

The ‘Missing Masses’ of Resistance: An ethnographic understanding of a workplace dispute

The literature on resistance has largely attended to human agents whether in terms of collective action or individual subjectivity. Through focusing on the ‘missing masses’ or mundane material artefacts, this article seeks to show how actor network theory (ANT) can advance our understanding of resistance. Drawing upon ethnographic research during a workplace dispute, this study explores how material artefacts as well as human actors reflect heterogeneous relations that together successfully mobilised opposition to the imposition of compulsory redundancies in a UK University. Insofar as the mingling and entanglement of human and non-humans have been largely neglected in accounts of resistance, we believe that an ANT informed account contributes in distinctive ways to this literature.

Keywords:

Actor network theory, ethnography, materials, redundancy, resistance, strategy.

Introduction

The missing masses of our society are to be found among the nonhuman mechanisms, it is not clear how they get there and why they are missing from most accounts. (Latour, 1992: 248).

There is a long tradition of research on resistance at work including studies of official and unofficial disputes as well as those that culminate in collective action such as a work-to-rule or a strike (Gouldner, 1954; Eldridge, 1968; Hyman, 1972; Allen, 2009). Other scholars have

focused on different forms of resistance including studies of fiddling (Mars, 1982), sabotage (Bensman and Gerver, 1963), ‘making out’ (Burawoy, 1979; Roy, 1952), the use of humour, mental distancing, cynicism and dis-identification (Collinson, 1988; 1994; Fleming and Spicer, 2003; Costas and Fleming, 2009; Karrlson, 2011). There has also been considerable research that has adopted a poststructural approach to resistance at work (e.g. Jermier et al, 1994; Knights and McCabe, 1998, 2000, 2003; Ezzamel et al, 2001; McCabe, 2007; Thomas and Davies, 2005) which has highlighted the importance of meaning and identity.

While acknowledging the contribution of this literature, we have sought a different point of departure in actor network theory (ANT). In the *British Journal of Management* (Nentwich and Hoyer, 2013; McDermott et al, 2013) and elsewhere (e.g. Jermier et al, 1994), the resistance literature has generally focused on humans and their activities but this neglects or takes-for-granted the way in which resistance is constituted through hybrid networks where human and non-humans mingle in complex relations (c.f. Alcadipani and Hassard, 2010). Our contribution is therefore twofold: first, to provide an ethnographic account of an industrial dispute in a UK university and second, to make the case for studying the missing objects or, as Latour (1992) expresses it, the ‘missing masses’ when seeking to understand resistance.

We are not arguing that non-humans have never been considered in relation to resistance for one has only to think of Bensman and Gerver’s (1963) account of the “tap” in a case of industrial deviance to know that this is not the case. With few exceptions (see Pliskin et al, 1997; Harrison and Laberge, 2002; Vickers and Fox, 2005), however, the tendency is for a human centred focus to marginalise the complex hybrid relations between materials and humans that were critical to the resistance manifest in our ethnography. As full participants in the resistance to compulsory redundancies, we did not adopt full-blown ANT methods by

following each link in the network (Latour, 2005) because we were unable to access management actors other than through observing them during staff-management meetings. Nonetheless, this problem is mitigated partly by our full and active involvement in the dispute, which adds to the article's distinctiveness.

Legitimising the target and approach of our research, Ashcraft (2008) has argued that there is 'a tendency in critical organization scholarship ... to frame relations of power and resistance as phenomena occurring in workplaces "out there", rather than also right here, in the academic institutions in which we labour and live' (op cit:380). Because of our involvement, it was possible to consider 'the fears and tears of struggle – the emotional drive that frames workplace politics', which are also frequently 'downplayed' in accounts of resistance (Fleming and Spicer, 2008). This involvement facilitated insights into the importance of what may be seen as banal objects often missed by external researchers studying resistance (Gabriel, 2012; Watson and Watson, 2012).

The article is organised as follows; first we seek to locate the distinctiveness of our approach by contrasting some of the literature on resistance with the attention we pay to material objects as well as social relations in presenting our ethnography. Second, we discuss our methods before presenting empirical material to illustrate how our understanding of resistance can be advanced through attending to the everyday objects through which it is mobilised. In the discussion and conclusion, we summarise our arguments together with indicating the potential of using this approach for future studies of resistance.

Understanding Materials in Relations of Resistance

Although ‘materiality’ has recently been considered ‘in the field of strategy’ (Dameron et al, 2015:S1; Thomas and Ambrosini, 2015), it has *not* been central to the analysis of resistance either historically or currently. In an early account of resistance, a human centric approach described resistance to change as ‘a combination of an individual reaction to frustration with strong group-induced forces’ (Coch and French (1948:529). This social psychological and human centric approach is widespread in the literature on change management, for example, and usually resistance is seen to derive from ‘the individual’ (Dent and Galloway, 1999: 29). This is clearly evident in Caruth et al’s (1985:23) literature review, where it was asserted that ‘The reasons for resisting new policies and job improvements offered by management fall into two broad groups: human nature and fears or imagined threats’. The human-centric nature of these studies precludes understanding resistance as a complex intermingling of social relations and material objects.

An equally early and enduring body of work contrasts with this focus on individuals in that it addresses collective and trade union resistance to management (Hyman,1972) exploring industrial action and disputes among, for example, miners (Allen,2009), dockers (Turnbull and Sapsford,2001) and glass workers (Lane and Roberts, 1971). These studies were steeped in an understanding of the material world and, especially inequalities in the distribution of material goods. However, this was largely understood in terms of the context through which workplace resistance and industrial conflict arises. In a climate of union decline during the rise of neo-liberalism, recent industrial relations literatures have focused, for example, on the development of organizing strategies in the workplace designed to build or rebuild union memberships (Lucio and Stewart, 2008; Simms, 2013) but again the focus is on human activists and how they take on the 'responsibility for dealing with management' (ibid: 387). This focus omits the way material artifacts may be embedded in mobilising actor networks to

resist management.

To establish a clearer distinction between these literatures and the approach we are proposing in this paper, it is useful to turn to the classic study on workplace fiddles by Gerald Mars (1982). He refers to different types of individual and collective fiddles and in terms of the latter discusses 'The Dustcart Crew'. As one member of the crew explains, 'there's also money for taking away things you aren't supposed to, like mattresses covered in piss or blood' (op cit: 90). The dust 'cart' is only mentioned in passing and yet it is an important actor in this fiddle, which refers to an era when the truck that bins were emptied into were open at the back, which is no longer the case in the UK. In this sense, the truck was an ally in this fiddle, which allowed the dustcart crew to take away 'a three-piece suite or any furniture like that' (op cit:91) whereas now the automated 'cart' prohibits them from doing so.

Likewise, supermarket checkout operator fiddles such as ringing 'up on the till less than the proper charge' (op cit:66) and taking the difference are no longer possible due to point of sale scanning technology. The till, which was once an ally for these fiddles is now an enemy; this is not to suggest that fiddling is no longer possible because new opportunities arise but it illustrates the importance of considering the role that material objects play in everyday life and specifically in terms of helping to understand resistance. Hence Mars' checkout operator referred to the importance of walls for if 'your till is by a wall' it creates 'a blind side', which 'cuts down the chances of being seen' (op cit:67). In effect, the wall is the fiddle's ally but Mars' does not attach importance to such objects in his account of fiddles because his focus is on whether they are individual or collective in orientation and yet the fiddles he discusses could not be achieved without the 'collusion' of objects.

In contrast to the above literatures, post-structural researchers (Ezzamel et al,2001; Jermier et al,1994; Knights and McCabe,1998, 2000, 2003) have focused on ‘resistance at the level of subjectivity’ (Merilainen et al,2004:558). This includes resistance as ‘identity performance...stimulated by contradictions, weaknesses and gaps between alternative subject positions’ (Thomas and Davies, 2005:687), which are ‘not solely constituted as actions, but also in relation to subjectivities and meanings’ that are often gendered (Thomas and Davies, 2005a: 718) and/or linked to different sexualities (Fleming, 2007). Highlighting the ambivalence of resistance, others recognise ‘that there are active processes of identity formation at work that are not fully circumscribed by either compliance with, or resistance to, organizational control’ (Iedema et al., 2006: 1112). Many of these studies draw attention to a diverse range of less overt but subtle forms of transgression or subversion or what Fleming and Sewell (2002) call ‘covert and seditious acts carried out in the silent spaces of everyday life’ (ibid. 860). In addition, Fleming and Spicer (2007) refer to four other forms of worker ‘resistance as refusal, voice, escape and creation’ (op cit:29). This literature has provided insights into various symbolic exemplifications of resistance as cynicism, irony and humour but the focus is still primarily on the active human agents of resistance. Like the earlier literature, it has not sought to draw our attention to how humans and materials are interwoven in practices of protest and resistance.

Instead of focusing on subjectivity, traditional labour process theory (LPT) stresses the ‘materialist’ (Thompson and Smith,2010:14) conditions of work. The notion of ‘labour power’ is central to LPT whereby employers only buy an individual’s *capacity* to work. It is, in part, the ‘indeterminate status of labour power as human, embodied, mobile and active’ (ibid) that helps to account for ongoing acts of resistance, struggle or misbehaviour. Nevertheless, as this explanation of labour power indicates along with Ackroyd and

Thompson's (1999) definition of misbehaviour as 'anything you do at work you are not supposed to do' (op cit: 2), it focuses attention principally on the agency of workers independently of material artefacts. This is explicit in Thompson and Smith's (2010) explanation of 'the misbehaviour perspective' which involves the 'mapping of worker action and agency' (op cit:19). Indeed, Thompson and Ackroyd (1995) lamented what they understood to be 'the virtual removal of labour as an active agency of resistance' (op cit:615) in recent British industrial sociology. However, this view is contradicted by literature where subjectivity is seen not as a distraction but an essential *complement* to understanding the employment relationships and resistance (Jermier et al,1994; O'Doherty and Willmott, 2001), even though how material artefacts are embedded within these practices and relations has continued to be neglected.

Turning to the framework that informs our analysis, ANT can help to shed new light on resistance because it challenges our taken-for-granted assumptions about agency. To be clear, we are not suggesting that objects are separate from humans or that we should forget humans and focus on objects or that objects can resist independently of humans. Instead, we are saying that some contemporary forms of resistance are made possible through material artifacts and that a greater appreciation of this is necessary to understand resistance in the modern workplace.

Our contribution then, is to suggest that an understanding of resistance can be enhanced through 'ensuring the relations that establish themselves among the artefacts of technology are accorded as much importance as that given to human interaction' (Munro, 2008:130). In understanding the resistance of human subjects, we found that whether in the form of emails (see Pliskin et al, 2007), cars, mobile phones, computers or placards, material artefacts and

their interrelationships with humans were vitally important. Drawing on the theorizing of Latour (2004) about the dangers of extreme binaries between, on the one hand, un-reconstituted social constructionism and, on the other, traditional positivism, the following section prepares the ground for our examination of the case study material.

The Organization of a Network

In ANT, actants are referred to rather than actors reflecting how both humans and non-humans contribute to the development and reproduction of actor networks. This is not to suggest, however, that objects have agency in the same way that humans do for objects lack ‘intentionality’ (Pickering, 1993:565), although increasingly a form of unconscious intentionality is in effect partially built into them, for example, as in the case of ‘automatic’ fire extinguishers or computerized robots. In ‘enacting or performing reality’ (Mol, 1999: 77; Law, 2011) or in our case resistance, a ‘gathering’ (Latour, 2004:246) of humans may mobilize materials as indispensable elements in developing a network to challenge that which they oppose. Objects as well as humans resist but the former is evident only when mobilized as part of a network that incorporates the latter.

A considerable literature exists that both promotes and challenges ANT (Czarniawska and Hernes, 2005; Law, 2004; Law and Hassard, 1999; McLean and Hassard, 2004; Latour, Latour, 2004; 2005). Actor Network Theory evolved out of dissatisfaction with the field of the social studies of science (Callon and Latour, 1992). Its central focus is to study how scientific knowledge is stabilised as actor networks are mobilised around the settlement of particular theoretical and practical controversies. Nevertheless, its key protagonists have sought to escape the ‘fixity’ and ‘singularity’ that has been imposed on ANT by virtue of it being labelled as such (Law, 1999). Law argues that if ‘relations and the objects’ they

constitute are non-essentialist and ‘performative’ in character (ibid: 2-7), then theory has to reflect this dynamic impermanence. This is reflected in an avoidance of isolating subjects and objects 'from the practices in which they are ... enacted' (Mol, 2002: 33).

It is important therefore neither to privilege human or material agency for when different materials are mobilized within networks their impact can only be anticipated, not predicted. For the ‘contours of material agency are never decisively known in advance’ (Pickering, 1993:564). Put another way ‘technologies exercise agency through their “performativity”...in other words, through the things they do that users cannot completely or directly control’ (Leonardi, 2011:148) either in terms of content or outcome. Relating this to our subject matter, we argue that objects such as computers and the emails they facilitate can work both for and against resistance, thus adding to the unpredictable outcomes of action.

In our case study, both a consultant’s report recommending a programme of redundancy and an alternative staff report had performative effects, as the opposing parties in the conflict mobilized them to justify specific actions and objectives. The consultant’s report stimulated employee antagonism and a determination to resist the proposed redundancies as well as providing management with a ‘there is no alternative’ (TINA) mantra. In challenging this, the alternative report performed the task of providing the network with a focus for resistance, legitimizing a felt sense of grievance among employees about what were seen as unnecessary redundancies.

For this reason it is important to avoid pigeon holing ANT as a depoliticized or technical analysis for a neglected argument by one of its founders urges us to focus on *matters of concern*, and the politics and power relations that infuse everyday life (Latour, 2004). In

terms of our case study, this relates to representations by management around the need for cost cutting and income generation versus alternative representations by staff that articulated the need to protect jobs. This is not to reject *matters of fact*, for example, concerning student numbers and projected income but highlights how facts are ‘partial’, ‘polemical’ and ‘political renderings of matters of concern’ (ibid. 232). In short, management’s matters of fact were matters of concern for the employees and vice versa.

These issues are evident in our case study in relation to the consultant’s and the alternative reports. While the former drew on statistics about falling student numbers and linked these to the modules on offer, the staff report argued that data or ‘facts’ had been manipulated to ‘fit’ the case for redundancy. Hard copies of both the management report and its alternative served as ‘spokepersons’ for the respective managerial and staff actor networks as endeavours to displace ‘other actants’ representations’ (Porsander, 2005: 28). Consequently, though informed by matters of concern, matters of facts began to dominate the multiplicity of socio-material connections that mobilised each network. On both sides of the management-labour divide, these were political resources regarding what management claimed to be the case for the organization to thrive and what employees saw as a threat to their employment and the further marketization of academia (Molesworth, Scullion and Nixon, 2010). The dispute can therefore be understood as a performative outcome of different calculations or ‘distinctions between things’ relating to “facts” and the ‘courses of action’ to be taken in relation to them (Callon and Muniesa, 2005: 1231).

The different sets of accounts presented in the ‘consultants’ and the ‘alternative’ reports, were significant actants in the networks that the managers and staff sought to mobilise to support or resist organizational change. But these opposing representations can be seen neither as

mere subjective interests nor as wholly determined by the context in which the organization found itself. Through the practices of seeking to institute redundancies and resist them, these reports became material ‘objects’ that reflected and fuelled the dispute but they are too strong to be dismissed as *just* the vested interests or social constructions of actants but too weak to be seen as facts or undisputable products of ‘causal’ determinations derived from positivist analysis (ibid. 242). To view them in either of these ways is a kind of ‘critical barbarity’ that remains trapped in disputes over matters of fact rather than focusing on matters of concern. This means that the following account cannot be seen as a neutral representation of the dispute for that would falsely reduce it to matters of fact.

Methods and Methodology

We did not consciously plan this ethnography for, at the outset, we were too involved in the dispute to treat it as a research site¹. Nonetheless, soon after redundancies were announced, we could see it as an important vehicle for studying resistance. Our methodology involved an ethnographic approach of non-disclosed participant observation (Van Maanen, 2006; Zickar and Carter, 2010) such that the following account is a representation of the issues that arose during the lives of those (including ourselves) participating in the dispute. Others have described this as ‘enactive ethnography’ ... where ... ‘the investigator acts out (elements of) the phenomenon’ (Wacquant, 2015: 2). There has been some debate in the literature about the ethics of conducting covert research where opponents (Bulmer, 1982; Punch, 1986; Homan, 1980; 1991) list several objections. Most of these revolve around the ethical problems of violating the principle of informed consent, which has been a central principle of ethical committees that have proliferated to protect the rights of the researched but also the potential liabilities of researchers and their organizations. Defenders of covert research argue that informed consent is ‘neither possible nor desirable’ in certain sites and occasions and, in

particular, in qualitative and ethnographic types of research that seek to avoid interfering with ‘natural’ forms of behaviour (Calvey, 2008; Spicker, 2011: 121). Furthermore, many of the criticisms conflate the absence of informed consent with deception, which is not necessarily related to ‘covert research’ (Spicker, 2011: 120). The ethical bureaucratisation of research may well pose no problems for research that is deductive, managerial and has a prescribed and fixed design but much ethnographic research is by definition, flexible, unpredictable and often inseparable from everyday life (Charlesworth, 2000). Research of this kind is lived experience and boundaries between participant observation and living one’s life are not sharply demarcated, as is evident from a reading of such classics as Dalton (1959), Goffman (1961) and Whyte (1955).

If we are concerned to understand social life, we cannot ‘switch off’ our observational antennae just because we are not officially pursuing a formal research project and this was certainly how we came to develop the materials for this article. We were simply observing our own engagement with what was happening at work but because we felt that an analysis of these events could provide fresh insights into resistance, we began writing about them². We remained ambivalent as to whether this was research up to and around our attempts to write up what we were observing so asking for permission to conduct research would have been post-hoc and probably impossible in the sense that we were facing redundancy and battle lines had been drawn. Relatedly, political sensitivity would have applied to the management networks that we were involved in challenging and so we could only observe them from a distance. While this does not relieve us from ethical questions, we have sought to protect individuals through anonymity and confidentiality so that no one is harmed as a result of our account and this involved some data being omitted or dissembled to protect the anonymity of the research site.

However, ethically we feel on stronger ground because of a growing literature (Pullen and Rhodes, 2015) that challenges conventional rule based, utilitarian or virtue ethics insofar as they displace moral dilemmas with imposed constraints that require mere compliance rather than ethical responsibility (Derrida, 1982; Levinas, 1986). Informed by these perceptions, an alternative ethics is being developed by posthumanist feminists (Braidotti, 2011; Gatens and Lloyd, 1999) who claim that ethics requires an embodied engagement in our relations with others because then we are confronted with choices that we feel and that affect others rather than simply obeying rules or living up to utilitarian or virtuous ideals. As active participants in the dispute to defend jobs against a management determined to make redundancies, we were far from impartial or disembodied in our relations with one another or with management. Moreover, we believe that it was this ethical and embodied engagement that was crucial in the formation and sustenance of a robust network of resistance.

It may seem strange that we draw on ANT as a framework for making sense of the events that transpired because, with the exception of Latour's argument about matters of concern, it is known less for its embodied engagement with its subjects than its indifference as to outcomes. And yet it was our very engagement in the dispute that brought to our attention the importance of the sociomaterial practices of resistance. Thus full participant observation has clear advantages in enabling a close and embodied engagement in the very practices that are analyzed, while, at the same time, closing off certain sites of investigation such as management-only meetings. Although we did not attend such meetings, we had access to written documents and were in attendance at several management-staff meetings that were a condition and consequence of the dispute. Non-participant researchers may also be excluded

from certain sites and interview-based research has the disadvantage of being separated from practices and their enactment.

The empirical material is drawn from a strategic consultant document, an 'alternative' staff report, minutes of meetings, email correspondence and a diarised account of the dispute. The diarised account can be compared to field notes (Van Maanen, 1988) in that it reflected an attempt to record immediate observations and reflections on significant events. Data collection also involved participant observation of management-staff meetings and twenty-two union or action committees responsible for organising the industrial action. Each of the latter lasted for at least one hour. During more than 22 hours of observation it was possible to 'collect data openly' using 'pen and notepad, recording conversations by writing quickly' (Rosen, 1986:67). Moreover, we observed and participated in three protest meetings and a one-day strike. This allowed us to gain 'first-hand knowledge' of the 'context' (Bryman, 1989:142) through which the resistance emerged and evolved.

The Case in Context

In 2007, an email commissioned the academic staff in a Faculty of Midshire University (pseudonym) to attend a presentation chaired by the Vice Chancellor (VC). The substance of this presentation surfaced before it took place when trade union leaders requested and leaked a copy of a consultation document that was largely based on an external consultant report. From the outset, management's attempted 'funnel of interests' (Callon and Law, 1982:610) or, in other words, translation of change into a 'palatable and acceptable' (Whittle et al, 2010:17) form was resisted because the consultant's report proposed to reorganise a School within the faculty, which would close one Department and lead to compulsory redundancies of 50% across the School.

The Head of School (HoS) called a staff meeting, where it was collectively agreed to attend the VCs presentation as a form of protest. It was decided that the HoS would pre-empt the VCs presentation by stating the intention to produce an ‘alternative’ report, setting out a different vision of the future and addressing the limitations of the consultant’s report, after which the staff would depart en masse as a kind of silent protest. Both the consultant and the alternative reports can be understood in terms of ‘problematization’ (Callon,1986) whereby managers and resisters each in their own way sought to become obligatory points of passage, defining the only path forward.

Despite rising student numbers historically, the consultant’s report linked a relatively recent fall in applications to courses that were ‘not attractive to current market demand’. The ‘alternative’ report suggested that this rationale was flawed given that the drop in student recruitment was across the whole faculty at Midshire. Although ignored in the consultant’s report, management had also made decisions that could have contributed to the decline in student applications³. The alternative report stated that the ‘Cost Analysis’ of the consultation paper contained ‘a back-of-the-envelope calculation about the savings and subsequent surpluses that will be generated from making half the School staff redundant’. Whilst admitting that it was not possible to ‘project student recruitment’ onto the new “products”, the consultant’s report also failed to provide a ‘financial plan’ or a ‘risk analysis’ of the proposals. The ‘alternative’ report provided these figures/calculations and it was suggested that management’s objectives could be achieved through ‘natural’ turnover and voluntary rather than compulsory redundancies. By these means, the predicted deficit for the next year would be turned into a surplus in future years. This finding is distinctive in highlighting how it is not only ‘change agents’ that attempt ‘to funnel the interests of the recipients’ (Whittle et

al,2010:31) of change but also those who resist.

Courpasson et al (2012:806) assert that a condition of successful 'productive' resistance is for resisters to produce a 'report' to articulate 'a new agenda' but we argue that such artefacts cannot guarantee desired outcomes. Indeed, management refused to engage with the 'alternative' report's problematization thus denying it strategic import. Although the alternative report apparently failed, its creation can be understood in terms of 'interestment' (Callon,1986) or enrolment, for as a nascent feature of the resistant network, its construction brought resisting parties together. Staff were angered that management ignored or failed to respond to it. This endured confirming the view that the effects of objects cannot be known in advance of their production or immediate consumption. This was evident during a management-union staff meeting some four months after the alternative report was produced, when a union member sarcastically asked management: 'Were Council [the University's highest governing body] given the alternative [strategy]? No, of course, they weren't'. During this meeting another union member responded to management statements about the uncertainty of the future by saying 'But what we offered you [the alternative strategy] you've ignored'. The alternative report then formed part of the resistant network and although it failed to modify management's position, its rejection continued to generate anger in a way that could not have been foreseen. Of course, it had to be printed and distributed to union members via photocopiers, emails, computers, paper and printers all of which were part of the resistant network for without them its circulation and distribution would have been less effective.

Despite no evidence that new courses would attract more students than the present offering, management continued with its proposals to make staff deemed not to possess the necessary

‘skill’ sets redundant. At the first union meeting of the dispute, ‘interestment’ (Callon,1986) continued through setting up an Action Committee (AC) with ‘volunteer leaders/representatives’ (14 Dec. 2007, union meeting notes) from all the major groups whose jobs were at risk. The AC proved vital as a means to ensure the ‘enrolment’ (Callon,1986) and ‘mobilization’ (ibid) of actors from groups of staff that had previously been fractured around disparate disciplines. It also generated alliances with supportive networks such as academics beyond the confines of the dispute, the local community and the media. In the following sub-sections, we discuss how the dispute proceeded through an assembly of material and cultural relations.

Emails, Addresses, Minutes, Letters and Lists

An array of material artefacts alongside the humans that are associated with them proved indispensable during the dispute in translating problems and interests through producing alignments, alliances and boundaries (Latour, 2005: 34-37). They also provide us with a vehicle for tracing the links that generated a network out of a multiplicity of possible assemblies. To illustrate this, at the initial union meeting of the dispute, it was decided to collect private or home ‘emails and addresses for all staff’ (14 Dec. 2007, meeting notes) since management had access to all work email messages. This was justified as follows:

We know management will try to communicate with people as individuals if they haven’t done so already....because that’s how they divide people (Local union representative)

This individualization had already commenced because individuals had been approached by management in the belief that by offering them job security, ‘their interests might be

transformed so that other actors would fall in with its schemes' (Callon and Law,1982:620). The need to communicate through private emails reflected management's legal right to monitor work emails and to do so 'retrospectively' (10 Jan. 2008, AC meeting notes). Not surprisingly, the use of external consultants; the secrecy around the redundancy plans including who should be made redundant and the determination to impose redundancies, generated fears of surveillance and subsequent persecution. Private email addresses were a crucial material artefact in the evolving dispute, especially because it allowed the employee network to communicate without fear of interception or retribution. The urgency to produce a list of private addresses also reflected the legal requirement to ensure the accuracy of a ballot for strike action. Indeed, Midshire's solicitors initially claimed that the union ballot 'was not in compliance with the legislation' (AC minutes, 5.2.2008) and this confirms how 'accurate lists' and 'home emails' are as essential to resistance as members voting for industrial action on their ballot papers.

At an AC meeting on the 1st January 2008, the importance of mobilising wider community support for the action was stressed and 'a letter writing campaign' was instigated. Letters and emails containing inscriptions of the dispute and targeted phone calls were also enrolled as actants within the network of resistance:

All union members are to be asked to forward all support emails that they have received to X, who will send them on to a union official for collation into booklets for senior management. (AC Minutes, 29 Jan. 2008).

Emails, letters, phones, computers, addresses, lists, the AC, its members and the wider union membership represented the early formation of an actor-network that constituted the conditions of possibility for effective resistance. Assembling these artefacts contributed to

defining shared interests, enrolling and mobilising the AC members and the staff they represented. It added to their ability to coalesce around shared solutions to the problem of the redundancy programme and to recruit/enrol both internal and external networks. The assembly and alignment of heterogeneous elements rapidly increased the profile of the dispute in a way that could not have been predicted in advance. Moreover, the speed and spread of this would have been difficult to achieve without the technology that in effect became an ally in the dispute.

The ‘minutes’ of the AC also became a material ally documenting the progress of the dispute that was then communicated to others through email thereby maintaining alliances. However, even the ‘minutes’ of meetings are unpredictable as evidenced when the management network appeared to appropriate them for its own ends. So, for example, after senior management cancelled a meeting with senior union officials, the AC minutes stated:

There is a possibility that management used information in the minutes of 17th Jan as a basis to refuse to attend the meeting (29 Jan. 2008)

These minutes, which were distributed through the University’s email system, referred to the possibility of escalating the dispute. In refusing to attend the meeting, management alluded to this escalation, which suggested knowledge of the AC ‘minutes’. Action Committee members also produced a ‘newsletter’ to communicate key issues around the dispute, which were also initially distributed through the University’s email system. These newsletters mocked aspects of the managerial regime and during negotiations, management expressed displeasure regarding this mockery. This managerial snooping stimulated the AC to distribute minutes only ‘on the private email network, and not [...] on the work email system’ (ibid). It illustrates how opposing networks may enrol one another’s material allies in support of their

own network (Latour, 1987: 84). But also it shows that the ‘temporally emergent’ (Pickering, 1993: 564) agency of materials can work against those who seemingly own them.

As others have found (e.g. Pliskin et al., 1997), email is immediate in its impact on actors but they regard emails as ‘an independent variable that causes other organisational phenomena’ (ibid: 4) whereas, for us, emails are just one aspect of a heterogeneous network of humans and non-humans mobilising action. As socio-material artefacts, the outcome of using email are uncertain, as we have indicated. They also have a speed and spread of impact well beyond that which could be imagined through word of mouth communications. Although humans compose and send emails, this clearly would not be possible without computers, software and address books. The resistance would have struggled to enrol and mobilise a robust network in support of its cause without them. We endorse Pliskin et al’s (1997: 10) finding that emails can help to boost ‘morale’ and the following diary extract suggests a parallel impact in our case:

I am finding strength in the contact of the Action Committee. I tend to get lots of email contact from them and so feel less alone (Diary Extract, 23 February 2008)

Although emails are delivered through computers that, as Latour (2005: 37-42) argues, primarily transport meaning from one intermediary to others, they can also have the effect of transforming meaning. For, like conversations, they can mediate arguments, sentiments, grievances as well as moral outrage and transform their meanings to mobilise action. The effect of an email may exceed, or even contradict, the intentions of authors and what they seek to represent. An example was when a member of the AC sought to communicate the following message to the union members in his department:

Now is the time to stay steady. We have resisted unacceptable terms until now; we should continue to do so at this critical juncture. It is not too late for management to return to cooperation (email, 10 Apl. 2008)

Although written *only* to inform his immediate colleagues about the progress of the dispute, this email had the unintended consequence of bolstering members of the AC who warmly discussed the email and proposed that it be distributed to all groups involved in the dispute. Similar sentiments of defiance were evident in an email from another non-AC member. Here she commented on the situation during a one-day strike, when management representatives went from office to office, knocking on doors, to monitor attendance for the purpose of deducting pay from those on strike. Doors, in this instance, became part of the resistance for when Human Resource managers knocked on them, the effect was to provoke anger due to the sense of being spied upon:

I continue to be more and more shocked by the ‘hard line’ they [management] have taken. It just makes me more determined. ... such attacks to our professional integrity should only be resisted. (22 Feb. 2008)

This was another example of the ‘temporally emergent’ (Pickering,1993:564) agency of materials such that monitoring offices and knocking on doors worked to the advantage of those resisting. This email conveys individual shock and defiance and yet, it unintentionally fostered collectivism because for us, at least, it was inspiring at the time. In sum, this is what we mean by emails not being an ‘independent’ variable because (1) they are made possible through a complex network of humans and non-humans and (2) their outcomes are uncertain.

A mobile phone recording

A mobile phone recording became an important artefact in the performance of the actor network of resistance. Through a chance encounter in an airport, a union member involved in the dispute overheard and was able surreptitiously to record, on a mobile phone, a conversation of senior managers at the university. These managers expounded with much merriment the view that management would not be dictated to by the union but instead would be doing the dictating. The mobile phone and its recording became important actants as it provided evidence of a belligerent attitude on the part of management. The airport, the mobile phone, the recording, and the union member worked together to enrol the senior managers as embarrassed associates in the resistant network facilitating the translation of a problem (compulsory redundancies) to others. It meant that the manager was forced to offer a public apology. The impact of the episode was to make it clear that despite the ongoing managerial discourse of consultation and negotiation, management intended to crush the opposition and impose redundancies. This was a performative instance of 'them' and 'us' boundaries that rendered the resistance more robust for it mobilised feelings of indignation for staff threatened with redundancy and among those who were sympathetic to their plight, thus becoming important to resistance as a performative act⁴. The mobile phone became an ally strengthening the resistance by virtue of a communicable recording of management's duplicity for it exposed their hypocrisy in claiming to respect negotiations at meetings with the union while at the same time declaring their autocracy in private conversations that were not expected to be overheard.

Cars, Posters and Leaflets

A final illustration of how material artefacts can become key actants in mobilizing resistance now follows. Posters, leaflets and placards offer one of the more obvious signs and symbols

of resistance and yet they often are not noticed or acknowledged. Their very production is as much an enactment of the protest as are the demonstrations where they are carried or the walls on which they are hung. They symbolize resistance such that passersby can identify an assembled group of people as resistant. As participants, we felt this when putting posters up in halls and corridors that call for support for a protest or rally. By association, the act and the materials label and define you as one of the resisters for anyone including management who may be passing by. At such times, the posters in effect become spokespersons in ways that relieve the protesters of any need to be outspoken.

Displayed on campus marches, in offices or visually recreated through newsletters, websites, and media outlets; leaflets, posters and placards, along with the protestors who produce and display them, are spokespersons on behalf of the whole network. Passersby, who may have no direct interest in the dispute, can become potential allies through making sense of an assembly due to leaflets and posters. Moreover, these artefacts provide embodied visible expressions of the action and who is acting that can be transmitted through the media in ways that not only transport, but also transform, meaning across the whole network; for in enrolling the media, the boundary of the network extends beyond the University, the resisters and the academic community into the larger public domain.

Resistance, in the guise of leafleting, involves congregating at workplace entrances at specific times to hand out leaflets that provide potential allies with some explanations for the strike. It included advising police, marching along roads and being visible to management. The assembly of multiple actants (leaflets, entrances, roads and cars) can be seen as a means to enrol other academics who may fear that they could be next in line for redundancy. It can also attract media attention thereby extending the network further into the public domain. The

leafleting of cars entering the university created a 2-mile traffic jam extending from the site of the action back into a nearby town.

The cars, leaflets, roads and eventual traffic jam attracted the attention of local radio stations and later the police who intervened to modify the strikers' actions. A vehicle that refused to slow down almost hit a member of the AC and this became part of the folklore attached to the dispute and was subsequently mentioned in a speech during a one-day rally. Following on from this, newspaper interviews with spokespersons for the strike resulted in the media becoming an effective ally of the network through the publicity it generated. The disruption that the strike and leafleting created was celebrated due to the publicity it provoked, as the 'minutes' of the AC on the 21 Feb 2008 convey:

Traffic was heavily delayed, Radio X was reporting the strike action, the police behaviour was unnecessarily aggressive and their videoing of the protesters was intrusive.

Discussion and Conclusion

While a considerable literature has addressed questions of workplace resistance, it has tended to place the human actor centre stage. By drawing on an ANT lens, we have explored how mundane material artefacts that often go unnoticed, can play a significant part in a contemporary dispute as part of a network of resistance. Lacking 'intentionality' (Pickering, 1993), material entities have to be mobilised by humans as nodes in a network of heterogeneous elements holding relations of resistance in place, and like anything holding it together 'is an astonishing achievement' (Law and Mol, 1995: 291). Nevertheless, we have sought to illustrate how 'resistance, obduracy and sturdiness is more easily achieved through

netting, lacing, weaving, twisting of ties that are weak by themselves” (Latour, 1996: 16) yet effective when combined and coordinated through networks.

At the outset, we drew upon Latour’s distinction between *matters of fact* and *matters of concern*. This distinction is useful because it illuminates how power is exercised partly through attempts to reduce debate to matters of facts – statistics on student numbers, financial viability etc. It is an exercise of power which says “it is in your interests to” (Callon and Law, 1982:622) do X or Y that may be expressed through a concern for the organization, students and staff. Once this is understood, then all claims to matters of fact (including ours) have to be subject to analysis and critique, for what they express are matters of concern. In the case of management, their matters of concern were expressed as the need to reduce costs, increase student numbers and revenue and a programme of compulsory redundancies was seen as one means to this end.

The dispute began as a challenge to managerial matters of fact regarding student numbers and potential cost savings through redundancies and restructuring. The ‘alternative’ report can be understood as a significant object in the embryonic formation of an actor network of resistance. It produced its own matters of fact to display how compulsory redundancies could be avoided and the matter of concern was to protect jobs, but it also represented a limited challenge to the growing ‘marketization’ and ‘commodification’ of academia (Willmott, 1995). What our analysis has shown is how important were a multiplicity of heterogeneous material artefacts and human relations in the problematisation of management designs and the enrolment of allies in the mobilisation of the network of resistance. The alternative report, emails, conversations, newsletters, minutes of meetings, tape recordings, leaflets, cars, mobile phones, and placards resided side by side with staff throughout the hierarchy, union

officials, members of the action committee, academics in a wide range of universities, the media, and even the police in not merely transmitting but also transforming meaning relating to the protest.

The significance of these artefacts is partly their speed and visibility, which allowed the dispute to reach a much larger audience far more quickly than would have been possible without them. This proved highly effective in recruiting/enrolling allies both internal and external to the organization. Emails, in particular, hastened the moments of translation allowing the widespread and simultaneous enrolment of many actants as well as arousing emotions and interest through the mobilization, for example, of anger, hurt and frustration. As a consequence, the alliances generated by the employee actor network, including wider academic networks, heavily attended rallies, media reporting and strike action lengthened and intensified. These served to problematise and disrupt the stability and resilience of the managerial network, hindering the imposition of change until eventually, management withdrew the threat of compulsory redundancies, thus enabling negotiations with staff to begin without duress.

Although artefacts such as cars, minutes of meetings, emails, mobile phones, posters or leaflets and their complex ties with humans were integral to the resistance at Midshire University, their effects in giving robustness to networks depend largely on their enactment and performativity (Mol, 2002). While our title drew from Latour's notion of the 'missing masses', it is not just a matter of making the objects visible but more importantly, embracing their enactment, which as participants in this dispute we could hardly avoid despite sometimes being unaware of this embodied sociomaterial engagement. Still we need to acknowledge the intervention of chance and coincidence in the enactment of objects and not

to impose undue rationality to both humans and objects that together form a network. The encounter at an 'airport' recorded on a 'mobile phone' was significant insofar as it highlights that networks can be strengthened or weakened by chance or serendipitous events. Similarly, it could not have been foreseen that during a leafleting campaign, cars would provoke a traffic jam of sufficient proportions to involve the media and the police, thus giving valuable publicity to the dispute. Other artefacts such as knocking on doors that under other circumstances would be mundane occurrences, in the context of the dispute, assumed significance as an exercise of managerial surveillance. While ordinarily a 'boundary object' (Star and Griesemer, 1999) of privacy readily breached through knocking, the office door and knocking were enacted as a part of the management network seeking to penalise those on a one day strike but were then re-enacted by staff as an act of managerial oppression. Also the enactment of sociomaterial objects such as minutes of meetings, the 'alternative' report as well as emails produce unintended outcomes. Nevertheless, 'the crucial issue in relating to objects was to get to know them' (Mol, 2002: 152) and this requires us to follow how they are enacted in diverse ways in social practices.

Insofar as management eventually capitulated and withdrew the threat of compulsory redundancies, it could be said that this was partly due to an embodied sociomaterial engagement in the practices of resistance. The enrolment and mobilisation of allies was more robust within the network of protest than in the network mobilised by management. A traditional industrial relations analysis might conclude that union activists and members fought off the threat of compulsory redundancies. However, we feel that there is more to it than that because even though the enactment of a multiplicity of sociomaterial practices of resistance contributed to the end of the dispute, we cannot know precisely what caused what. A closure cannot be drawn around the dispute because 'we will always stumble on a new

controversy dealing with how and why it closed' (Latour, 1987: 13) or what were the conditions that made one outcome possible rather than another.

As the dispute proceeded, new actants (e.g. mobile phones, cars, rallies, the media) were enrolled to mobilize opposition to the redundancies. While the managerial network started out with strong allies in the form of hierarchical resources, the element of surprise and the legitimizing services of management consultants, it confronted 'a totally unexpected 'outside'' (Latour, 1987: 248) – a robust network of resistance that enacted a more diverse range of agents and objects and both national and international academics and non-academic allies.

Future research into resistance could give greater attention to sociomaterial practices and how objects are enacted in actor networks – providing an understanding that is missed when we see action principally in terms of human subjects. Although scholars have highlighted that 'apparently powerful actor-networks also contain spaces for resistance' (Whittle and Mueller, 2010: 643), we have argued that resistance itself can be theorized as an actor-network. When, as in most studies of resistance, humanistic perspectives privilege human action, the sociomaterial practices in which they are embedded can remain marginal or only contextual aspects of the analysis. Objects tend to be taken for granted or treated as merely contextual rather than central enactments of social practices whether these be management enforced redundancies or organized networks mobilized to resist them.

In focusing on resistance in this paper, we have sought to show how a multiplicity of objects may be assembled as material allies and human actors whose alliances can strengthen the network (Latour, 2005). And yet, while allies, objects cannot be guaranteed to mobilize

support for those who resist, as was seen when management simply ignored the ‘alternative report’ and when they enrolled the minutes of AC meetings to disrupt the resistance, at least temporarily, by cancelling a meeting. In contrast to Courpasson et al’s (2012) arguments, producing a new agenda through the alternative report was insufficient to secure managerial compliance. Nonetheless, the very act of ignoring the alternative report served to consolidate the network of resistance.

There are limitations and possibilities both in this account of resistance and in drawing upon an ANT approach. We have only provided a partial rendition of the actor network of the dispute, which reflects our involvement on one side and our focus on employee resistance (see Law, 1992 quoted in Vickers and Fox, 2005: 139). Future research could seek to follow through all of the human [managerial and non-managerial] and non-human actors wherever that would take them. To do so, however, in a context of an ongoing dispute is likely to prove methodologically difficult even for non-participant research, which has been the mainstay of recent research into resistance. This is because one would not know when a dispute was likely to arise and access is likely to be limited on either side of the management-staff divide due to the sensitivity of the issues involved and the power struggles they reflect.

Nevertheless despite being partial, we believe that our analysis shows how resistance is more complex than is often represented by human-centred accounts where, for example, there is a focus on individual subjectivity such as cynicism (Fleming and Spicer, 2003) or distance (Collinson, 1994). Similarly, in focusing on union or collective action, the industrial relations and sociological literature (e.g. Mars, 1982) only tells part of the story. While collectivism is a necessary condition of effective opposition, it may also rely on effective non-human allies and their embeddedness in social practices of resistance that have tended to be marginalized

in this literature. Through representing our embodied engagement in the sociomaterial practices of resistance, we have been able to begin to fill what Courpasson et al (2012) find lacking in the resistance literature. In addition, following Ashcraft (2008: 380) instead of only studying resistant practices at some distance from our own, here we have sought to examine the very ‘relations of power and resistance’ with which we are involved in our own academic institutions. Moreover, we have sought to study resistance as an object of study not just an entity ‘waiting out there to be represented’ nor one that is simply constructed by agents for this is just to reproduce the binaries both between human subjects and material objects but also between active subjects and passive objects of knowledge (Mol, 2002: 31). In this research, objects are not separate from, but a crucial part of, the practices that enact them where, for example, clandestine mobile phone recordings of private conversations and traffic jams due to leafleting motorists resulted in complex sociomaterial dramas of crucial significance for the performance of resistance.

To conclude, focusing on the mix and multiplicity of human and non-human elements, their relations and associations, and the ways in which they are assembled, re-assembled or disassembled displays the complexities of alliances, attachments, controversies and contests that are temporally settled or challenged through effective or ineffective practices of resistance. In our case, the resistance was effectively translated through an actor network that challenged the problems and solutions advanced by the actor network of senior management. Our embodied engagement in, and enactment of, these complex sociomaterial practices distinguishes this study from those where mundane artefacts and objects are given a back seat, if any seat at all, in the literature on resistance.

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¹ One of our reviewers felt that we were conducting an autoethnography but because we do not focus on the reflexive learning aspects of our story, we resist that label.

² This has been done by others (e.g. Sparkes, 2007; Parker, 2014) as autoethnographic reports from the heart of their personal experience in university.

³ We have not disclosed these as they would identify the university.

⁴ Conversations among our colleagues after this episode expressed this indignation and a determination to prevent management from pursuing their clear intentions to make staff redundant.