

PERSONIFYING CORPORATIONS, ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE, AND OTHER ENTITIES AND COMMUNICATING WITH THEM

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Abstract. In contemporary technological society, non-human entities are increasingly becoming full participants in social and legal relations. Expressions such as “makes decisions,” “responds,” and even “bears responsibility” are routinely applied to corporations, artificial intelligence (AI) systems, and information and communication technologies (ICT). The corporation is recognized as a legal person, users “converse” with voice assistants, and people thank chatbots. This phenomenon—the personification of non-human things and communication with them—stands in tension with the subject/object (human/thing) dualism of traditional social theory. Through concepts from Bruno Latour’s Actor-Network Theory (ANT)—actant, the principle of symmetry, delegation, and hybrid—this article analyzes the conceptual foundations of personification and of communication with non-human subjects. The findings are discussed in the context of corporate legal personhood, the ongoing legal debate over the “electronic person,” and the paradigm of accepting the computer as a social actor (CASA).

Keywords: Bruno Latour, Actor-Network Theory, personification, artificial intelligence, legal person, legal personhood, electronic person, non-human actants, information and communication technologies.

Introduction

In contemporary technological society, non-human entities are increasingly becoming full participants in social and legal relations. The corporation has for centuries been recognized as a legal person; today, expressions such as “makes decisions,” “responds,” and even “bears responsibility” are routinely applied to artificial intelligence (AI) systems, autonomous software agents, and voice assistants. Users engage chatbots while observing norms of politeness, give names to robot assistants, and respond to them emotionally. In other words, society personifies non-human phenomena and enters into communication with them.

The traditional modernist worldview divides the world into two rigid categories: active subjects (humans) and passive objects (things). On this view, only humans can possess agency, intention, and subjecthood, while things merely serve as instruments. Bruno Latour, however, argues that this very division is the unfounded “constitution” of modernity—in practice we constantly deal with mixed (hybrid) assemblages composed of human and non-human elements (Latour, 1993). The Actor-Network Theory (ANT) that Latour founded proposes precisely to rethink this boundary: on its account, any element capable of action—whether human or thing—participates in the social network as an actant (Latour, 2005).

The central research question of this article is as follows: **How do Bruno Latour’s ANT ideas explain the personification of corporations, artificial intelligence, and ICT systems and the phenomenon of communicating with them, and what are the legal and social implications of this understanding?** This question is not only theoretical but also of practical significance: ongoing international debates over the legal personhood of AI (the “electronic person”), the question of liability for harm caused by autonomous systems, and the ethical dimensions of human–machine communication are directly connected to it (Teubner, 2006; Bryson et al., 2017). The article sets out the analytical potential of Latour’s categories and also indicates their limitations.

Methods

The study is conceptual-theoretical and interdisciplinary in character and relies on a qualitative method. No empirical data collection is undertaken; instead, a comparative and interpretive analysis of theoretical sources is employed.

The analysis proceeded in three stages. First, on the basis of Latour's principal works (Latour, 1987, 1992, 1993, 1996, 2005) and the texts of other representatives of the ANT tradition—Callon (1986) and Law (1992)—the theory's core categories (actant, symmetry, translation, delegation, hybrid) were identified. Second, these categories were applied to three practical domains: corporate legal personhood, the legal status of AI, and communication with ICT. Here, legal scholarship (Teubner, 2006; French, 1979; Bryson et al., 2017), the philosophy of technology (Gunkel, 2012; Coeckelbergh, 2020; Darling, 2021), and communication theory (Reeves & Nass, 1996; Nass & Moon, 2000) were drawn upon. Third, the analytical potential and limitations of the theory were critically assessed.

Alongside secondary analyses published after 2000, the sources also encompass the primary, foundational texts of the ANT and CASA (Computers Are Social Actors) paradigms. A limitation of the study is that it rests on theoretical generalization and does not aim at a detailed comparison of specific normative-legal instruments across national legal systems.

Results

3.1. Latour's core concepts

The central place in Latour's theory is occupied by the concept of the actant. An actant is any element that modifies a state of affairs—that is, that makes a difference; it may be a human, a thing, an organization, or a technology (Latour, 2005). The crucial point here is that being an actant is not a pre-existing inner “essence” but a property that emerges through relations within a network. In other words, nothing is an “actor” on its own—it becomes an actor within a network of connections with other actants (Law, 1992).

The second foundational concept is the principle of generalized symmetry. ANT requires that human and non-human elements be described in the same terms

at the outset of analysis: the researcher must not begin with the firm conclusion that “only the human is active while the thing is passive” (Callon, 1986). This does not equate things with people; rather, it is a methodological principle demanding that agency be seen as an outcome of distribution within the network.

The third concept is delegation. In his well-known analysis of the “missing masses,” Latour shows that many social tasks are transferred from people to technical devices: the obligation to close a door is delegated to a door-closer, and the requirement to reduce speed to a “sleeping policeman” (speed bump) (Latour, 1992). In this way moral and social order is partly “inscribed” into things; things act on our behalf.

Fourth, Latour distinguishes the mediator from the mere intermediary: an intermediary transmits input without change, whereas a mediator transforms and reshapes meaning and action (Latour, 2005). Finally, the concept of the hybrid (or quasi-object) denotes phenomena that are neither purely social nor purely natural but consist of a fusion of the human and the technical (Latour, 1993, 1996).

3.2. Personifying the corporation

The recognition of the corporation as a legal person is the oldest and most institutionalized instance of personification. From the standpoint of ANT, a corporation is not a single, unified “person” but a heterogeneous network composed of people, documents, contracts, buildings, information systems, and legal instruments (Law, 1992). Through legal and social practice this network is stabilized as a single acting unit—a “person”—so that suits may be brought in its name, contracts concluded, and liability imposed upon it.

In the philosophical literature, French has argued that a corporation may be regarded not merely as a legal fiction but as a moral person, because it possesses a distinctive decision-making structure (a corporate internal decision structure) (French, 1979). ANT broadens this view further: a corporation’s “agency” arises not from some mysterious collective consciousness but from a coordinated network of human and non-human elements. Personifying the corporation is therefore not an anomalous exception but a historically recognized expression of society’s capacity to ascribe subjecthood to non-human actants. This provides a

ready conceptual foundation for the contemporary debate over the legal status of AI.

3.3. AI and the “electronic person”

AI systems—autonomous software agents, generative models, and robots—are a vivid example of actants in Latour’s sense: they modify states of affairs, make a difference, and thereby occupy an active place in the network (Latour, 2005). They often function not as mere intermediaries but as mediators—rather than simply relaying input, they reshape it and produce unexpected outcomes.

It is precisely this feature that gives rise to legal debate. Teubner discusses how autonomous electronic agents are “new actors” that do not fit the traditional legal system’s human/thing dichotomy, and the need to recognize for them a limited legal personhood (Teubner, 2006). In its 2017 resolution, the European Parliament put forward a proposal to explore an “electronic person” status for the most sophisticated autonomous robots (European Parliament, 2017). From the standpoint of ANT such an initiative is logically consistent: if a corporation is granted personhood on account of its place in a network, granting a comparable status to an autonomous AI system is not, in principle, an entirely new step.

At the same time, this analogy is subject to criticism. Bryson, Diamantis, and Grant warn that conferring legal personhood on a synthetic person may create a “lacuna” in liability—that is, it may be used as a “shield” to allow a real person or organization to evade responsibility (Bryson et al., 2017). This points to the impropriety of automatically drawing a normative (legal equality) conclusion from ANT’s descriptive symmetry.

3.4. Communicating with ICT systems

Why do people interact with machines as though communicating with a social partner? In communication research this question is answered by CASA—the “Computers Are Social Actors” paradigm. The experiments of Reeves and Nass showed that people apply social rules—politeness, reciprocity, and even gender stereotypes—to computers involuntarily (Reeves & Nass, 1996). Nass and

Moon call this an “unconscious social response”: even though users do not believe the computer to be a living being, they treat it as if it were a social actor (Nass & Moon, 2000).

These empirical findings complement Latour’s idea of delegation. ICT systems not only “activate” social rules but also perform, on behalf of humans, the social tasks delegated to them—reminding, regulating, instructing (Latour, 1992). In this sense, communication with a voice assistant or chatbot is a natural outcome of the network relation between the human and the technical actant. Darling emphasizes that an emotional attitude toward robots—the tendency to animate them—is a deep social-psychological feature of human beings (Darling, 2021). Personification, then, is not merely a technological property but also a function of human perception.

Discussion

The foregoing analysis shows that Latour’s ANT can unite the personification of corporations, AI, and ICT within a single conceptual frame: in all three cases the non-human element becomes an actant by virtue of its place in the network and is accepted as a full participant in social and legal relations. The principal contribution of this approach is that, by softening the subject/object dualism, it presents “personhood” not as an innate essence but as a product of relations (Latour, 2005; Law, 1992).

In legal terms, this view clarifies the “electronic person” debate. If personhood is a status ascribed within a network, then the question is posed not as “Is AI a person by nature?” but as “What status is it expedient to ascribe to it?” (Teubner, 2006). This is a normative choice, not a descriptive fact. For precisely this reason the warning of Bryson and colleagues (Bryson et al., 2017) retains its force: personification must not distance liability from real human actors.

In ethical and communicative terms, the CASA findings (Reeves & Nass, 1996; Nass & Moon, 2000) and views in the philosophy of technology (Gunkel, 2012; Coeckelbergh, 2020) show that communication is not one-directional—a projection of the human onto the machine—but a new form of interaction between

the human and the technical actant. Coeckelbergh stresses that in communication, relation and social context take priority over knowing an entity's "inner mind" (Coeckelbergh, 2020); this accords with Latour's relational approach.

At the same time, Latour's theory has a number of limitations. First, the symmetry principle is charged by critics with insufficiently taking into account the distinctive intentionality, consciousness, and moral responsibility of humans. Descriptive symmetry must not be conflated with normative equality: a thing may act, but the capacity to answer (to be accountable) belongs to humans and organizations. Second, ANT sometimes fails to disclose adequately who carries out personification, how, and in whose interests—that is, the question of power and interest. In the context of AI this is especially important: personification may become a means of commercial advantage or of evading liability. Third, because the theory is descriptive in character, it does not by itself answer the question "Should AI be granted legal personhood?"—that answer must be reached on the basis of legal-political values.

Conclusion

The article has shown that Bruno Latour's Actor-Network Theory can provide a coherent theoretical foundation for understanding the personification of corporations, AI, and ICT systems and the phenomenon of communicating with them. The concepts of actant, symmetry, delegation, mediation, and hybrid make it possible to analyze these non-human entities within a single frame—as active participants in a network. Personification, then, is not an unusual exception but a natural and historically confirmed manifestation of society's capacity to ascribe subjecthood to non-human actants.

At the same time, although Latour's relational approach has descriptive power, it must be critically assessed on questions of legal personhood and liability: the legal form of personification—the "electronic person," for example—is a normative choice that must not weaken the responsibility of humans and organizations. As promising directions for future research, the legal implications of personification under generative AI and a comparative analysis of this issue across national legal systems deserve particular emphasis.

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