e.g., DePamphilis, 2008). This ubiquitous inter-organizing has contributed to the legitimacy of meta-organizations, which help to organize it (Ahrne and Brunsson, 2008). Indeed, this form of organizing is perhaps most studied within mainstream organization studies. But probably the most common and least noted is the cooperation among various parts of different formal organizations – a joint action. Such cooperation is often dictated by necessity, rather than the will to collaborate. Thus an urban recovery project in Rome in the rundown district of Magliana along the River Tiber required the removal of 43 companies, and included plans for 32 new interventions, 22 of public and 10 of private organizations (Czarniawska, 2010b). The problems and obstacles related to the actualization of this project was partly related to the fact that it was almost impossible to ascertain if the number 43 was correct and to contact all involved parties; and partly related to the city’s problem of maintaining the will to cooperate among the 32 parties, especially as their planned interventions had to wait until the formalities were resolved.

Not all projects are necessarily this complex, but there is no doubt that organizations are constantly cooperating; that their cooperation is not always easy, precisely because of the formalities involved; and that the issue tends to be ignored in conventional organization studies, keen as its authors are on remaining “within” an organization.

## *Organizations can be obstacles to organizing*

As I suggested before (Czarniawska, 2010a; 2013), I find the conceptualization of organizations as tools for collective action (Perrow, 1986) to be particularly useful. It permits one to conceptualize organizations as virtual artifacts. From that perspective, an organization can be seen as combining the functions of dispatcher (Latour, 1998) and a translator in a machine that has been given a legal personality (Lamoreaux, 2004). An organized collective action means that the right objects and the right persons must be in the right places at the right times, doing the right things. To be able to send objects and people to the right places at the right time, the dispatcher must know how to contact them and how to explain what to do. Thus the dispatcher depends on translator services. The translator is needed because there is a movement of people and objects; had they stayed at the same place, there would be no need for translation (Czarniawska and Sevón, 1996, 2005).

Humans are not “cogs” in this machine, any more than they are chips in their computers. They constructed this machine—this tool—with help of other co-constructors (thus “social construction”), but once constructed, the machine continues to construct them. In such a perspective, organizations are literally instrumental: either they work, or they do not. If they do not, they should be repaired or exchanged (and eventually dropped, as Karl Weick, 1996, has suggested). What is more, they can be designed better or worse, but they cannot be designed perfectly. Elaine Scarry’s (1985) theory explains convincingly why that is so.

According to her, an artifact’s “reciprocation” (the ways in which it can be used) always exceeds the designer’s projection (the intentions of the designer projected into the object). As much as they may wish to, designers cannot control the use of their artifacts because they design more than they know (the institutional order speaks through them), and they cannot foresee all the contexts in which they could be used (Czarniawska, 2009).

Organizations, like computers and other tools, can be used for varying purposes. Refusing to account for the functionality of an organization or accounting only for its formally stated purposes can overshadow the many unexpected uses of organizations – such as the obstruction of organizing. James C. Scott (2009; 2012) is of the firm opinion that the formal organization of the state has been damaging to spontaneous and superior forms of organizing:

Forms of informal cooperation, coordination, and action that embody mutuality without hierarchy are the quotidian experience of most people (...) Most villages and neighborhoods function precisely because of the informal, transient networks of coordination that do not require formal organization, let alone hierarchy. [The question is whether] the existence, power and reach of the state over the past several centuries have sapped the *independent, self-organizing* power of individuals and small

communities.(...) The state, arguably, destroys the natural initiative and responsibility that arise from voluntary cooperation. (2012: xxi-xxii, italics in original)

Scott did not limit his criticism to the state: "...existing state institutions are both sclerotic and at the service of dominant interests, as are a vast majority of formal organizations that represent established interests."(2012: xvii). So, although not everyone may be ready to cheer for anarchism, the stultifying impact of formal organizations on informal organizing needs to be better documented.

Of course, there is no need to abandon studies of formal organizations, so dominant in contemporary life. But it would be good to return to the definition of organizing that extends organizing in formal organizations, as Karl Weick suggested long ago. In his definition, organizing is the process of assembling "ongoing interdependent actions into sensible sequences that generate sensible outcomes" (Weick, 1979: 3). The result of organizing is interlocked cycles, which can be represented as causal loops rather than as a linear chain of causes and effects. But, and above all, organizing is an ongoing encounter with ambiguity, ambivalence, and equivocality, part of a larger attempt to make sense of life and the world.

## Some newer frames: networks, actor-networks and action nets

### *Networks*

The idea of networks was supposed to change the traditional way of portraying organizations as specialized offices (bureaus) arranged in a hierarchical manner and the traditional way of seeing markets as "free" – that is, not organized (see e.g. Håkansson and Snehota, 1995).

The idea of networks has become extremely popular when supported by the emergence of the Internet, not the least in the military context. Network-Centric Warfare, or NCW, an invention of the Pentagon (see e.g. Alberts et al., 1999), has quickly reached other western army forces, including Canada, Singapore, Australia (Network Enabled Warfare), Holland (Network Centric Operations), UK (Network Enabled Capability), Norway and Sweden (Network Based Defence). NCW has been hailed as "an impressive change in institutional culture", and its guru, John Garstka, an associate director of the Pentagon's Office of Force Transformation has said "that the benefits of flattening the military command structure and increasing its networking capabilities will ultimately prove irresistible" (Salkever, 2003).

The assumptions behind NCW seem sensible and convincing. The term conveys a double meaning: "network-centered" in the sense that it is based

entirely on the ICT, on the Web – in its various Internet and Intranet forms. The second meaning refers to networking – flexible cooperation and capacity of ad hoc collaboration among previously highly bureaucratized army forces. The former – a shared information and communication technology – is seen as a necessary but sufficient condition for the latter.

According to Alex Salkever, technology editor of *BusinessWeek*, NCW was no more or no less than a hope “to remake a hierarchical, hidebound organization so that it can function with a flat management structure, ad hoc collaboration and on-the-fly decision making” (Salkever, 2003). But, he added, it could also strengthen the traditional tendencies of “Pentagon mandarins” to “micromanage” – to make even local decisions. Commanders sitting far from the field miss key pieces of local information that did not make it, or could not make it, to the Web. Salkever quoted both the criticism and the response to it: “You have to be able to create graceful failure modes. If everything goes through some central network without which I’m helpless, then what happens if some key node fails?”; “We’re developing the information grid so that every platform will have the same information, and if one or two platforms fail, their functions are automatically taken over by other platforms. Every platform will be able to be the command center”. But what if every platform tries to be a command center, as allegedly happened with tanks, when each crew member had a GPS map of the terrain (Mark Davis, personal information)?

I have no intention of dramatizing the perils of a network, but I would like to suggest another way of looking at it. A network, in the traditional meaning of the word, is but a flattened hierarchy in which the top becomes the center and the bottom the periphery. This means that the nodes exist prior to connections: no nodes, no connections. Can the nodes exist without the previous hierarchy? If so, how are they created? Thus although there is no doubt that networks exist and multiply, there is also a need for other ways of conceptualizing organizing.

### *Actor-Network Theory*

As the reader is probably well aware, actor-network theory (ANT) originated in studies of science and technology, as the result of a fortunate crossover between narratology (in the version of Lithuanian-French semiotician Algirdas Greimas, see e.g. Greimas, 1990) and studies of successful inventions (see e.g. Latour, 1988).

It can be said that ANT is narratology at the service of understanding how the social is assembled (Latour, 2005), based on a fruitful analogy between a fictitious narrative and the production of a research report. In a fictitious narrative, it is not known at the outset who is a hero and who is a villain (unless it is a sequel). Initially unprepossessing figures conquer kingdoms after having successfully accomplished their narrative trajectory, whereas various tokens of power and authority (formal titles, golden treasures) may change owners and remake some characters while dismembering others. Thus a lesson for studying organizing: If it

is known at the outset who has power, who is a hero, and who is a villain, research is a waste of time. A study that truly purports to provide information that did not exist before begins with the identification of actants (those that act and are acted upon) in a given case (that is, an occurrence of a phenomenon), follows a narrative trajectory (a series of programs and anti-programs), and shows how actants that established associations and stabilized them became actors, or even macro-actors. After all, macro-actors are but large networks that are hiding their networked character by presenting themselves through one voice of a representative speaker.

Although ANT can be of great use in organization theory (see e.g. Czarniawska and Hernes, 2005), it does not cover all cases of organizing. ANT was constructed for a different purpose: It focuses on macro-actors in order to show how they were assembled. It does not focus on organizing that does not lead to the construction of actors or on the macro-actors that disassemble.

### *Action nets*

For some years now, I have been suggesting an extension of the actor-network approach to studying connections among actions (Czarniawska, 1997; 2004; 2008). The idea is to study organizing as the connection, re-connection, and disconnection of various collective actions to each other, either according to patterns dictated by a given institutional order or in an innovative way. Such collective actions need not be performed within the bounds of a formal organization; an action net can involve actions performed by several formal organizations or by assemblies of human and non-human actants. The actions can be connected loosely or temporarily, but the connections may stabilize in time.

I also added to actor-network theory an insight provided by new institutionalism: In a given institutional order, certain collective actions seem obvious or even necessary candidates for being connected to others (producing to selling, for example), whereas other connections may seem alien or innovative (open source, for example).

A standard organizational analysis begins with “actors” or “organizations”, whereas an action net approach sees them as *products* rather than sources of the organizing – taking place within, enabled by, and constitutive of, an action net. Actors are produced by and in an action net, not vice versa. Organizations, in themselves products of organizing, become actors due to a repeated type of action legitimized by a “legal person” certificate.

Another product, or effect, of organizing, may be a network. But the concept of network assumes the previous existence of actors who make contacts, whereas action nets assume that connections between actions produce actors. A network that is not part of an active action net is like the robot Hal in *2001*: a system and a network, but isolated and absurd.

Such action nets usually transcend any given organization (Czarniawska, 2002). Public marketing of a company requires connections to such organizations

as advertisement offices, city administration, and publicity regulation. Such connections can assume a variety of forms: formal contracts and hierarchical subordination, but also friendship. As actions thus connected are different, they require translation at connecting points. A given unit, with its own internal actors and artifacts, may be considered an entity unto itself in a legal sense; but many other actors and artifacts, including whole networks, are usually involved in an action net. Taking entire action nets rather than mere interorganizational contacts under observation unveils a more comprehensive picture of the way organizations are formed, stabilized, dissolved, or relocated. It also improves the ability to see how actants try to stabilize “their” segments of a net in order to form powerful actor-networks (Callon, 1986).

Different approaches and ways of conceptualizing organizing have their advantages and shortcomings, but the fact is that formal organizations, networks of actors and actor-networks, action nets and spontaneous organizing coexist – at the same time and in the same territory. Nowhere it can be seen as clearly as in big cities and their management (Czarniawska, 2002). Although there is always a large formal organization called “city administration,” it is a multi-faceted hybrid, with parts ranging from the purely political to the purely productive, and everything in between. But the city is also an arena for a great many other formal organizations, from companies to citizens’ voluntary associations, and for social movements and spontaneous demonstrations and ad hoc groups. No wonder that it is urban scholars who have searched for a metaphor that will encompass it all.

## Would meshworks fit the bill?

### *Urban studies*

Mexican-American philosopher Manuel De Landa (1995a) is usually seen as the author who imported the notion of meshworks from behavioral AI to social sciences. Although he later continued to use the term in relation to computer sciences (De Landa, 1998)<sup>4</sup>, he used the metaphor first in relation to homes.

If our minds are thus hybrids of two or more computer-types then we should expect out homes to be also complex mixtures of self-organized and planned components, or to use technical terms, of hierarchies and meshworks. Hierarchies are structures in which components have been sorted out into homogenous groups, then articulated together. Meshworks, on the other hand, articulate heterogeneous components as such, without homogenizing. (...) Our homes can then be seen as mixtures of self-organized and planned components (...) (De Landa, 1995a: 3).

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<sup>4</sup> There is also a term “mesh networking” to describe digital connections outside the Internet (Dibbell, 2012).

I return to some peculiarities of this definition. For now I add only that De Landa explained in another paper (De Landa, 1995b) that those “hierarchies and meshworks” are translations first, of Herbert Simon’s “hierarchies and markets”, and second, of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s “strata and aggregates”. “Aggregates” are now usually translated as assemblages (even De Landa uses this word in later texts), so the connection to actor-network theory is obvious (Latour has been also influenced by Deleuze; see e.g., Latour, 1993).

The meshwork metaphor has been enthusiastically adopted by Marilyn Hamilton, urban scholar, city activist, and city management consultant. She actually consulted neurological literature and established that the term “meshwork” depicts

... the emergence of patterns in the brain, resulting from the neuro-chemical connections of synapses that produce a hairnet-like mesh of axons (...), characterized by major primary connective pathways that produce and intersect secondary, tertiary and many further levels of connectedness. It appears that the meshwork self-organizes connections and when a certain density and/or repeated use of pathways arises, a hierarchy of complexity emerges that enables the brain to replicate the patterns (...) allowing retention of learning and efficiencies of energy use. This cycle of self-organizing and hierarchical patterning continues throughout a lifetime, allowing the brain to build up a repertoire of learned behaviors while continuing its capacity for self-organizing adaptiveness to dynamic environments and never-ending stimuli (Hamilton, 2012: 2-3).

In other words, when connections within action nets become repetitive and stabilized, a formal organization may emerge. And, like brains, organizations can also become sclerotic, as Scott has rightly noted.

Still within the territorial frame of reference, one can find another use of the term, “meshworks” this time by the social anthropologist Tim Ingold. He borrowed the term from another French philosopher, greatly interested in the issues of space: Henri Lefebvre (Ingold, 2007: 80). To Ingold, a network is a set of lines that joins the dots (or, in my vocabulary, a set of connections between the actions). A meshwork is

interwoven trails rather than a network of intersection routes. The lines of the meshwork are the trails *along* which the life is lived. And (...) it is in the entanglement of lines, not in the connecting of points, that the mesh is constituted (Ingold, 2007: 80-81)

The picture on the next page (82) is similar to those I drew when trying to illustrate the concept of action nets (apart from the fact that Ingold is famous for drawing beautifully, and I am not).

In a later work, Ingold engaged in a debate with Latour, suggesting that ANT departed from Deleuzian insights; whereas his definition of meshworks – as different from networks – develops them further.

ANT claims that events are the effects of an agency that is distributed around a far-flung network of act-ants comparable to the spider's web. But the web, as SPIDER explains, is not really a network in this sense. Its lines do not connect; rather, they are the lines along which it perceives and acts. For SPIDER, they are indeed lines of life. Thus whereas ANT conceives of the world as an assemblage of heterogeneous bits and pieces, SPIDER's world is a tangle of threads and pathways; not a network but a meshwork. Action, then, emerges from the interplay of forces conducted along the lines of the meshwork. (...) Where ANT, then, stands for actor-network theory, SPIDER – the epitome of my own position – stands for the proposition that *skilled practice involves developmentally embodied responsiveness*. (Ingold, 2011: 84-85)

I am not sure that ANT people wouldn't agree with the last statement, but indeed, even in action nets actions are connected and translated, and, unlike a spider's web, often heterogeneous. But didn't De Landa claim just that the meshworks are knitted from heterogeneous elements, unlike hierarchies? What does the meshwork metaphor stand for, then? Perhaps it is necessary to consult its non-metaphorical use.

### *Meshworks in technology and in organization studies*

According to a non-metaphorical meaning of the term “meshwork”, all the authors I have quoted are wrong. Meshwork is “an open fabric of string or rope or wire woven together at regular intervals” (<http://www.thefreedictionary.com>), in medicine a vascular network (<http://www.merriam-webster.com>); - in other words, a tightly knitted net. The threads are homogeneous; at most they can have different colors, but the material must be the same, because otherwise it would be difficult to obtain mesh, which “consists of semi-permeable barrier made of connected strands of metal, fiber, or other flexible/ductile material. Mesh is similar to web or net in that it has many attached or woven strands.” (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/>). Yet even the very high hi-techs speak of their “wireless mesh network” (Dibbell, 2012); an oxymoron if there ever was one.

Although Deleuze and Guattari rightly differentiated between strata and assemblages, the assemblages they meant were definitely made of heterogeneous elements. Why not use the term “assemblage” rather than “meshwork”, then? Because assemblages do not produce this association of density, which is important, and suggests straighter lines, albeit of different length and directions, than the wavy trails mentioned by Ingold. Indeed, Simon's contrast of hierarchies and markets would be good, if in the meantime we did not learn that markets are assemblages (Callon, 1998) rather than self-organizing, spontaneous sets of actions.

The neurological definition quoted by Marilyn Hamilton rightly speaks of “hairnet-like mesh of axons”, but it does not contrast hierarchies and meshworks.

To the contrary, and this renders it fascinating, it says that a meshwork first connects itself spontaneously as it were, and only later develops hierarchy within itself – produces strata. This usage would be almost perfect, but it still assumes homogeneity of axons (nerve fibers). It is the connections that produce a variety of behaviors; the meshwork itself is homogeneous.

Tim Ingold's use of meshwork, indeed as an opposite of hierarchy or anything that is planned, departs completely from the literal meaning of meshwork. But metaphors are *by definition wrong*. In technical terms, metaphor is “a new semantic coupling” (Eco, 1979/1983: 69); its meaning in Greek being “move”. As Umberto Eco noted, however, the common theory of metaphor confuses it with metonymy in assuming that it consists of the substitution of one element of language for another “*by virtue of a resemblance of their referents*” (ibid: 79, italics in original). But it is actually not the resemblance (important for both simile and metonymy) that makes a successful metaphor; it is the “short circuit” of associations that it is able (or not) to produce. True, metaphors owe their life to metonymies: Such short circuits are possible because of the existence of the “multidimensional network of metonymies, each of which is explained by a cultural invention rather than by an original resemblance” (ibid: 78). Eco also explained the difference between acceptable metaphors (where the resemblance is indeed visible almost at once) and the misleading ones (where the circuit is long, and when accomplished, does not produce much knowledge or aesthetic satisfaction). The truly rewarding metaphors are those that produce “the tension, the ambiguity, and the difficulty which are characteristic of the aesthetic message” (Eco, 1979/1983: 82).

I find the metaphor of “meshwork” attractive because it provokes associations to various aspects of organizing, but also because it creates a tension with its literal meaning. I would like to use the term in a sense that permits me to pack in all kinds of organizing at once. Therefore the density of the mesh is an appropriate association. On a given territory, let's say, a city, there is self-organizing and planned organizing, formal organizations and informal networks; action nets are connected and disconnected, stabilized and destabilized; actants busy themselves trying to become actors; and trajectories of people and things crisscross. The type of activity may differ from place to place, but then, in time, another type may replace it.

The meshwork metaphor deftly captures the processes of organizing – of the news and of the news production – which I have studied in news agencies (Czarniawska, 2012). News agencies provide an excellent example of organizing that takes place outside, inside, and between formal organizations; where networks, action nets, and actor-networks are meshed together, and hierarchy and anarchy cohabit; and where no single worker can (or needs to) understand the working of the whole system.

A critic can say that I am mixing metaphors: I called news agencies “cyberfactories”. So are news agencies factories or meshworks? They can be both,

depending on what aspect of their functioning is in focus. Unlike philosophers, organization scholars are not supposed to create ontologies, but to study ontologies (and cosmologies) of other people. So news agencies are also neither factories nor meshworks, but can be considered as both. As suggested before, the very “wrongness” of the metaphors opens routes of exploration of organizing in practice.

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