

Float and Drift: How Things Work or 'How Things Use Law and Religion'

Richard Mohr

Social Research, Policy & Planning PL and University of Sydney

I explore the apparently perverse but essential ways in which tools (broadly defined) have real world effects. Many of the puzzling aspects of the technologies of law and religion involve their unintended consequences. When ICT enters the court or the fatwa, when it mediates between judges and plaintiffs, or between God and believers, it changes that relationship. In McLuhan's aphorism, 'the medium is the message'.

Technologies do not always behave as expected. We get good and bad surprises: the Internet, global warming. Seen as the runaway world of the master's apprentice, these strange powers of technology are alarming, as if the technology has its own agency. Yet actor network theory tells us that tools are always agents (Latour 2005).

To understand that agency we should first understand what we expect the tools to do. Their physical effects are achieved by extending or amplifying the force of humans. Social effects are achieved by communication. In complex systems, including law and religion, neither of these processes is linear, nor isolated. Both are compounded by cumulative effects multiplying possible outcomes.

Ciborra (2002) has called this phenomenon 'dérive'—'drift and deviation'—when it occurs in technologies like complex organisations or ICT. Symbolic and communicative tools effect social change performatively, through an excess of signification, above and beyond simple description (Austin 1980; Agamben 2005, 37). The paper explores the phenomena of drift and the floating signifier in order to seek a framework to analyse, explain and possibly even intervene in complex technical and symbolic transactions.

Agamben, G. 2005. *State of Exception*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Austin, J.L. 1980. *How To Do Things With Words*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Ciborra, C. 2002. *The Labyrinths of Information: Challenging the Wisdom of Systems*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Latour, B. 2005. *Reassembling the Social: An introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.