Mylène Tanferri, STS Lab, University of Lausanne

Micro-infrastructures: when a team is devising its own ordering devices

Abstract

The main proposition of this paper is to ask if, and how, using the notion of infrastructure and its theoretical apparatus might be a good fit to describe the ways small teams work to produce, establish, and maintain their own working procedures and environments. Based on fieldwork data collected during my PhD thesis, the participant observations I made in two archival institutions on a long-term basis (from the beginning of a digitization project to its first weeks of proceeding), led me to propose that the participants I followed were working toward establishing a framework, both material and procedural, that could then organize their actions. To be able to produce digital copies, they had to stabilize a certain number of elements, or they wouldn't be able to digitize. At the beginning of the projects, they were confronted with ongoing open questions, too many contingencies, way too many decisions to make and an array of different materials that could be put to work in one or the other way. Having devised a « straight » path from beginning to end - from putting the document under the digitizing tool to the moment the copy could be considered as good enough- they established what could be described as an infrastructure, shaping their actions and aimed at producing even, uniform copies among several operators. Through testing and discussing their results, they stabilized their own environments and procedures, and used them at their own localized level.

By using the notion of infrastructure to describe these processes, we can first ask what the devised procedures are and how they stand at the articulation between materials and actions. Second, as a small-scale operation, with an easy to follow beginning and end, this fieldwork can also help to reframe questions regarding infrastructures as ordering devices: how are they collectively shaped and maintained? How do their « ordering powers » work ?

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