

## Social Technology Workshop

VKS Amsterdam

2 October 2009

Paul Wouters (Virtual Knowledge Studio, Amsterdam) and Bas van Heur (Maastricht Virtual Knowledge Studio)

Organized by the Virtual Knowledge Studio, the Copenhagen Business School and the Department of Psychology at the University of Groningen, this one-day workshop offered an interdisciplinary take on the notion of *social technology* and its relevance for the further development of Science & Technology Studies (STS). In the Call for Papers of the workshop “redressing the imbalance” inherent in a material view of technology was formulated as a key goal of the workshop. It took as its point of departure that the dominant view in STS holds that all technology is by definition social while the analytical focus is determinedly fixed on devices and material technologies. This has two consequences. First, the social tends to be seen as theoretically uninteresting and analytically useless (because it is pervasive). Second, more ephemeral instrumental procedures and institutions are overlooked although they do function in many ways like technologies. This makes this workshop relevant for fields outside of STS, in particular for the social sciences that have developed other relevant notions and concepts about the social, and for the information sciences that have to take into account the social in the design of new technological platforms. Examples of social technologies that came up in the workshop varied from social software to the arrangement of chairs in therapeutic sessions to the role of social science in ship design. This brief review summarizes the main debates and highlights some of the key issues in need of further development.

A basic issue raised in almost all concept-centred events is the explanatory status of the concept. Not surprisingly, therefore, in this particular workshop the notion of social technology returned as a key topic for debate. Although most participants resisted the urge to define this concept in advance of empirical analysis, various dimensions of social technologies were addressed. Kathrin Braun in her paper on bioethics committees, for example, argues that social technologies are generated by the social sciences, used to tackle social entities (the ‘social’, however, is itself the product of technologies of government), and consist of action meaningfully oriented to others. Random or unintended actions between human beings and objects therefore do not qualify as social technologies. This is quite a distance (as also noted by Braun) from the STS conviction that there is no non-social action, but at the same time it does seem compatible with Latour’s early Machiavellian version of ANT. Highlighting this aspect of meaningful action, Braun argues that social technologies need to be understood as more or less standardized procedures organizing social action. This dimension of social technologies, in other words, refers to the strategic regulation of ‘the social’.

Steven Brown – who unfortunately had to cancel his participation in the workshop – in his paper proposes to describe commemorative and collective silence as a social technology. In contrast to Braun, the reason for this seems to be less ontological than epistemological: he argues that this allows analysts to follow the STS argument that the meaning and very nature of a technology is determined by those who use and interact with it. The notion of social technology, in other words, is used here to emphasize the local situatedness of action. Brown rejects the understanding of commemorative silences as rituals, since this ignores that these silences cannot

draw upon an established memorial infrastructure. This argument chimes with the argument put forward by the workshop organizers Maarten Derksen and Anne Beaulieu in their paper, where they claim that some practices are usefully understood as social technologies, since they raise the issue of the specificity of the social. In contrast to ANT and Foucauldian analyses, it is argued, this approach pays attention to the social as an emergent category. The paper focuses on three kinds of social technologies: 1) technologies as the product of the social sciences (e.g. the skills of the social science graduates); 2) technologies that consist mostly of human action (rather than devices); and 3) technologies that mediate social group formation. It is particularly in the study of these forms of technology that currently dominant approaches in technology dynamics miss out on the opportunity to specifically study the social dimensions since these are explained away a priori.

This approach does raise the issue, however, of how to define the notion of “social technology”. What exactly is the analytical gain of the concept of social technology in comparison with the concept of institution (or in some cases ritual)? To what extent can the social technology concept help mainstream sociology to pay more in-depth attention to social practices and routines that otherwise would be too easily subsumed under more familiar categories or concepts? In other words, in what sense is the notion of social technology useful? Is it primarily a new perspective on social institutions and processes that zooms in on the instrumental dimensions and that mobilizes the sociology of technology for this? Or are social technologies specific phenomena in the world that need particular specifications in order to be properly evaluated and understood?

In the workshop, the empirical references were highly diverse and ranged from brain devices (Jonna Brenninkmeijer), the notion of talent (Sara Malou Strandvad and Julie Sommerlund), an experiment in industrial democracy on a ship (Javier Lezaun), carbon dioxide emissions (Ingmar Lippert), the visualization of social networks (Katja Mayer), a circle of chairs in psychiatric practice (Katia Dupret Søndergaard), Roma expertise (Tereza Stöckelová) and Bion’s group analytical technique (Signe Vikkelsö) to priming, surveys and polling groups and social software platforms (Maarten Derksen and Anne Beaulieu). The notion of social technology, in other words, is used to refer to an extraordinarily wide range of entities – from organizations to discourses, methods and ICT infrastructures. This suggests that the notion of social technology is located on a theoretical level, since it needs to be capable of encompassing all these rather diverse entities by showing the commonalities between these entities.

All this raises a few questions. First of all, if social technologies can be found everywhere throughout the social field, what then distinguishes this concept from other concepts that lay claim to partly the same territory? Concepts such as structure, agency, institution, organization, ritual, regulation, selectivity, governance and emergence all refer to entities and processes also captured by the notion of social technology, but the workshop papers and discussion only addressed the relation between these concepts to a limited extent. What is, in other words, the unique selling point of social technology? Partly, this question was answered in the workshop by emphasizing the continued importance of understanding the complexity of the social, against a trend in STS that understands the category of ‘the social’ as increasingly irrelevant. This had the paradoxical effect – as Tereza Stöckelová concluded – that the workshop discussion tended to

ignore the technological dimension of social technology in its attempt to rehabilitate the social. But it also raises the question concerning the domain-specificity of the debate on social technologies. Is the notion of social technology only relevant in STS – i.e. in a discipline that hasn't paid much attention to the distinctiveness of human actors in a technoscientific world – or can it productively make wider claims, not only in STS but also in other social scientific disciplines? As we have noted in the beginning of this review, we think that potentially this wider relevance was present in the papers, but it is not yet clear in what forms this potential can be realized. The workshop tended to focus on actor-network theory (ANT) which may not be that important in other fields. The focus on social technology as a concept would win in strength if the discussion could be related to other theoretical frameworks, such as structuration theory, neo-institutionalism, and theories about ritualization.

Last but not least, it raises the question of who produces social technologies. In many ways, the social sciences developed the instruments to analyze society (mass observation, surveys, descriptive and inferential statistics, the interview) in the course of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. They thereby also constituted society as a distinct domain of practice and knowledge. Nowadays, many of these techniques have been adopted by commercial companies that have also developed new analytical ways to mine their data. At the same time, people playing online games and participating in social software platforms are massively annotating their private lives in public. Social network analysis has been transformed into the basis for visualization products. In other words, the monopoly of the social sciences on social science analysis has been destroyed. It does not mean that social science has no role to play anymore. But it does make a sophisticated analysis of how these new technologies create new forms of the social, and thereby of society, more urgent.