

The misunderstanding of excessive communication (2)

Why do socio-technical networks thrive on translation?



Blog post

A question left open

In the first article of this series, we reached a relatively simple conclusion. Complex innovations generally suffer less from an excess of information than from a difficulty in building a shared understanding. This observation, however, leads to another question. If innovations need to be explained, who performs this mediation work? How do actors with different interests, skills, and languages manage to build a sufficiently common understanding to act together? To answer this question, we must shift our perspective. After the diffusion of innovations, we must examine the networks that make this diffusion possible.

The network does not pre-exist

Our spontaneous intuition often leads us to consider networks as pre-existing entities. Businesses, government agencies, investors, communities, and digital platforms appear as actors who interact within a pre-existing network.

Michel Callon offers a different perspective. According to him, the network is not the starting point. It is the outcome. Before a collective can act, different actors must first define a common problem, identify converging interests, and build sufficiently stable relationships to cooperate. The network thus appears as a gradual construction.

Constructing a common question

The first difficulty is usually not finding a solution. It lies in defining the problem. An investor, a public administration, a technical operator, and a local community do not necessarily view a situation in the same way. Each has its own priorities, constraints, and expectations.

Before even coordinating their actions, these actors must therefore recognize that they are all dealing with the same issue. This step seems obvious. Yet, it constitutes one of the first tasks of translation.

To align interests

Once the problem is defined, a second difficulty arises. Why would different stakeholders agree to participate in the same endeavor? The investor seeks profitability. The public administration pursues a public policy objective. The technical operator seeks to deploy a solution. Local communities want tangible benefits for their territories.

These interests are not identical. Yet, a collective project becomes possible when they manage to identify sufficient points of convergence. Cooperation rarely arises from identical interests. It generally results from a process of alignment.

The network is a construct

This idea leads to a significant shift. Networks do not pre-exist the actors who compose them. They emerge gradually through operations of coordination, engagement, and mobilization. In other words, networks are not discovered; they are built.

This observation is particularly useful for understanding contemporary projects that combine digital technologies, public institutions, investors, and territories. Their success depends less on an isolated actor than on the collective's ability to maintain sufficiently stable alignments.

How do you make a forest circulate?

Bruno Latour approaches the question from a different angle. One of his best-known examples concerns a seemingly simple problem: How can a forest be moved without moving the forest itself? The question may seem strange, yet it lies at the heart of many contemporary activities.

How does a territory become a map? How does an environmental measurement become data? How does data become a report? How does a report become a decision?

The transformation chains

Between the reality observed in the field and the decision made in a distant institution, a long series of transformations takes place. Observations become measurements. Measurements become data. Data become tables. Tables become reports. Reports become decisions.

Each step simplifies reality while making it easier to transport, compare, and use. This is what Latour calls a chain of reference.

No fact circulates alone

This idea has considerable implications today. A carbon credit doesn't circulate in isolation. A digital asset doesn't circulate in isolation. An environmental certification doesn't circulate in isolation.

Between the initial object and its final use, multiple intermediaries always intervene: experts, institutions, certification bodies, digital platforms, government agencies, and investors. Each intermediary interprets what it receives before passing it on. Circulation, therefore, relies on a succession of interpretations.

The networks are fragile

A final step involves considering the lifespan of networks. Once built, can they function indefinitely? John Law answers in the negative. According to him, no network is ever definitively stable.

Interests evolve. Regulations change. Technologies transform. New players emerge while others disappear. The stability of a network is less a lasting state than a continuously reproducing equilibrium.

Translate to maintain

This idea is particularly important. When a network is functioning well, its members tend to forget the work required to maintain it. Meetings seem repetitive. Explanations appear redundant. Rephrasing sometimes gives the impression of repeating the same things.

However, these activities often serve a vital function. They allow for the correction of misunderstandings, the integration of new participants, the adaptation of the project to its environment, and the maintenance of previously established alignments. From this perspective, translation is often less about repetition than about repair.

Another way of looking at communication

This conclusion allows us to return to the question that served as the starting point for this series: Do we communicate too much? The work of Callon, Latour, and Law suggests a different answer.

In a complex socio-technical network, the main challenge is not simply to circulate information. It consists of building, nurturing, and maintaining the relationships that make this circulation possible. Translation no longer appears as a peripheral activity. It becomes a condition of collective action.

A new question

This reflection, however, leads to a new question. What happens when the objects in circulation themselves become increasingly abstract? What becomes of the work of translation when networks combine blockchain, tokenization, finance, regulation, natural resources, and territorial development?

Contemporary digital finance systems have a particular characteristic. They connect numerous actors, speak several languages simultaneously, and manipulate objects whose understanding is becoming increasingly distant from ordinary experience.

In such a context, translation no longer serves merely to build or maintain networks. It is gradually becoming a true infrastructure of intelligibility. It is this invisible infrastructure that we will examine in the third article of this series.