1. Introduction: action nets

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This book has been written by the scholars who participate in the research program Organizing in Action Nets (OAN) at Gothenburg Research Institute (GRI), School of Business, Economics and Law at University of Gothenburg. Its origins can be traced back to the conspicuous changes in organization theory that have occurred in recent decades, as the focus of the field shifted from structures to processes, from organizations to organizing. The constructionist perspective, present in much of current social science reasoning, helped organization theorists to realize that everything flows, even if change itself can become stable. The global economy and its ally, information technology, made it obvious that organizing crosses corporate and national borders, that mergers and acquisitions are mundane events and that markets are more virtual than ever. Ideas travel all over the world and become translated into local practices.

As a research program, OAN aims at reinvigorating the vocabulary of organization theory to fit the present time. Management is studied as the construction and reconstruction of action nets – collective actions connected to one another – because they are perceived, within a given institutional order, as requiring each other (Czarniawska, 2004; 2008a). The collective actions concerned need not be performed within the bounds of a formal organization; an action net can involve several organizations or groups of people organized loosely or temporarily. Thus, action net is a general concept referring to useful ways of studying that practice rather than to entities concerned with the practice of management.

Organizing in the Face of Risk and Threat applies this approach to an especially relevant topic. Although risk and threat are topics that have attracted a great deal of attention recently (see, for example, Weick and Sutcliffe, 2001; Power, 2004; Boholm and Löfstedt, 2004), our ambition is

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to contribute to organization theory rather than risk theory. In other words, we simply extend organization theory to yet another field of practice.

MORE ON ACTION NETS

The idea of an action net has its roots in the new institutional theory, but it can also be seen as an attempt to extend this theory. The new institutional theory is based on an assumption that it is possible, at any time and place, to distinguish an institutional order – a set of (not necessarily coherent) institutions that are dominant then and there. Such institutions steer practical organizing in the sense that they prescribe which actions can be legitimately connected. In the present institutional order of Western-style democracies, for example, producers sell their products. This order leads to the emergence of various entities and identities that are then treated as legitimate study objects: formal organizations, producers, consumers, suppliers and marketers. A traditional institutional analysis begins from such entities, which are often called ‘actors’. It is there that the action net approach suggests a change of perspective in order to minimize the initial preconceptions. The action net approach suggests that producers, consumers and formal organizations should be seen as results of organizing, rather than its premises.

The approach suggests moving the focus of research back in time, and from ‘who does what?’ to ‘what is being done?’ Back in time, consumers or suppliers became defined as such because of the repeated actions they performed. The verb to consume preceded the noun consumer, and the verb to supply gave birth to the noun supplier. This is obviously not a linguistic discovery, but by highlighting the obvious, we justify our plea for moving the starting point for research on organizing back in time. Before they were taken for granted, institutions were merely action patterns, possibly even seen as eccentric when new. Institutions begin with some people doing something, then repeating it, and then joining what they do to what others do or have done. When the pattern becomes obvious, it acquires a normative justification and is taken as given.² We wish to study this process as early as possible, beginning with actions rather than actors.

What is the relationship between the concept of action net and more well-established concepts such as organization field, network and actor-network?

² In the literal sense, however, institutions are instituted; that is, a certain type of practice is prescribed and normatively justified (Czarniawska, 2008b). It is assumed that the actual practice will follow (which it seldom does, if the practice was not previously well established).
The conceptualization of organization field changed in time. When DiMaggio and Powell (1991) compared their version of the ‘new institutionalism’ with Selznick’s (1949) ‘old one’, they noted that Selznick used the expression ‘interorganizational field’ quite literally. His study object, the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA), was a federal authority created to build a dam on the Tennessee River, in hopes of counteracting unemployment in the region. The interorganizational field was the web of actual contacts created between the TVA and other organizations in the region. In Selznick’s view, the concrete actions defined and limited the field.

DiMaggio and Powell, however, borrowed their concept of the field from Pierre Bourdieu, who in turn borrowed it from Kurt Lewin, who intended that it be perceived as a ‘field of forces’. Thus, in DiMaggio and Powell’s version, an organization field became more symbolic – one could say ‘virtual’, as information technology now plays a critical role in the creation and maintenance of organization fields. An organization field is a common frame of reference used by various organizations that are directly or indirectly (for example, consultants) engaged in a similar type of activity. Field participants need not meet one another, or even know each other; nevertheless, they can become each other’s role models, competitors or objects of desire (Hedmo et al., 2005).

DiMaggio and Powell’s redefinition is extremely useful, because it highlights the use of symbolic images in organizing. Nevertheless, it also means that they lost Selznick’s insight concerning the importance of actual contacts. A similar turn occurred in studies of finance, in which Knorr Cetina and Bruegger (2002) claimed that ‘postsocial’ relationships (experiencing the world through the mediation of a computer screen) replaced the actual ones. This finding is contradicted by, among others, Renemark (2007), who showed that finance workers continue to have face-to-face contact even after having developed a digital web of contacts. Neither are such contacts limited to the same type of practice. As university teachers, we have daily contact with cleaners and caterers, to mention only two types of workforce present at the university but not as teachers or administrators. Our actions are closely connected to theirs, although our frames of reference are not the same. The idea behind an action net is bringing light to both actual and virtual connections among collective actions.

As to the difference between action nets and actor–networks, these two concepts are partially overlapping. In the traditional network theory,
actors first exist, and then tie contacts, somewhat as in Selznick’s organization fields. In actor-network theory (see, for example, Latour, 2005), actors emerge via associations of *actants*, that is, whatever entities that act or are acted upon, which construct a network and then speak in one voice via their spokespersons (Czarniawska and Hernes, 2005). The same process can be distinguished by the action net approach, but the net is cast wider. An action net can lead to the construction of a network, and such a network may, but not necessarily will, succeed in presenting itself as an actor. Action nets that do not produce networks do exist, and an action net can continue to exist even when the actors have been disassembled or replaced. People will still be investing and buying insurance even after the 2008 crisis swept away several important macroactors.

When interrogated, however, the practitioners of organizing seldom say that they connect actions to one another (with some exceptions; see Lindberg and Czarniawska, 2006); the vocabulary of formal organization (hierarchies) and, more recently, networks, dominates the discourse. In their eyes, it is the existing actors who build a network; duties and responsibilities are automatically distributed within a network when needed. That which was the base of bureaucracy – the division of competencies between bureaus, that is, public administration offices – is now presented as the opposite of bureaucracy, because it is called ‘a network’.

Whatever the label, however, it is not the formal structure or the formal network that becomes mobilized when something must be done. In such situations, it is unimportant who is responsible for what or who has the right to do what. The critical issue is: *what must be done and how?* This is the way, as becomes clear later in this volume, that a reaction to a concrete threat or catastrophe is most often organized. When it is the case of a hypothetical risk, however, the actions unfold according to the bureaucracy/network prescription, with long and convoluted discussions about whose responsibility it is going to be.

Such discussions obviously have their raison d’être, as somebody must be held responsible before the law. This is one of the reasons that bureaucracy was invented in the first place. There is an interesting historical shift in this process: it was the normative aspects of the law that led to the creation of bureaucracy, whereas the attribution of responsibility within a network is a way to meet the punitive aspects of the law – in advance. From the point of view of the individuals involved, it makes sense to care about the division of responsibilities. After the tsunami catastrophe hurt many Swedish tourists, the main point of the public debate was not how to improve the actions needed in such a case, but who within the government should be punished. Apparently, had not the Minister of Foreign Affairs gone to see a play on Boxing Day, everything would have taken another...
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turn . . . from the perspective of the efficiency of the actions taken, this punitive aspect is of doubtful significance, though.

Thus, we suggest a conceptualization of organizing as creating, stabilizing, maintaining and recreating connections among collective actions. Such an approach need not exclude such concepts as network or actor-network; they are all needed. Furthermore, an ‘action net’ is not an observable phenomenon; it is a concept that may prove useful in the attempt to describe organizing in its early stages – before any concrete entity has been formed. Threat and risk are, by definition, situations in which well-established entities may be of little use, although there is a continuous process of creating such entities explicitly for this purpose. Thus, threat and risk situations provide a wealth of examples to illustrate what we mean by organizing as the creation of action nets.

ABOUT THIS VOLUME

In the next chapter, Ulla Eriksson-Zetterquist presents previous research focusing on the interface between risk and organizing. She begins with a wider frame of reference, constructed by sociologists who claim that risk has acquired a special meaning in modern societies. She then lists the most current definitions of such concepts as risk, threat and catastrophe. The chapter moves to the newly emerging field of risk management. Its origins are in the insurance industry, but the concept has now been significantly extended (extended, in fact, to everything, claims Michael Power, 2004). Researchers interested in this phenomenon examine how companies deal with the uncertainties confronting them, but also how risk is calculated in decision-making. Risk concerns future events, however, and other researchers have decided to focus on actual events by studying catastrophes and their aftermath. The chapter ends with a review of such studies – studies that are then related to the action net approach, representative of this volume.

In Chapter 3, Andreas Diedrich describes an outbreak of the Marburg hemorrhagic fever virus in Uíge, Angola, in 2005. The World Health Organization (WHO) faithfully follows its vision of ‘a network of networks’, which is expected to cover the entire globe with the aim of dampening such outbreaks before they become epidemic or pandemic. An even more ambitious goal would be to stop them entirely. With such a goal in mind, a network of experts is created, the task of which is to develop plans and procedures, which are, in turn, to be coordinated by WHO. Such experts, however, usually work far from the places where outbreaks occur. As Diedrich’s chapter shows, almost none of the experts’ plans were successful in Uíge. A local action net was created instead, but was then
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destroyed. Diedrich reminds the readers of Paolo Freire’s ([1970] 1993) criticism of the traditional idea of ‘knowledge transfer’ from what Freire called the ‘developed’ to the ‘underdeveloped’ countries. This idea fails in practice: the good intentions of WHO’s leaders and their understanding of preparedness capitulated to the actual threat.

In Chapter 4 Kajsa Lindberg describes the reaction of public sector organizations to the threat of bird flu. A common conclusion has been reached that it would be crucial to provide access to the vaccine for all Swedish citizens in case of an epidemic. The discourse legitimating the actions that followed was based on concepts such as risk and threat, but as it turned out, bird flu can also be conceptualized as an opportunity. The organizations that wanted to be involved actively divided responsibilities and planned what was to be done. It has been established that a critical component of the preparation for pandemics is a constant supply of vaccine. One way of ensuring such constant supply to Swedes (which is at present being investigated by the Swedish government) is to build a factory that will produce the vaccine in Sweden. The plan is for this enterprise to be private-public, and to be ready in 2010. Three international pharmaceutical companies have already signaled their interest. As private companies have different aims than public administration units, however, cooperation may prove difficult.

As Lars Norén claims in Chapter 5, the negative experiences of Swedish tourists affected by the tsunami catastrophe made it clear to many a Swedish citizen that the state is no longer prepared to guarantee their health care. A gap has been revealed, and one can expect that private insurance companies will rush in, creating a wide market for individual insurance. Two types of clients may be interested in entering such a market: employers and private individuals. The Swedish insurance companies seem to be much more interested in the former than in the latter, perhaps because risk calculations that are globally used by insurance companies to decide whom to insure and whom not to insure are seen as controversial in Sweden, and the companies have not used them yet. Instead, they try to convince employers that they run huge risks if they do not insure their employees. This attempt can be interpreted as a continuation of the tradition of the Swedish welfare state, where collective insurance was always preferred over individual insurance. Or perhaps it is an indication that the ‘risk society’ mentality has not yet reached Swedish citizens, in spite of the tsunami events. The 2008 financial crisis may strengthen this tradition even more.

In Chapter 6, Eva Gustavsson also tells a story of the creation of an action net around a division of responsibility, but in this case, the risks are connected to so-called adventure tourism. A complicated history of creation of safety rules for adventure tourists clearly shows that such a collective action is much more complex than mere cooperation among
various organizational units – although that is usually complex enough. In
adventure tourism, various groups – of tourists, of organizers, of experts
– associate and break their associations; try to influence rules and one
another; form connections between actions and dissolve them.

The two chapters that follow focus not on preparedness and the division
of responsibility, but on actions undertaken in the case of actual catastro-
phes. And, perhaps surprisingly, these actions seem to be more successful
than the previous chapters might have led the reader to expect.

The impact of Gudrun, the storm that hit Sweden on 8 January 2005,
can be placed partway between a tsunami and adventure tourism acci-
dents, but it has also been instructive for the Swedish citizen. In Chapter
7, David Renemark describes the efforts that have been undertaken after
the storm. One thing is obvious: a catastrophe is not the right time to
bother with organizational borders and formal divisions of responsibil-
ity. Even if the people who tell the story use the legitimate vocabulary
of ‘actors’, ‘networks’ and ‘hierarchies’, their accounts of what actually
happened show that the spontaneous actions of volunteers were most
crucial. It becomes apparent in a crisis that it is no longer important who
should be doing what, only that it gets done. Private individuals helped
one another and the employees of public administration units during and
after Gudrun; various companies offered financial support and performed
tasks far beyond their areas of competence. All this does not diminish the
importance of preparedness, but it suggests that in order to be able to deal
with future catastrophes, it is more important to know what needs to be
done and how, rather than who should be doing what.

The story of the collapse of the bridge from Gothenburg to the island
of Tjörn and its incredibly speedy reconstruction, told by Lars Walter in
Chapter 8, supports this conclusion. Even in this case, the popular account
of events (not least the one offered by the media) employs traditional
vocabulary of an ‘interorganizational network’ and a mystical idea of a
‘shared responsibility feeling’. Walter suggests, however, that it was the
very catastrophe that explains why the new bridge was built so quickly.
The catastrophe created a state of what he calls ‘action precedence’,
characterized by a loosening of most of the rules for what can be seen
as ‘normal’ organizing. Two typical examples were the use of shortcuts
rather than customary routines, and distributed responsibility in place of
da detailed division of responsibility. The paradoxical conclusion is that
effective organizing can occur when all the rules of ‘proper’ organizing
are ignored. A catastrophic situation also reveals what is ‘normal organ-
zizing’ – through the fact that it is not done. Catastrophes invoke a state
of action precedence, thus creating special conditions for organizing – not
only during the catastrophe but also afterwards.
Not all catastrophes are huge catastrophes. Tobias Engberg returns to the well-known topic of the interaction between humans and machines from an innovative perspective, pointing out in Chapter 9 that both bodies and machines contribute to the stability of the interaction. When an interaction is truly stable, it runs the risk of stagnation. The first symptoms – backache or the slow start of a program – are merely announcing future, more painful threats. Further systems are therefore developed to handle such risks, and devices for dealing with small breakdowns are established. Such a risk management system contributes to a progressing stagnation however, through a further reduction of the border between people and their office bodies. Enberg’s chapter ends with a prescription for an alternative route, one in which the first small breakdowns are taken as an invitation to self-education: looking under the cover of the copying machine or learning more about the actual workings of one’s computer.

Peter Zackariasson takes the problem of risk and threat even further into the virtual domain: that of the arts. Aesthetics and the arts have strong meaning for a great many people, and therefore a painting, a drawing or a play can be perceived as threatening or risky. What for some spectators is an aesthetic expression, for others may be seen as a threat to their beliefs or ideals. Chapter 10 describes action nets that were created following the exhibition of two works of art: the installation *Snow White and the Madness of Truth* at the exhibition ‘Making Differences’ at the Historical Museum in Stockholm, and the painting *Scène d’Amour* that was removed from the World Cultures Museum in Gothenburg. There was one key difference between these two cases: in the first case freedom of expression won (over the Israeli ambassador who vandalized the work); in the second, the threat towards the museum caused the removal of the work of art. The two cases are instructive in the context of organizing caused by threat and risk, however. It becomes obvious that risk and threat are in the eye of the beholder, and that art and other aesthetic expressions have such great impact that global action nets can be built in their wake.

In the last chapter, Czarniawska presents the conclusions from this variety of cases, and sets them against other studies of risk and organizing. The chapter ends with some practical suggestions, and with a list of research questions that we deem worthy of pursuing.

In order to facilitate the use of the volume, we collected all the references at the end of the book. Specific field material, however, is referred to in the footnotes to each chapter. Also, we render the titles of press articles in English only, in order to render the flavor of the debate.