

Wanda J. Orlikowski, [Susan V. Scott](#)
Exploring material-discursive practices

Article (Accepted version)
(Refereed)

Original citation:

Orlikowski, W. J. and Scott, Susan V. (2015) *Exploring material-discursive practices*. [Journal of Management Studies](#), 52 (5). pp. 697-705. ISSN 1467-6486

DOI: [10.1111/joms.12114](https://doi.org/10.1111/joms.12114)

© 2014 [John Wiley & Sons Ltd](#) and [Society for the Advancement of Management Studies](#)

This version available at: <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/57600/>

Available in LSE Research Online: November 2015

LSE has developed LSE Research Online so that users may access research output of the School. Copyright © and Moral Rights for the papers on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. Users may download and/or print one copy of any article(s) in LSE Research Online to facilitate their private study or for non-commercial research. You may not engage in further distribution of the material or use it for any profit-making activities or any commercial gain. You may freely distribute the URL (<http://eprints.lse.ac.uk>) of the LSE Research Online website.

This document is the author's final accepted version of the journal article. There may be differences between this version and the published version. You are advised to consult the publisher's version if you wish to cite from it.

**Exploring Material-Discursive Practices:
Comments on Hardy and Thomas' *Discourse in a Material World***

Wanda J. Orlikowski
Sloan School of Management
Massachusetts Institute of Technology
100 Main Street
Cambridge, MA 02142
USA
wanda@mit.edu

Susan V. Scott
Information Systems and Innovation Group
Department of Management
The London School of Economics
Houghton Street
London WC2A 2AE
United Kingdom
s.v.scott@lse.ac.uk

We welcome the opportunity to engage in a discussion about how organization researchers might take materiality more seriously in their empirical studies. As a topic that has inspired us to revise our *modus operandi* and achieve fresh insights in our work, we believe that it can offer scholars an innovative approach to studying key research questions in contemporary organizing (Scott and Orlikowski, forthcoming). Our intent in this commentary is to support the turn to materiality, and contribute to it by considering some differences in our approach from that proposed by Hardy and Thomas (forthcoming), as well as those of other scholars who have been advocating attention to the material in discourse studies (Alvesson and Kärreman 2011; Ashcraft, Kuhn and Cooren 2009; Iedema 2007; Siles and Boczkowski 2012). We offer these in the spirit of constructive engagement, recognizing that the concepts at stake are necessarily constructs-in-the-making, which for us makes the examination of multiple possibilities all the more generative and valuable.

As interest in materiality progresses, we are witnessing the emergence of an exciting repertoire of approaches. Hardy and Thomas in their article, “Discourse in a Material World,” propose the use of a discursive approach to study materiality, arguing that a deeper examination of the relationship between materiality and discourse can yield valuable insights into the operation of power in organizations (p. 2). We find common ground with Hardy and Thomas in their assertion that discourse studies can address materiality and acknowledge the importance of Foucault’s work in this regard. We particularly connect with what they refer to as a “fundamentally radical approach” that decenters the human subject, marking a departure from the humanism of social construction. Re-framing conceptual concerns away from human-centered methodologies is a bold move and we recognize that doing so disrupts some of the conventional assumptions underpinning many areas of management research (Orlikowski and Scott 2008).

The ideas that we offer in our discussion are inspired by agential realism (Barad 2003, 2007), which not only theorizes the entanglement of matter and meaning but also assumes a particular position about engagement founded on the practice of *diffraction*, one

of its underlying concepts. Barad defines diffraction as “accounting for how practices matter” (Barad 2007, p. 88), drawing our attention to the politics of how we frame, stage, and conduct research. This is consequential because in agential realism, our analyses don’t just reflect the world, they are active interventions: the making of difference. When extended more broadly to academic practice, this offers an ethic of reading and writing that turns away from “excessive critique” (Puig de la Bellacasa 2011, p. 91) towards “respectful engagements with different disciplinary practices, not coarse grained portrayals that make caricatures of another discipline from some position outside it” (Barad 2007, p. 93). Rather than setting up unmovable positions or defensive foils, a diffractive methodology encourages us to recognize the insights that are generated through boundary-making practice. Thus even as we participate in a point-counterpoint exchange, our approach is not so much to “counterpoint” as to articulate some critical details emanating from our theoretical standpoint around which we hope to generate further interest.

In elaborating their theme of “discourse in a material world,” Hardy and Thomas (p. 3) draw on Hook (2007) to emphasize the importance of seeing “the discursive effects of the material, and the material effects of the discursive.” They illustrate this by examining how discourse interrelates with four different aspects of materiality — bodies, spaces, objects, and practices — and offering some important avenues for further empirical investigation. We were surprised to see “practices” analyzed as a distinct aspect of materiality alongside bodies, spaces and objects. As we discuss below, our approach treats practices as ontologically prior. As such, bodies, spaces and objects are not separable from or detached from practice. Rather — to paraphrase Taylor (1993) — bodies, spaces, and objects are, at any given time, what practices have made them. In other words, practices are constitutive of the world. This emphasizes some important differences between our approach and those of Hardy and Thomas, which we consider below in terms of the ideas of *materialization* and *performativity*.

Materialization and Performativity

In developing agential realism, Barad (2007) draws on a Foucauldian notion of discourse, but suggests that further attention needs to be given to how meaning and matter are held together. In particular, she maintains that Foucault is “not clear about the material nature of discursive practices” (2007, p. 63), and is thus less able to account for how “discourse is made possible through specific material practices” (2007, p. 148). Her position is that discourse must be *materialized* in some form and in specific times and places in order to exist.

For Barad, materiality is not a separate or static entity, but dynamically produced-in-practice: “not a thing but a doing” (2007, p. 151). As she explains, “Matter is not immutable or passive. Nor is it a fixed support, location, referent, or source of sustainability for discourse.” Instead, it is a process of materialization that stabilizes over time to produce the effect of boundary, fixity, and surface that we call “matter.” Thus rather than focusing on the discursive and asking how it exists in, is related to, or shaped by the material world, we center on practices and treat these always and everywhere as *material-discursive*. As Barad argues (2003, p. 822), practices are constituted by both meanings and materialities:

The relationship between the material and the discursive is one of mutual entailment. Neither is articulated/articulable in the absence of the other; matter and meaning are mutually articulated. Neither discursive practices nor material phenomena are ontologically or epistemologically prior. Neither can be explained in terms of the other. Neither has privileged status in determining the other.

The notion of material-discursive emphasizes the entangled inseparability of discourse and materiality. We follow Barad in understanding this *entanglement as ontological*. While Hardy and Thomas observe that discourse and materiality are “inextricably intertwined” (p. 2), they view this *entanglement as empirical*, positioning discourse and materiality as separable elements. For example, the title “Discourse in a Material World” indicates that there is a material world (e.g., composed of bodies, spaces, objects, etc.) within which discourse is located. Similarly, the interest in studying the “intersections of the discursive and the material” (p. 8) suggests these are distinct albeit

overlapping elements. And in the concluding paragraph, they note “discourse brings to materiality — and materiality to discourse — an understanding of the role of power relations in the construction of our realities” (p. 21). We don’t disagree about the importance of power in enacting reality, but treat materiality and discourse as constituted through each other. In other words, materiality does not “bring” anything to discourse (or vice versa) because these are ontologically inseparable. As Barad notes “To be entangled is not simply to be intertwined with one another, as in the joining of separate entities, but to lack an independent, self-contained existence” (2007, p. ix).

Consequently, an agential realist approach does not recognize a division between the discursive and the non-discursive. From this approach, it would not be sustainable to put “materiality more firmly under a discursive lens” (Hardy and Thomas, p. 21), because this would require us to identify material “elements” (p. 2), “aspects” (p. 4) or “entities” (p. 21) that exist apart from discourse. Studies inspired by agential realism work from the position that discourse does not exist without being materialized in some form. Rather than seeking the material in elements, aspects, or entities, we focus on materializations — how meanings are materially enacted in practice (Introna 2011). The strength of this position is that it allows for multiplicity and indeterminacy of outcomes, which requires paying particular attention to what is taken-for-granted and to how boundaries are redrawn by shifting what is included and excluded. Our interest then becomes calling out specific material enactments that produce outcomes with ethical implications: “There is a difference between the material instantiation of language in bodily gestures, or in sound waves propagating through the air, or in measuring devices: matter matters” (Barad 1998, p. 108). This approach is particularly helpful in preparing us to study the materializations entailed in the rise of metadata, social media, algorithms, and analytics. These phenomena are capable not only of producing performance indicators and evaluative measures that hold organizations more accountable to their constituencies, but also of imposing increasingly consequential forms of surveillance and audit. As we have noted elsewhere, how the different consequences of these phenomena

play out and in what conditions are important empirical and ethical questions with significant salience for organizing (Scott & Orlikowski 2012).

Material-discursive practices are thus constitutive; they configure reality, or put another way, they are *performative*. Performativity focuses attention on the ongoing, dynamic, relational enactment of the world. This is a critically different perspective than that of representationalism, which centers on identifying *relationships* between distinct entities, an approach associated with functionalism or social constructivism. As Barad (2003, p. 802) notes:

The move toward performative alternatives to representationalism shifts the focus from questions of correspondence between descriptions and reality (e.g., do they mirror nature or culture?) to matters of practices/doings/actions.

Performativity reframes our understanding of reality as a contingent and practical accomplishment (Law 2004, p. 137). Reality is an ongoing “becoming” (Tsoukas and Chia 2002); it is enacted in practice. As Law and Urry (2004, p. 396, emphasis in original) put it “the real is real enough. It is obdurate. It cannot be wished away. But it is also *made*.” While much of the literature on performativity has highlighted the importance of discursive performativity, where utterances or statements create what they purport to describe (Austin, 1962), Barad emphasizes a *material-discursive* performativity. She writes (2003, p. 828):

A crucial part of the performative account that I have proposed is a rethinking of the notions of discursive practices and material phenomena and the relationship between them. On an agential realist account, discursive practices are not human-based activities but rather specific material (re)configurings of the world through which local determinations of boundaries, properties, and meanings are differentially enacted.

Performativity offers a way of understanding how the world is constantly being made and reconfigured in practice. Studies in the sociology of finance have highlighted the performativity of financial models that produce the market conditions that they describe (Beunza and Stark 2004; Callon 1998; Callon and Muniesa 2005; MacKenzie 2006; MacKenzie and Millo 2003). For example, MacKenzie’s (2006) study of the Black-Scholes options pricing model showed how this financial model first described the world of options pricing and how over time it then produced that world through becoming materially enacted in specific trading skills, computer algorithms, and financial institutions. Similar reconfigurations

are at work in the development of social media websites that collate online user-generated reviews and ratings to produce algorithmically ranked products and services (Orlikowski and Scott, forthcoming MISQ). We have recently been examining these material enactments in the hospitality industry (Orlikowski and Scott, forthcoming OS; Scott and Orlikowski 2012, forthcoming), attempting to understand how the material-discursive practices of hotel evaluation are changing as valuations move online, and with what performative outcomes.

Materialization and Performativity in Hotel Evaluation

In comparing traditional practices of hotel evaluation with those emerging online, a number of significant discursive materializations come to light. Consider the world prior to online social media websites. In this world, the primary source of guest feedback to hoteliers was face-to-face interactions during a stay or paper-based comment cards completed on departure. This world has been reconfigured with the emergence of social media websites such as TripAdvisor, where feedback is now materialized on an online website and intended to communicate with the public at large (or more precisely, anyone with Internet service). The material-discursive practices producing guest comments on paper cards are significantly different to those producing online hotel evaluations on TripAdvisor. Comparing these not only draws attention to the making of consequential discursive materializations associated with social media, but also helps us to identify critical performative outcomes that in turn inform the research agenda.

Blank guest comment cards are typically found in hotel rooms, offered as a channel for private communication, soliciting direct and confidential feedback from guests about specific aspects of hotel facilities and services. Once regarded as a “best practice” hospitality innovation, they have been adopted sector-wide: hoteliers commonly use them and guests expect to find them. In other words, they are a standard manifestation of normative guest-hotelier relations and as such, regularly included in institutionalized hospitality curricula. Comment cards are typically paper-based, laid out over one or two

pages with a message from hotel management encouraging guests to provide feedback by rating facilities and services on a scale (from excellent to poor). Written comments can be made in small, fixed-sized text boxes that limit the length and style of remarks. In terms of timing and placing, guest comment cards are an optional part of guest departure and the hotel “check-out” routine. Guests pay their bill and are co-present with hotel staff; it is usually a time of smiles and felicitations in which comment cards are either slid discreetly across the counter at reception or placed in a box in the lobby. An analysis of guest comment cards suggests that the (arguably captive) staging of this feedback prompts guest responses that more closely resemble signing a visitor’s book (e.g., “Just perfect. We will be back again!”), rather than providing a critical evaluation.

Practices vary, but the hoteliers that we interviewed reviewed this guest feedback to flag actionable issues associated with maintenance (e.g. a leaky tap) or service (e.g. tardy room service) and then filed the cards away in a storeroom. Some comment cards promise the guest a follow-up by the manager, and when the guest provides contact information a personal phone call or letter typically ensues if the hotelier regards the issue as worthy of response. In general, guest comment cards are difficult to complete without having being a guest at the hotel, and they are only available to a few hotel staff who read, discuss, and respond to them in private.

In contrast, online hotel evaluations on TripAdvisor materialize public assessments of hotels by guests to the world at large. These social media postings are configured to include both ratings using a few specific (but undefined) criteria, and comments in a relatively unconstrained text area, which facilitates the posting of detailed compositions. The website is multi-media which means that guest photographs can be included in reviews to provide compelling illustrations of the points made. Reviews are typically posted after a stay (e.g., days, weeks or months later) but may also be written during a stay using hotel Wi-Fi in bedrooms or bars. Concerns have been raised about the possibility of fake reviews on social media websites with estimates suggesting that between 10 to 30 percent of online reviews

are false. The review platform is designed to allow website contributors varying degrees of pseudonymity and the anonymity of the crowd may elicit bolder comments. Accountability mechanisms are configured differently online and although there is scope for hotel managers to make brief, public responses to reviews, TripAdvisor relies upon public “course corrections” (travelers countering prior reviews) to “put the record straight.”

Hotel managers check daily or weekly for new TripAdvisor postings about their hotel. As online reviews are intended primarily for other travelers, the feedback hoteliers receive varies. Some comments are direct (pointing out a rude receptionist or praising bar staff), others are indirect (like street noise), or they raise issues that are “unfixable” (location, age of property). Managers integrate this feedback in their ongoing running of the hotel, printing copies to take to weekly staff meetings, and using them in formal staff appraisals. We found one hotel pinning printed versions of TripAdvisor reviews on the employee noticeboard to praise or shame staff members. Hoteliers are often at a loss to know whether and how to effectively reply to public and anonymous feedback. They worry about letting serious complaints or mistaken attributions stand without explanation or correction, but fret over engaging in a conspicuous “he said, she said” debate that could end up undermining their credibility.

Perhaps the most significant difference between the enactment of guest feedback on comment cards compared to TripAdvisor postings is the relationship that is implied and the degree of transparency afforded to different constituencies. When a guest makes a complaint to the hotelier through the comment card it is reviewed, entered in the hotels’ records, and archived, while remaining private within the boundaries of the business. When a guest makes a complaint on TripAdvisor, it is made visible online almost immediately and remains available to the public at large. This shift in material-discursive practices from private comments for hoteliers to persistent assessments accessible by the public is deeply consequential. Over time, they produce different hotels, different hoteliers, and different guests. Consider, for example, the influence of the two different forms of feedback on the running of a hotel and on its revenues. Due to the private nature of guest comment cards, this

feedback primarily influences the operations of a hotel. In contrast, the very public TripAdvisor postings influence both hotel operations and revenues. Furthermore, the different practices producing guest comments and TripAdvisor reviews configure guests and hoteliers differently. Guests who have read TripAdvisor reviews about a hotel prior to staying at it have more detailed knowledge about others' experiences with the hotel. Many feel empowered by this information to request particular rooms or services, and to demand upgrades or discounts on threat of possible negative reviews. Hoteliers in a world of TripAdvisor no longer see a guest walking through the door; they see a potential reviewer.

Barad's (2007) agential realism highlights the criticality of understanding how discourse is materially enacted. By centering our hotel valuation study on material-discursive practices, we are able to articulate how different valuation schemes differently configure the phenomenon of hospitality. This leads us to understand valuations, not as discursive criteria formatted by particular material artifacts or bodies, but as contingent, multiple and dynamic discursive materializations, constituted in ongoing practice and performatively entangled with the phenomena they assess.

Conclusion

In this commentary we have outlined some ways in which our approach to the materiality of organizational life both complements and differs from the directions recommended by Hardy and Thomas and other scholars in discourse studies. Even as our approach has a different starting point and different focus, we believe that multiple approaches to considering materiality are valuable and can contribute to deepening our understanding of contemporary organizing. We are encouraged by the renewed interest in materiality within organization studies and hope that our discussion along with the others in this point-counterpoint will further support and stimulate explorations of this important area.

References

- Alvesson M. and Kärreman D. (2011) "Decolonializing Discourse: Critical Reflections on Organizational Discourse Analysis." *Human Relations*, 64: 1121-1146.
- Ashcraft K.L., Kuhn T.R. and Cooren F. (2009) "Constitutional Amendments: 'Materializing' Organizational Communication." *Academy of Management Annals*, 3: 1-64.
- Austin, J.L. (1962) *How to do Things with Words*. Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press.
- Barad, K. (1998) "Getting Real: Technoscientific Practices and the Materialization of Reality." *Differences*, 10, 2: 87-128.
- Barad, K. (2003) "Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 28, 3: 801-831.
- Barad, K. (2007) *Meeting the University Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Hardy, Thomas (forthcoming) "Discourse in a Material World." *Journal of Management Studies*.
- Iedema, R. (2007) "On the Multi-modality, Materiality and Contingency of Organizational Discourse." *Organization Studies*, 28, 6: 931-946.
- Orlikowski, W.J. and Scott, S.V. (2008) "Sociomateriality: Challenging the Separation of Technology, Work, and Organization." *Academy of Management Annals*, 2, 1: 433-474.
- Orlikowski, W.J. and Scott, S.V. (forthcoming) "The Algorithm and the Crowd: Considering the Materiality of Service Innovation." *MIS Quarterly*.
- Orlikowski, W.J. and Scott, S.V. (forthcoming) "What Happens When Evaluation Goes Online? Exploring Apparatuses of Valuation in the Travel Sector." *Organization Science*.
- Puig de la Bellacasa, M. (2011) "Matters of Care in Technoscience: Assembling Neglected Things." *Social Studies of Science*, 41, 1: 85-106.
- Scott, S.V. and Orlikowski, W.J. (2012) "Reconfiguring Relations of Accountability: Materialization of Social Media in the Travel Sector." *Accounting, Organizations, and Society*, 37, 1: 26-40.
- Scott, S.V. and Orlikowski, W.J. (forthcoming) "Entanglements in Practice: Performing Anonymity Through Social Media." *MIS Quarterly*.
- Siles, I. and Boczkowski, P. (2012) "At the Intersection of Content and Materiality: A Texto-Material Perspective on the Use of Media Technologies." *Communication Theory*, 22: 227-249.
- Taylor, C. (1993) "To follow a rule . . ." In C. Calhoun, E. LiPuma, and M. Postone (eds.) *Bourdieu: Critical Perspectives*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 45-60.
- Tsoukas, H. and Chia, R. (2002) "On Organizational Becoming: Rethinking Organizational Change." *Organization Science*, 13, 5: 567-582.