



***Network:  
Theorizing Knowledge  
Work in Telecommunications***

*Author*  
Clay Spinuzzi

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Graduate students struggling to understand points of distinction between Vygotsky's Hegelian synthesis and Latour's Deleuzean ontology will find Clay Spinuzzi's 2008 book *Network: Theorizing Knowledge Work in Telecommunications* very useful. Administrators of undergraduate and graduate technical communication programs may find *Network* equally useful, and not just for pedagogical reasons. *Network* applies theory to concrete situations of organizational growth that administrators can extrapolate to changing dynamics in their department, college, or university. In *Network*, Spinuzzi casts everyday situations in actor-network (ANT) and activity theory (AT) frames, shifting between the two with the skilled hand of an activity theorist comfortably steeped in Latourean ontology. Spinuzzi's book is not a serious ANT or AT investigation of the telecom industry, but its strengths are patent: readers seeking an introduction to AT or ANT, a thorough discussion of the philosophical underpinning of each theory, an informative cross-comparison of the theories, or a thoughtful application of each theory to a historical narrative will relish Spinuzzi's work.

*Network* depicts a telecom company rounding the technoindustrial apex of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Telecorp (Spinuzzi's pseudonym for a Texas telecommunications company) is expanding faster than its infrastructure can handle. Legislative changes in the mid-1990s have provided it with access to its competitor's physical network. Emerging internet and voice technologies are expanding its

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business and private customer base, and the resulting growth has increased employee turnover as departments are created, expanded, and integrated. Because it leases network space from its larger competitor—BigTel—Telecorp shares information with a company it also vies against for customers. Expansion and an elaborately structured telecom industry force Telecorp to amass its employees at the border of interaction with its public and competitors. Telecorp is unable to form a “black box,” a coherent and contained mechanism that operates behind the curtain of industry (pp. 52–53).

Program administrators who read *Network* will likely recognize similarities between Spinuzzi’s Telecorp and contemporary local/regional learning institutions. Schools that once (and perhaps still) compete for students now share facilities, instructors, and courses to cut costs. Meanwhile, a “battered” US workforce is flocking to local schools in order to update skills and credentials. Undergraduates are staying in school longer to avoid job hunting, expanding the market for practical MA and MS programs. Spinuzzi never directly compares telecom and technical communication administration, but the dynamics that he describes present a familiar paradigm for administrators, instructors and students. Telecorp’s workers, “find themselves in a constant state of ‘metastability’... characterized by constant forging and testing of relationships” (p. 174). Workers must constantly update outmoded skills and associations to stay relevant to a rapidly-changing workplace.

Administrators at growing institutions may also recognize Spinuzzi’s “four disruptions,” the four characteristic conflicts that erupt in the wake of the rapidly expanding organization. At Telecorp, sales and customer service representatives quibble over mundane responsibilities. Sales and credit argue over whether a client is trustworthy. A manager threatens to sanction employees if they ignore a computer-based genre, and two departments use the same terms for different entities. Spinuzzi establishes these four disruptions early in the book as foils for theory discussion. He winds the theoretical threads of his project—Vygotsky, Engeström, Latour, and Bahktin—around the four conflicts, introducing the basic disagreements between AT and ANT as apologetics for their respective emphases. Spinuzzi juxtaposes the human-nonhuman symmetry of ANT with the remnant humanism of AT as he sets the scene for finer delineations of the two theories.

In Chapter 3, Spinuzzi develops the ‘God terms’ of his comparison in the most pedagogically friendly section of the book. Activity theorists, he argues, tend to view actions as *weaves*, movements of atomistic humans gaining competency. Weaves are based in conflict and subsequent, irreversible evolution that resolves the conflict. For activity theorists, “development precedes and underpins political-rhetorical interests” (p. 67). *Splicing*, the operative metaphor

for ANT, organizes phenomena in alliances of humans and nonhumans that continually form and end. For actor-network theorists, Spinuzzi posits, “political-rhetorical interests precede and underpin development” (67). Actor-network theory explains power relations as a consequence of a system while activity theory explains the system as an exercise of human power.

Telecom technology, Spinuzzi contends, creates a spliced environment. In that environment, “organizational, spatial, and temporal boundaries become less important than . . . fluctuating networked connections” (p. 144). At Telecorp, the seemingly simple act of ordering phone service creates a gamut of genre transactions that workers and technology perform in dizzying dispersals of customer information. Spinuzzi retraces familiar ground here, demonstrating the circulation of genres in organizations. He adeptly follows multiple genre substitutions as workers and machines exchange artifacts for operational resolution, adapting language practices in a rhetorical jungle. Spinuzzi shows that networks do not necessarily “develop;” they simply form and reform. Relations in the Telecorp network are always contingent and transformative.

Nonetheless, Spinuzzi posits that individual humans do gain skills and exercise agency. In Chapter 6, workers in a shifting environment use a variety of mediational tools to adapt to local circumstances. Spinuzzi describes the ways that employees use workplace lore, existing genres, and keen observations to acquire new skills. According to Spinuzzi, these skills are “supported almost wholly by informal, contingent ways of learning” (p. 189). Employees at Telecorp move across multiple departments and workgroups through self-training. Though Spinuzzi’s Telecorp is disorganized, workers make integral connections that allow the company to continue its knowledge work.

The most profound administrative implications of *Network* come in the final chapters of the book. Where industries are changing, Spinuzzi argues, the most important skills a worker can possess are not those that allow them to start performing a job immediately, but those that allow them to learn genres and praxes in novel circumstances (p. 202). Spinuzzi’s conclusions imply provocative programmatic changes: We should structure technical communication programs not to teach skills that students can plug into a priori job roles. Rather, we should teach students methodologies that prepare them to learn how associations and genres work at specific sites. Indeed, Spinuzzi argues, “Net workers need to become strong rhetors . . . they must persuade locals to show them the hidden passes that allow them to accomplish their work” (p. 201). Students above all need to learn how they learn, how to teach themselves, and how to learn from and cooperate effectively with others.

Spinuzzi builds an important narrative that may illuminate the dynamics in changing tech comm. programs and learning institutions. Further, Spinuzzi

explains the applicability of ANT and AT as he gently goads activity theory into developing more a comprehensive account of emergent phenomena. Spinuzzi repeatedly acknowledges that ANT and AT are productive for different purposes, and he grounds the discussion of those purposes in each theory's historical ecology. Spinuzzi's cross-comparison of AT and ANT is as helpful for its theoretical exploration as for its practical descriptions of organizational transformation. His book serves as a gateway to understand complicated theories and work structures as the "black box" of a once cohesive telecom organization opens for change.

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### **Author information**

Joshua Prenosil is a PhD candidate in Rhetoric and Composition at Purdue University, where he is writing his dissertation on the rhetoric and technology of social movements. Joshua is the co-founder and general editor of *Present Tense: A Journal of Rhetoric in Society* (<http://www.presenttensejournal.org>). He recently published an article, "The Children of Aramis," in the *Journal of Technical Writing and Communication* with Michael Salvo and Ehren Pflugfelder. His academic interests include public rhetoric, professional writing, actor-network theory, and speculative realism.