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Elena Simakova and Daniel Neyland
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http://mtq.sagepub.com/cgi/content.refs/8/1/91
Marketing mobile futures: assembling constituencies and creating compelling stories for an emerging technology

Elena Simakova
Cornell University, USA

Daniel Neyland
Said Business School, University of Oxford, UK

Abstract. This paper engages with the marketing of an emerging technology: Radio Frequency IDentification (RFID). It is based on a lengthy ethnographic field study with a marketing team in a hi-tech corporation. We argue that building market relations for this emerging technology involves three closely intertwined activities: the identification of relevant people and things which can form a constituency into which the product can be launched; the narration of a tellable story which articulates and renders accountable relations of people and things; and the development of a compelling version of this story to provide a basis for ongoing engagement of the putative constituency. Identifying potential members for the constituency, convincing them of the compelling nature of the mobility based story, managing access to the constituency and maintaining internal relations between the marketing team and the rest of the corporate organization are all ongoing aspects of this market building activity. The paper forms a contribution to marketing theory by bringing ideas of constituencies, tellable and compelling stories from science and technology studies research together with insights from the literature on marketing. Key Words • compelling • constituencies • mobility • RFID • stories • STS • tellable

1 Introduction

This paper uses a study of new technology marketing to elaborate its central question: how can science and technology studies (STS) contribute to an understanding of new markets and the work done to make new markets? The paper tackles
this central question in three principal areas: First, how is a constituency of relevant people and things identified through which a new technology can be launched? Second, how is a tellable story constructed which articulates the relationships required between those people and things for a new technology to be a success? Third, what do hi-tech company marketing teams do in practice in order to make their tellable stories sufficiently compelling to draw together and hold together the constituency required for the technology?

The central research drawn on in this paper is an ethnographic study of a hi-tech company’s (called Virtual World in this paper) marketing team. They are involved in attempts to market, and produce a market for, Radio Frequency IDentification (RFID) chips/tags and readers. These are small electrical circuits which can receive and transmit limited amounts of information over fixed distances and be attached to numerous goods, people and places to be traced on the move. Virtual World seeks to market RFID as an enabler of managed forms of mobility.

This paper contributes to the field of marketing theory by drawing together innovative insights on constituencies, tellable and compelling stories from the field of science and technology studies (STS) together with ideas from the field of marketing. The paper argues that these three concepts can augment marketing theory by providing new ways of thinking about how markets are developed in tandem with the launch of new technologies and how new technologies have designed into them specific market orientations regarding how they should be taken up and used. The paper will address its three central questions by first setting out how ideas from STS and technology marketing might be usefully drawn together. Second, the paper will present a detailed analysis of Virtual World’s attempt to bring to market (and produce a market for) RFID technology. Third, the paper will provide an analysis of the ways in which the concepts and data presented in this paper can provide useful insights for theories of marketing.

2 Constituencies, tellability and market-making

Technology marketing

In this paper we are entering into an already busy domain of research given the broad scope of literatures and textbooks on marketing. However, we find a significant lack of theorizing – in marketing and broader areas of social sciences – concerning technology marketing. Namely, our initial experience of marketing in practice and marketing theory suggested an absence of adequate theorizing to account for what hi-tech corporations did in their complex interactions in practice. These interactions can be preliminarily characterized as the simultaneous production of new technologies for market and production of new markets for technologies. At the same time, technology marketing in practice is surprisingly absent from the STS empirical body of research. Given our previous research history in STS and the rich history of STS research on technological development,
we wondered how the two fields of marketing and STS might be usefully drawn together.

Although we acknowledge the existing body of research in technology and innovation marketing and management, we note that some marketing theory (for example, ‘critical marketing’) suggests that marketing in practice is, in fact, different from its widely adopted normative textbook portrayals. The existence of a gap between marketing theory and marketing practice is suggested in the works of Brownlie et al. (1999), Dibb and Stern (1999), Brownlie and Saren (1991), Workman (1993) and Rossiter (2002). These incongruities between marketing theory and marketing practice are often acknowledged through stating the lack of empirical research in what it actually means to do marketing. In our ethnographic research on marketing, and particularly technology marketing, we have become interested in these noted ‘paradoxes’, ‘gaps’ and ‘differences’ between theory and practice (see for example, Willmott, 1999). These concerns were also noted in our interactions with participants. Initially we asked ourselves, in getting close to the practice of hi-tech marketing through ethnography, what kinds of ‘gaps’ might we find and what new ideas could we bring to these ‘gaps’?

First, we observed that there are claims (in the literatures, among practitioners) that establish specificity of technology marketing as a type of marketing. These claims are not visible in theories of marketing of consumer goods. Stating its difficulty is an element of the work of distinguishing hi-tech marketing from other types of marketing. There has been a history of technology marketing research which notes difficulties in sustaining marketing in a hi-tech organization (Levitt, 1975; Workman, 1993; Moore, 1999) and the difficulty of doing technology marketing (Kosnik, 1990). In the latter case, the character of hi-tech marketing itself is sometimes described as a heroic, difficult endeavour (Kosnik, 1990: 120).

Second, technology marketing claims a requirement for a different type of knowledge. Moore’s (1999) book – which asserts the specificity of technology marketing methods – was presented to the ethnographer as the ‘hi-tech marketing Bible’, along with more general comments on the lack of adequate academic knowledge available (or of its application to practice in the corporation). It appears that the invocation of the book serves the purpose of distinguishing hi-tech marketing from consumer goods (namely, Kotlerian) marketing in the eyes of an outsider/observer. The invocation of marketing theories (and the need for a better one) in settings of marketing practice raised some questions for our research. Namely, what counts as (technology) marketing in a hi-tech corporation, what is adopted, sustained and contested as technology marketing expertise? The boundaries of technology marketing knowledge constituted in organizational and ethnographic interactions are one of the main focal points where we see ourselves contributing to marketing theory. This paper’s particular intent is to provide insight into, and theorize, such everyday interactions through a study of technology marketing in practice. Coming from a science and technology studies tradition of research, we see a possibility for bringing a number of sensibilities to marketing theory that help us to frame our analysis.
Science and technology studies (STS)

This paper will by no means be the first piece of research to suggest a combination of STS and marketing theory or even to note mutual influences between the two scholarly areas. First, marketing has been developing theories of social relations, embracing different forms of anti-essentialism in regard to marketed artefacts, sometimes supported by ideas offered by STS (Peter and Olson, 1983; Cova, 1999), where, for example, marketing skills could allegedly be applied to any kind of product. Second, a marketing analogy has been employed to support post-essentialist arguments regarding the dynamics of ideas in STS research (Cooper and Woolgar, 1996; Woolgar, 2004). In this sense, STS and marketing may both be described as contesting knowledge claims regarding the nature of social relations. This paper will enhance this drawing together of STS and marketing ideas through the exploration of new technology marketing.

From STS we will take on board sensibilities regarding scepticism (e.g. in relation to claims about what technology can do); reflexivity (e.g. the researcher and reader is heavily involved in making sense of the world and of this text); fluidity (e.g. that relations such as technology usage do not remain consistent without work); and constructivism (e.g. people and things are ontological products of construction rather than available as entities whose characteristics are fixed and straightforwardly available). The latter STS sensibility can equally be ascribed to the generic idea of marketing, and can form the basis for drawing these sensibilities together with insights from the (social studies of) marketing literature, particularly: the recognition that marketing should not be considered as a single, unified phenomenon (Brownlie and Saren, 1991; Brownlie et al., 1999); that marketing is performed in certain accountability relations that assume multiple relevant audiences to be taken into account in marketing decision making (Woolgar and Simakova, 2003; Moeran, 2005); and that marketing needs to sustain itself as a useful practice and a form of expertise in an organization employing marketing (Workman, 1993; Ericksson, 1999). We will investigate the ways in which such sensibilities for engaging with technology can be provocatively combined with the marketing literature on the practices of technology marketing professionals. Our initial question in drawing together these sensibilities was: what can they tell us which will help us understand the making of new markets for new technologies?

Constituencies and market-making

Recently, the phenomenon of the market has been questioned from an anti-essentialist perspective in the fields of science and technology studies, sociology and anthropology. These studies of the market take issue with positivist views on the market and stand distinct from an understanding of ‘the market’ as a powerful economic force epitomized in Adam Smith’s metaphor of the invisible hand of the market. The practices of actors engaged in a broadly defined activity of market-making, like marketing and advertising (Callon, 1998, 1999; Barrey et al., 2000;
McFall, 2004; Callon and Muniesa, 2005; Moeran, 2005) are increasingly scrutinized by researchers. This research is sometimes labelled market(-ing) studies, sociology of marketing, anthropology of marketing and/or advertising, and can be characterized in a general way as social studies of marketing, to accommodate the theoretical stances explored in STS.

This interest in the market in STS has already been labelled (sceptically) as the ‘market turn’ (e.g. Fine, 2003; Mirowski and Nik-Khah, 2007). The ‘turn’, as the earlier ‘turn to technology’ in STS (Woolgar, 1991b), attempts to translate earlier STS insights to studies of the market. In line with this view, Callon speaks of ‘simply the continuation’ of anthropology of sciences with regard to anthropology of social sciences, such as marketing: ‘The way we are now studying social sciences is only an extension of the work done on the natural sciences. It’s simply the continuation of the anthropology of science, but an anthropology of science which is concerned with economics in the broadest sense of the term, including, for example, marketing and accountancy’ (Callon in Barry and Slater, 2002: 285).

This suggests a central question for this paper: how can STS contribute to an understanding of new markets and the work done to make new markets? For Callon (1998, 1999) one way in which to conceptualize the work of market-making for emerging technologies is to focus on the partial and practical transitions and connections linking together various ‘imbroglios’ (Callon, 1999: 82), or collective identities, of human skills, artefacts and markets. The term ‘imbroglio’ used in this context builds on the history of research offering provocative ways to re-conceptualize notions of, and connections between, people and things known as actor network theory (ANT). However, we need to tread carefully here: what precise form of connection between people and things might we be interested in while figuring out the work done to articulate new emerging technology markets?

For Callon, even when it is acknowledged that those collective identities are not very well defined (e.g. Callon in Barry and Slater, 2002: 286), the focus on imbroglios appears to prioritize a solidification of the often competing claims struck between and through relations of people and things. Although operating with much the same sensibility as Callon (in terms of investigating the ways in which relations between people and things might be articulated), we are interested in investigating closely the instability, messiness and management of these forms of relating. We will argue (in Section 3) that the instability, messiness and management of possible new markets in the making are not best analysed through a prioritization of solidification in human–non-human relations. Hence, in place of imbroglio, or *agencements*, we prefer to use the term constituency. Through the use of constituency we hope to steer away from questions regarding the solidification of relations (featured in imbroglios and *agencements*). Rather, we suggest a move towards questions regarding the ways in which relations might be approached as discursive accomplishments which feature both in attempts to make constituencies stay together and on those occasions where they come apart in messy and sudden moments. We are interested in how this is managed by marketing professionals.

This paper provides a particular view of marketing and of the work of actors
actively engaged in the practical management of market relations. ‘Marketing’ as it is used in this paper is not understood in terms of one of the possible ‘market-making’ (Araujo, 2007) activities in the sense of a purposeful construction of a ‘market’ out there. We rather propose to see the market as a metaphor carrying a distribution of agency and power (Dilley, 1999) used in various (economic, societal, managerial) discourses whose currency needs to be examined (Dilley, 1999; Carrier, 1997; Miller, 2002). Hence, we prefer to speak of the constitution, or of the practical management of market relations, whereby the notion of the market gains currency, such as in technology marketing practice. Our argument focuses on recognizing and describing marketing as a form of organization of relations between various people and things in (what we term) technology ‘constituencies’. This still leaves us some way short of an adequate description of the formation of these constituencies. In the next section we will argue that tellable stories are crucial for articulating (and producing a durable version of) the roles to be played by people and things.

**Tellable and compelling stories**

How might we go about thinking through the building of constituencies? Several STS approaches usefully recommend analysing artefacts as discourse (Pinch et al., 1992; Grint and Woolgar, 1997). How might we think of constituencies as discursively oriented? From this perspective, authors speak about attribution of agency, or formation of various ‘imbroglios’ (or what we will term constituencies) as a textual phenomenon. It is suggested that the distinction, for example, between humans and non-humans is accomplished and sustained in textual practices (Woolgar, 1991a; Ashmore, 1993; Grint and Woolgar, 1997). An analysis of markets from this perspective can be turned into an analysis of the properties of market narratives. An analysis of markets and technologies would attend to questions of how notions about the character and capacity of different market constituencies, the relationship between different human and non-human entities which make up the constituency, their relative boundedness, and associated patterns of rights and responsibilities are achieved in interactions. This implies analytical attention to the interpretations accomplished by actors engaged in the construction of agency (including us as analysts). In this sense we approach the articulation of a constituency of people and things and the relations drawn between those entities as the construction of a tellable story:13 a story which narrates boundaries, relations, agency and identities for entities. Much of the focus on tellable stories will be on the tales that the organization can tell about itself, about the markets it is trying to shape and the constituencies required for so doing.

A simultaneous focus for marketers which draws together questions of agency, boundaries, forms of discourse and new products can be characterized as the construction of stories that can be told to various audiences beyond the organization, including those identified as necessary members of future marketable constituencies. We thus attempt to avoid reification of the distinction between content, form and circumstances of interpretation (audiences) and try to unpack the complex
work of creation of such stories. We will argue that this work requires the articulation of compelling stories: narratives which turn out to be sufficiently compelling to draw together and hold together constituencies of people and things focused around a new technology. By using the term ‘compelling’ (along with our subjects) here, we mean to suggest that the stories do not just articulate a narrative which suggests a role for the audience, but also actively attempt to incorporate those identified as relevant audiences into a constituency of potential users, purchasers, journalists, or advocates of the product in focus. In other words, the story is articulated in a manner to compel the audience to form part of the constituency of use, consumption and promotion to be built around the product. As the work of Shapin (1984) and Latour (1988) on scientific demonstration suggests, narrating a compelling story is a complex process involving the organization of witnessing.

Methodology

Our analysis of the constitution of tellable and compelling stories in technology marketing is based on participant observation by one of us (ES) in a major hi-tech corporation, ‘Virtual World’. The EMEA headquarters of Virtual World where the study took place was based in West London – an area with blue chip corporate giants and residential districts, not far from Heathrow airport. Elena joined Virtual World in February 2004, and continued her ethnography until July 2005. Elena’s previous professional experience in marketing and the promise of having a spare pair of hands were considered by gatekeepers to be worth giving her a title of Marketing Project Manager. Having a personal laptop provided by the company was seen as an important membership attribute of the tribe. The laptop was securely configured to provide necessary workplace software, access to the corporate databases and an internal email address, for the duration of the fieldwork. In order to get access to marketing activities in the corporation, as well as to the internal documents exchanged by the managers and kept in the corporate intranet, a Non-Disclosure Agreement (NDA) was signed between the University of Oxford and the company.

The NDA, and the work of anonymizing and concealing some native narrative elements while writing up, is a particular feature of this study and involves complex accountability work. While trying to follow the development of Virtual World’s RFID value proposition whose elements can be traced throughout the paper, it is never disclosed in full. This particular way of accounting for marketing in practice is an outcome of a number of considerations. It stems, first, from meeting the formal requirements of the corporation. Virtual World routinely briefs some of its external audiences (e.g. business analysts) under NDA about innovations in the making as a means to try out content and to control proliferation of public statements. Second, this is a reflection of the gatekeepers’ uncertainties concerning the outcomes of this particular ethnographic study that might portray corporate practices negatively. As the paper will argue throughout, managing interpretations in favour of Virtual World is an important matter of marketers’
everyday concerns. Third, and surprisingly favourably for the task of anonymizing this text, writing up under the NDA also resonates with a post-essentialist research strategy that moves away from textual determinist explanations that overprivilege the analysis of content of narratives. Rather, the need to understand how claims of technological capacities are established and circulated is emphasized. Heuristically, this approach renders important understanding the circumstances of interpretation providing for some technology claims winning out (Grint and Woolgar, 1997; Rappert, 2001).

3 Emerging technologies and forms of mobility

The emerging technology which formed the focus for this research was RFID. These tags and readers have been promoted as containers of information often regarding the person or thing to which they are attached. It is claimed that tags can be tracked using scanners which pick up on, download and decode information from a tag in order to identify what the tag/person/object is, where they are, where they should be going and so on. Tags can either be active (in which case the tag broadcasts its identity over a certain distance and can be read by a scanner) or passive (in which case tags have no power source and scanners broadcast a signal of sufficient power that tags can pick up the signal and use its power to broadcast its information in return).

RFID devices provide one example of a broader range of technological developments involved in advancing ideas of enhanced, profitable, valuable and/or essential modes of mobility (Castells, 1996; Urry, 2000, 2003; Sheller and Urry, 2003; Neyland, 2006a). Often forms of immobility are demarcated as the exception to expectations of mobility (Hine et al., 2000; Cohen, 2003; Neyland 2006b; for a discussion see Shove, 2002). The promotion of RFID has involved creating various RFID stories often involving motifs of mobility. We will argue that such promotional stories involve the elaboration of socio-technical constituencies which form the focus for attempts to articulate an audience, use, market and so on for RFID. On occasions these stories ascribe essential attributes to the tags and attempt to promote their pervasive utility for enhancing and managing modes of mobility. The key to making RFID stories tellable and compelling appears to lie in attempts to incorporate these mobility motifs into the constituency of people and things articulated through RFID stories. Indeed the mobility motifs are presented as the reason for connection to the constituency.

This narration of tellable and compelling stories is both mundane (in that it is something marketing professionals are frequently involved in doing) and complex (in that this activity is messy, uncertain and liable to sudden change). Marketers do not aim to simply tell a story, but invoke a range of audiences as part of the narrative of the story. However, these audiences of people can come together, move apart, pick up on, dispute or ignore the ‘compelling’ story (as the next section of this paper will highlight). In the case of RFID technology, we will argue, launching a product does not involve simply sending a product out into the world,
but requires the active and ongoing management of sets of relations between people and things through which the product will be taken up. This will be discussed in the next section presenting our empirical findings of a study in technology marketing.

Marketing mobile futures – tellable stories

Elena followed Alex, her line manager, helping out marketing managers and participating in a number of live projects. In September 2004 Alex took up a position with an advanced technologies marketing team as an ‘RFID Marketing Manager’ for EMEA.

In Virtual World, the need for RFID marketing was established in view of a perceived fear of competition. Could ‘clever marketing’ help? The position of ‘RFID marketing manager’ was introduced to redress the perceived balance in the market of advanced technologies in favour of Virtual World. The phenomenal success of the corporation was not always accounted for in terms of clever marketing. The decade of transformation of a start-up into a global corporation was, according to some managers Elena spoke to, due to the ‘internet firestorm’, when customers themselves came to Virtual World to seek technological solutions. The newly appointed RFID Marketing Manager also expressed his belief that ‘RFID will take off’ when other market players have done their work, to reduce the price of RFID tags which will stimulate a wider deployment of RFID.17

The RFID marketing manager and Elena, who was invited to function as a project manager for an RFID demonstration project, engaged in an extensive information search. It was noted (within internal organizational documents and market reports bought in) that RFID was being utilized by competitors, had the potential for increased market growth and could provide a platform from which the organization could enhance the utility of its products for client firms. Further to this, meetings were held which assessed and established a putative constituency of support within the organization for RFID and identify those (engineers and marketers) to be handed responsibility for the development of Virtual World’s approach to RFID. This initially assembled RFID constituency within the organization was positioned to persuade other members of the organization that RFID was a worthwhile project. Hence, internally, the RFID story was made to match the concerns (workload and prestige) of the managers and engineers recruited for the project and in relation to a perceived external threat from competitors who were already ‘doing’ RFID.

Creating a product and a market involved developing this small, internal to the organization constituency into a tellable story which Virtual World could use to narrate its actions. This then required situating within broader (external) socio-technical relations. Attempts were made to incorporate potential users of RFID, possible functionality, links between RFID and the organization’s networking technology and a market proposition for RFID, into a compelling story of socio-technical mobility. The practical concern of the marketing managers related to attempts to articulate a corporate RFID story to a wider set of audiences. The
constitution of a boundary between inside and outside, between internally assem-
bled constituencies and those identified as ‘outside’ of the corporation, required
accomplishing an initial tellable story of the technology, prior to the launch of an
externally oriented compelling RFID based story. The latter, as we shall show,
involved making decisions regarding an appropriate time, place and audience
through which the compelling story could be told. It also entailed further educat-
ing members of the organization (e.g. sales managers) in how the compelling story
should be told and broadening the set of constituencies. RFID teams were form-
ing; sales managers were educated in RFID; RFID consultants were invited.
Importantly, the preparatory activities were labelled ‘internal’, which implied that
no statements still in flux about the relationship between Virtual World and RFID
could be told to those defined as ‘outsiders’ to the organization.

In sum, Virtual World made efforts to produce a tellable story for their own
organizational actions. The tellable story involved work to produce a coherent
account of what it was Virtual World had been doing and what they were going to
be doing. Producing a tellable story involved making sense of the possibility of a
product, the possibility of a market for that product and doing a range of practical
tasks to prepare for those possibilities (such as recruiting staff, holding internal
meetings and investigating what other RFID developers – the competition – were
doing). The tellable story was thus the focal point for forming Virtual World’s
internal RFID constituency. This was deemed a necessary pre-requisite for Virtual
World’s external launch of a compelling RFID based story.

Marketing mobile futures – compelling stories

The product launch, an activity planned and prepared by the corporation, pro-
vided an announcement of relations between the internal constituency and
members of a proposed external constituency, where rights and responsibilities for
those who could and could not speak on behalf of RFID were articulated.
Preparations for the product launch were in the realm of marketers’ responsibility.
Alex was busy writing a launch plan and presenting it to his colleagues and seniors.
Namely, Alex and his colleagues were trying to articulate answers to such ques-
tions as:

What is RFID?
Why, how, when does Virtual World start speaking of RFID?
What kind of discourse should Virtual World adopt?
What kind of expertise in RFID can Virtual World offer? And for whom?

The launch plan involved three areas: work to prepare an audience for RFID (this
involved further constituency building), effort to produce an initial paper for
publication on RFID and decisions on an appropriate form of launch for Virtual
World’s RFID expertise. This work was seen as vital for making Virtual World’s
RFID story compelling.
Preparing an audience

Although various opinions existed, the possible external constituenciesVirtual World would address were not yet defined. Hence the internal tellable story of RFID for Virtual World had to prove durable for the internal constituency and open to development, as the constituencies for its external orientation were still being built. Envisaging the growing interest in RFID in various industries due to the ‘buzz’ around it created by media and various RFID interest groups (including contributions from Virtual World itself) the managers’ task was to provide a way of talking about RFID that could be used in engagements which were perceived as becoming increasingly more likely: with press, business analysts, and customers.

Who exactly the story should be told to was not, however, clear yet. ‘RFID is a moving target at the moment’, Abigail, the PR manager said, starting an interview Elena had requested. Although Elena was involved in the RFID activities as the RFID demo project manager, PR activities were not visible to the ethnographer, their very existence denied when managers were asked what else was going on. Alex and Abigail presented their PR strategy to Elena as a product of their thinking, a carefully designed set of documents and ideas they had nurtured together before making them known to the other (marketing) managers and the researcher. The materials analysed below are based on the interview with Abigail, more informal interactions with Alex, and RFID team meetings.

In February 2005 the marketing managers shared with the ethnographer their concerns about RFID. On the one hand, they acknowledged pressure from their colleagues in the corporation who insisted that Virtual World had to ‘say something’ in relation to RFID, to ‘enter the RFID space’. Sales managers wanted to be armed with a compelling RFID story anticipating interest from customers. Fear of being left behind, of losing the element of novelty, was also a reason why an RFID story had to be issued urgently. On the other hand, some anticipated negative interpretations of RFID were also voiced. Some audiences were characterized as ‘risky’ (journalists, or ‘journos’, for example) and warnings were given against an early product launch.

Those concerned with the inappropriateness of an early launch claimed that an RFID demonstration, as a physical bounded entity, was not ready: partner agreements were not in place; answers to difficult questions still had to be finalized. The external constituency of people, things and motifs of mobility were not sufficiently well integrated to make a compelling story. In addition, according to the marketing managers, the corporation advocated a cautious attitude to RFID technology, trying to avoid joining the hype, lacking confidence in the potential of the technology and their corporate expertise.

Some sales managers reported that their customers were already asking about whether Virtual World was ‘in RFID’. Conversations that could be held once an account manager approached a prospective customer with an RFID story were discussed. To define the outcome of future interactions, the participants were trying to articulate answers to questions like ‘What do you expect to see in customer engagements?’ and ‘What should I plan on hearing or what will I soon be hearing?
from my customers?’ The RFID talk anticipated ‘concerns’, ‘thoughts’, ‘motiva-
tions’, ‘religions’, ‘fears’ and ‘responsibilities’ of existing or possible customers, as
well as potential scenarios of possible engagements. Knowledge of ‘what’s on
the customers’ mind’, their ‘careabouts’ and ‘pain points’ was defined as a pre-
requisite for a sales manager before an engagement would happen. The marketers’
task was to equip sales managers with stories (e.g. elevator pitches) that would help
to win a customer in communication events.

Potential customers were brought into the RFID story. Virtual World commis-
sioned research and a white paper from an analytical firm. This research involved
interviewing a number of key technology adopters whose testimonies would con-
tribute to support Virtual World’s RFID proposition. The paper was to be made
available to various audiences through the external corporate website, at confer-
ences and expos and in conversations with accounts (customers). Writing the
paper entailed a number of iterations between the analysts and Virtual World’s
marketing managers, who advised the analysts to carry out more interviews and to
change some wording. This advice was not reflected in the paper that was pres-
ented as an independent study produced by the analytical firm. Writing the white
paper was seen as a way of gaining more credibility through involving current and
potential RFID technology adopters, whose membership of the very industry of
RFID would help to persuade other prospective customers:

If it’s [the research] compelling, so maybe it gives us an opportunity to say something to the
industry. Because again it’s a validation not by us, but by the very industry that we are talking
to. (A public relations manager)

Writing the white paper entailed certain difficulties: it seemed to be too early to
seek support or professional advice from business analysts who were themselves in
learning mode. This did not, however, mean passively waiting for the moment
when audiences would become mature enough to achieve a good reading of
Virtual World’s RFID statements. The corporation actively engaged in education
of RFID partners and analysts. Moments of enlightenment during these engage-
ments sometimes happened coincidentally when Virtual World commissioned
research from an analytical firm:

We need to get them, you know, think about that. And that started to happen, for example, I
think, interestingly it happened to people that we talked to when we were putting the brief
together for the research, which is quite fun. (A public relations manager)

In addition, the results of the messaging testing, which solicited the opinions of
hi-tech analysts and customers, were not encouraging. Marketing managers’ read-
ing of the results was that neither potential customers nor business analysts yet
showed due understanding of the relationship between RFID and Virtual World’s
expertise. According to focus group results, business leaders just did not see IT as
a potential solution for their business problems. In this situation, going public
with an aggressive statement, according to the marketing managers, would make
the company look ‘pretty stupid’ in the eyes of those ‘not in the know’ (quotes
from a public relations manager).

Getting prepared for an engagement with audiences, the marketers thus needed
to construct knowledge of the relations they were going to enter while presenting their proposition to various groups: who will say what in reaction to their statement; how can they achieve certain reactions and avoid others; what kind of allies do they need to have inscribed into their technology in order to achieve recognition and credibility. This knowledge was constructed through boundary work at the same time as the corporation was attempting to find its own voice. Relevant members of the industry and external groups, partners and competitors were identified, recruited or avoided to draw the boundary between ‘us’ and ‘not us’. Speaking forth in order to establish connections between the discursive constituencies (Virtual World, RFID, analysts, audiences), was achieved through anticipating and actively providing for possible positive and favourable interpretations.

This work to produce an audience for Virtual World’s RFID expertise also entailed establishing that marketing knowledge in the organization was an authoritative source of expertise in (RFID) storytelling. Marketers stressed that they knew their audiences, and were able to find and engage with new ones. Target audiences’ interests were captured and operationalized for briefings and pitches. The broad group of journalists (‘journos’) was considered a special, and difficult, category of the public to engage with. Virtual World had received some (recognized as) negative coverage in regard to some of its products. According to the managers, avoiding a similar failure was important. As opposed to business and technical analysts, the ‘riskiness’ of this group resided in anticipation of a possible negative statement about the company. Journalists were viewed as a group who follow the motto ‘bad news sells’. Technology and business analysts, in turn, were put into a similarly ‘difficult’, but ‘more mature’ and ‘easier to deal with’ category. Analysts were believed to be more interested in ‘knowledge itself’ rather than in generating news.

Analytical firms were an audience of considerable concern for the RFID marketing managers. Gartner, Yankee Group, Forrester and others publish authoritative reports assessing companies’ strengths and weaknesses and establish hierarchies in the IT industry. It was considered prestigious, for example, to be among the top ten in the rankings, or to get into the leaders’ corner of the ‘magic quadrant’ of Gartner’s rating. Marketers adhere to the point of view that the position of a firm in the ranking is not a straightforward reflection of the firm’s performance or its product quality. They believe that the ranking can and should be influenced. The task of an analyst relations manager is to manage Virtual World’s position in the analytical publications. Tony (an analyst relations manager) was routinely in interactions with analysts. He had to be constantly available on the mobile phone in case analysts rang him up and asked for more or new information. He also scheduled some update calls once in a while with the analysts on his list, for 30 minutes or so, and this was in addition to the regular corporate analyst briefings and press conferences associated with new product launches, updates and emergencies. Tony needed to be continuously updated about the company’s business and new products. He had to have a clear view, coordinated with his peers and seniors in the company, of what could be made
public and what could not. He admitted some possible influence on rankings through the corporation’s own efforts to establish a relationship with the analytical firms. Virtual World, according to the manager, was one of the major subscribers to such analytical materials, ‘spending millions’ on the reports. This, according to the manager, works well as an incentive for the analytical firms ‘to speak good about us’.

Marketing managers defended their own particular expertise in assessing the appropriateness and the content of the product launch. They claimed they had a method, a knowledge of how to create a compelling story. Alex told Elena they were using a special document, the ‘go-to-market’ checklist to persuade other, non-marketing people in the organization of the readiness of RFID for launch. The document portrayed fifteen ‘bottom lines’ (marked red), that had to be ‘cleaned’ (changed to green) before the launch. Achieving bottom lines involved negotiations with members of internal and external constituencies. In February 2005 only one bottom line, called ‘20 most difficult questions’, from journalists was ready. The demonstration kit was delayed for yet another time, so a further reminder had to be sent to engineers and a manufacturing partner. The ‘target audience definition’ was not ready. A business development manager had not reported about agreements signed with partners. Presentation content for sales managers was yet to be written. And so on. According to this kind of marketing reasoning, some fixed descriptions of and relations between these entities should feed into a compelling story of RFID to be narrated on behalf of Virtual World. ‘Until reds becomes greens, there is nothing to talk about’ said Alex. This is not to say that turning reds into greens was accomplished smoothly and straightforwardly before the corporation announced its place in RFID. Rather, small, partial attempts to narrate the bottom lines were made, along with anticipations and assessments of its successes.

**A first RFID story**

The first RFID story formed an attempt to produce a bounded narration to compel some limited audiences into Virtual World. The following example illustrates this point. A public relations manager working on RFID messages said that putting an article into a journal entailed identifying and enrolling small sets of putative audiences, journalists and journals she could start to work with. What she was doing, she said, was ‘not an announcement, not a launch’:

> So, that's the kind of stage we're in at the moment in terms of . . . softly, softly, we put small announcements out . . . a lot of these are specialized publications, they don't have skills and resource within their editorial capacity to be able to write something specialized about IT and RFID. So, I'm working with a writer, who's actually a freelance journalist, and he's producing our first by-line actually, which will be placed in a UK magazine called 'Logistics . . . manager' or something very . . . hm . . . interesting. So, this is just general visibility, really, nothing too aggressive. (A public relations manager)

To define the content of their own story, the marketing managers engaged in specifying categories, hierarchies and relationships of power between ‘market
According to Alex and Abigail, the perceived pressure to launch was increasing. They claimed, in response, that audiences were ‘still not ready’ as few of the bottom line requirements were fulfilled. Producing an initial ‘soft’ launch for Virtual World’s RFID expertise involved three inter-related aspects. First, Alex signed a sponsorship agreement with a new organization called RFID Expo – a trade fair featuring organizations primarily promoting RFID-related products and services. Defending the budget spent on the ‘Golden sponsorship’ package Alex
claimed the Expo was a ‘good marketing buy’. The package, he explained, assumed a number of ‘sponsor benefits’: an RFID workshop with Virtual World’s own speaker and a guided RFID demo tour for selected executives.

RFID Expo itself became a focus for further constitution of the compelling RFID-based mobility story. This was construed through Virtual World’s posters featuring their commercial propositions for RFID on the walls of their stand at the Expo, through negotiating the geometry of the stand and through training Expo demonstrators to relate RFID and mobility via demonstration scripts. Alex received a suggested stand layout from his counterpart in the USA (assuming a similar layout will work in Europe), and was involved in producing an Expo script. For this script Alex claimed he knew a formula which he could fill with RFID content: ‘These are the problems, these are the technology, I’ll show you how it works and what the benefits for the customers are’. This formula, as with the other solidified marketing storytelling tools discussed above, was rendered good enough for the occasion of accounting for the product in the context of the demonstration. The marketing expertise in narrating compelling stories resided in the assertion that the formula only needed to be filled in with some (RFID) content to become a persuasive and compelling RFID story.

Virtual World’s ‘soft’ launch of RFID at the Expo operated on the basis of not sending stories out into the world, but instead attempting to bring (a version of) the world into the organization. In place of externalizing the internal, the organization internalized a version of a perceived-as appropriate and apparently controllable version of the external. Marketers with responsibility for launching Virtual World’s compelling RFID story suggested and defended a suitable forum for bringing the world to a pre-educated and pre-selected audience through RFID Expo. The marketers selected RFID Expo on the basis that access to the (still under construction) RFID story could be closely controlled. This, they insisted, would not be an occasion for bringing a wide range of journalists, for example, to the story. Instead, the audience for the story would be other organizations (who may wish to buy into the system) and a narrow selection of journalists from specialist trade journals who might be interested in a detailed (and carefully crafted by marketers) rendition of the compelling RFID story. This accounting and discounting of who and what was to take part in the story (based on anticipation of possible readership of the story) involved marketers articulating a very precise version of the ‘world out there’ to be brought ‘in here’ to Expo.

Alongside Virtual World’s Expo work, a second interrelated feature of this RFID activity was the Expo Director’s own plans for a ‘soft’ launch of RFID Expo itself. Virtual World, as a sponsor, was invited to take an active role in the launch. For the Expo launch, only partners and insiders were invited in order to avoid negative interpretations by ‘risky’ audiences. Eric, the Expo Director, explained his decision for not doing a ‘real’ opening through the following metaphorical story: ‘They never do it with ships, I mean, launching it immediately after it’s built. They give it at least three months of a sea trial while it still leaks’.

A third feature of this RFID work was Virtual World’s own marketing team’s efforts to write a press release for the soft launch of RFID Expo. Abigail, a PR
manager, was in charge, and was invited to give a rationale for her text in front of her colleagues. Through analyzing the work that went into the creation and dissemination of the press release, we can understand better how exactly the themes of managed mobility and RFID come to work together, as managers attempt to market mobile futures. The press release is an illustration of the intertwinenment of an RFID discourse with the theme of mobility, which also incorporates anticipation of possible interpretations by various potential readers. The story of RFID created by Virtual World managers employed the theme of data mobility. First, unmanaged data mobility was presented as a typical customer concern. Second, a company spokesperson claimed that the ‘complexity and volume of network traffic’ in need of management will increase in the future. Third, Virtual World’s technological solutions would provide this management, under technical supervision by Virtual World specialists.

Abigail explained that, preparing the press release, she had to be ‘careful with wording’, she had to take into account possible interpretations of the press release. She said she used ‘the original scope of words’ she found on the Expo website, which already implicated certain audiences not necessarily conceived as Virtual World’s possible customers. The press release asserted RFID was still in flux: for industries, 2004 was the year of the ‘RFID pilot’. Launching the RFID Expo was equivalent to displaying that RFID was mature enough as a technology on which commercial exchanges may start to grow. Framing the transition from pilots to full-blown implementations, the press release employed a certain discursive framing to achieve this transition by suggesting Virtual World’s expertise would help to evaluate the potential of RFID for a customer organization. Abigail anticipated possible reactions from EPC Global – a standards body with which RFID frequency standards and implementation strategies needed to be aligned. In this regard, explaining her choice of wording to account for the transition, Abigail added that it was important to steer away from the concept of ‘testing’ (RFID technology) to avoid anticipated negative comments from the standards body who might become suspicious. ‘Testing’ would allegedly indicate the lack of loyalty to the standards currently being endorsed. ‘Accurate understanding’ and ‘measure’ were the words used in the press release.

During Expo the masses were managed away in favour of those understood as having the time, patience and intelligence to see the RFID story as compelling. In Virtual World this ‘soft’ product launch was considered by some members of the organization as a necessary protection to reduce the risk of their RFID mobility story being considered insufficiently compelling. Others in the organization interested in a more aggressive, and hence less careful, approach to marketing, viewed the soft launch as inefficient and not much of a launch at all. The marketing managers sounded disappointed seeing no possibility for a full-blown application of their knowledge. ‘Quiet announcement’, they joked.

The creation of compelling stories also involved assessments of those stories. In a debrief after the soft launch, the managers reported to their colleagues that the press release was ‘doing a good job’: Virtual World’s participation in RFID was getting coverage, the readers started to associate Virtual World with RFID and...
some new partners were becoming interested. The press release was assessed as a successfully compelling story gaining currency in favour of Virtual World.

4 Analysis

In what ways are RFID mobility stories made tellable and compelling? It appears that mobility is not an inherent property of (in this case, RFID) technology and that stories of (RFID) technology can be told in fluid ways with adjustments made according to assumptions regarding the audience for any particular mobility story. Given that the technology and the story of technology and the audience for the story each seem to be mutable, how are mobility stories held together? Our analysis has identified that making and maintaining these tellable and compelling mobility stories involves three interrelated, simultaneous actions.

First, launching a new product involved the identification and articulation of people, actions and things to form the basis for a constituency for the launch. On occasions these people, actions and things are understood as pre-existing the launch (such as marketers, the organization, networking technology) and, on occasions, these constituencies are deemed new or challenging (such as RFID still under development). However, in each case these constituents are translated in relatively mutable forms into the constituency. That is, they are translated into the constituency for the identified task at hand (e.g. as possible purchasers of RFID or journalists who will write about RFID).

Second, an articulation of the people, actions and things as a mutable constituency is developed into a coherent and tellable story of what the constituency should accomplish internally to Virtual World. For example, staff are recruited, meetings held, appropriate marketing strategies developed and reports are purchased on RFID markets.

Third, a tellable story is made relevant to specific audiences, users, corporations and so on. That is, it is rendered compelling so as to give a reason for participants to form and remain in the constituency. In our case it is not just that RFID enables mobility management, but that RFID backed up by Virtual World’s expert support forms the ideal solution for data management. However, to make the story relevant requires actively managing the story-telling process through back and forth movement across organizational boundaries to repair and keep on track and predict and prepare for possible breaches to the constituency. For Virtual World this involved preparing for possible customers, producing a first RFID based story and inaugurating a ‘soft’ launch through RFID Expo. These movements back and forth across boundaries are mostly made while articulating and maintaining the story.

In sum, this paper suggests that studying emerging technologies offers the opportunity to analyse the ways in which tellable and compelling stories are made and maintained or challenged. Furthermore, motifs of mobility are not compelling in and of themselves but require a great deal of work and are susceptible to many unintended/unanticipated outcomes. This work involves the elaboration
and management of boundaries, accountability, socio-technical constituencies, mobilities and non-mobilities, assessments, claims and counter-claims regarding technological, systemic and people’s capability.

These RFID stories move mobility away from association with ideas of freedom and liberty toward management. Management here appears to relate to concerted actions to produce a socio-technical constituency and produce a tellable and compelling story on behalf of that constituency. It also assumes attribution of individual agency to entities responsible for management (in our case, a marketing manager). However, such management must still pay attention to the liberty of times, places, people and things which do not stick to the compelling mobility management script. The mundane masses of constituents which prove obdurately awkward to carefully elaborated, compelling mobility stories manage to maintain their own brand of libertarianism. They are always sufficiently ‘other’ to remain just out of reach of marketing and management prerogatives to bring the world ‘out there’ ‘in here’, suggesting the assembly of constituents and the elaboration of tellable and compelling mobility stories are always in principle available to be challenged.

5 Conclusion: contribution to marketing theory

This article was written as a contribution to marketing theory from a science and technology studies perspective. It would be unfaithful to our own study of marketing in practice not to get preoccupied, reflexively, with the question of what counts as an attempt to produce a compelling contribution to marketing theory. These questions were brought to the fore as we realized our own writing did work similar to that of our subjects. What kind of constituency management is implied? This article has attempted to build its own constituency in relation to managed mobility and the constitution of market relations. We showed how marketing is an active constituency engaged in continuous elaboration of other constituencies external to our ethnography of a compelling RFID story. Our portrayal of managed mobility as an outcome of the practical activities of marketing involves a set of what we think are compelling claims, too. We were interested and tried to interest readers in the idea that marketing is not a unified scholarly area or professional activity but an upshot of constituency building and contested claims.

We discussed the ways in which the constitution and management of market relations can be understood as a form of constituency building and management. We argued that technology marketing can be seen as a form of market-making: a bounded practice claiming knowledge in how to manage constituencies through storytelling and the practical management of motifs of mobility. Technology marketing in this article engages in work relating to marketing knowledge itself. In the paper we examined some claims in the literature related to agency and technology marketing. We argued that technology marketing appears to be a contingent accomplishment as insiders and outsiders to marketing claim contesting sets of characteristics for marketing knowledge. In our ethnographic example,
marketing managers employed various tools of the trade, such as the ‘go-to-market’ checklist, to persuade non-marketing people in the organization of the ‘right’ properties and circumstances of storytelling. The paper showed that technology marketers are creators of narratives who sustained their ability to assemble and dissociate constituencies providing for the building of a boundary between those who tell and those who listen to (interpret or come to terms with) compelling narratives.

Our ethnography did much the same kind of work. We attempted to unify and to differentiate within the constituency of STS on behalf of which we spoke by introducing STS sensibilities. We also engaged in work to establish what counts as marketing to which a contribution may be made. As a possible contribution to Marketing Theory, the paper engaged with literatures in critical marketing and ethnographies of marketing which take a less normative and more analytically-sceptical stance (see for example, Wensley, 1990; Brownlie and Saren, 1991; Workman, 1993; Brownlie et al., 1999). Differentiating between marketing and STS and making contributions to marketing theory through STS sensibilities required continuous work, to create a (compelling?) narrative which delineated between the two areas and suggests a reflexive way forward for marketing theory. Perhaps, then, we have completed our own ‘Go-to-market(ing)’ check-list?

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Notes

1 The term ‘constituency’ here is used to denote a particular set of people and things identified as requisite for a new product. This draws on, but has some differences from Callon’s (1999) work on imbroglios and assemblages (detailed in Section 2).
2 Tellable stories in this paper are stories which narrate the boundaries, relations, agency and identities for entities being sensitive to possible interpretations of these narrated relations. As the paper will argue, tellability of particular stories (e.g. a press release) is a matter of concern in the marketing department.
3 ‘Compelling’ here is a post-hoc arbiter of success: either stories proved compelling and the constituency came together and held together, or they did not. ‘Compellingness’ of a story, as its ability to draw constituencies together, like in our case to draw industries attention, or to attract visitors to a trade show, is the subject of assessments, which bears on evaluations of marketing expertise in writing such stories.
4 The ethnographic access to Virtual World was successfully negotiated on the assumption that more research on marketing in practice needs to be done.
5 It is said that one needs to do hi-tech marketing in order to appreciate this difficulty. The difference will arise immediately as ‘the difference between reading a biography
of Michelangelo and setting to paint your own Sistine Chapel’ (Kosnik, 1990).

6 Anti-essentialism is used here in a broad sense to cover those arguments which dispute that things, techniques, technologies or people have essential (fixed, determinate) characteristics.

7 Post-essentialism refers to arguments that we should move away from limiting debates between essentialism versus anti-essentialism and look at, for example questions of the properties of things as a research strategy.

8 If the general strive of marketing can be recast in terms of an effort (theoretical, practical) to develop an idea of the marketer as a specialist who seeks to influence the market to adopt what Kotler labels ‘social objects’ – ‘any entity or artifacts found in society, such as a product, person, organization, place or idea’ (Kotler, 1972).

9 ‘Provocative’ in the sense that drawing these sensibilities together will hopefully provoke new ideas, challenges, questions, etc.

10 Some similar points are raised in studies of the construction of financial markets (e.g. Knorr Cetina and Bruegger, 2000; MacKenzie and Millo, 2003; Beunza et al., 2006).

11 Science and technology studies have already known at least two critical debates called ‘turns’ – the ‘semiotic turn’ (Latour, 1999; Lenoir, 1999) and the ‘turn to technology’ (Woolgar, 1991b; Pinch, 1993; Winner, 1993; Woolgar, 1993). We can expect that the market turn in STS will provoke equally important questions concerning the nature of technology, and the market, as the previous turns. It seems we need to expect that turning to the market, marketing and other business-related settings and practices will provoke reflexive questions about the nature of such engagements, about shifts, translations and utility of STS (Coopmans et al., 2004; Woolgar et al., 2005).

12 Or agencements, a Deleuzian (Deleuze and Guattari, 2004) notion reintroduced by Callon (Callon, 2005: 4) to conceptualize material agency. See Hardie and MacKenzie (2006) for an analysis of the term that denotes in English, in short, both material assemblage, arrangement, configuration or lay-out and agency.

13 We should note that this approach is different from the way Sacks (1995) uses the term ‘tellability’ in relation to the properties of conversational items. Sacks writes: ‘For some sorts of items we can pretty much say that their total currency turns on being tellable. What makes an item a good piece of gossip is its tellable character’ (Sacks, 1995: 776). For Sacks, tellability appears to be an inherent feature of a language item, whereas our analysis focuses on participants’ deliberations on the tellability of the stories they produce.

14 This is not to say that a ‘compelling’ story is necessarily completely separate from a ‘tellable’ story, but instead is meant to suggest that each has a different orientation. We use ‘tellable’ stories to describe those practical narrations used for internal organization of Virtual World’s RFID marketing and ‘compelling’ for those external articulations to be launched to do the work of convincing.

15 EMEA stands for Europe, Middle East and Africa. This is one of the global ‘theatres’ where the corporation established its presence.

16 Although in the period from March 2005 to July 2005 the participant observation took the form of ‘virtual ethnography’ (Hine, 2000), i.e. was accomplished mostly through remote access to the intranet, continuing email exchanges and by conference calls.

17 A further aspect of these attempts to establish RFID as a known entity involved efforts to establish the acronym RFID as a reference point for other members of the
organization. The acronym in the organization functions as an attempt to introduce a form of social control (cf. Bowker and Star, 2000: 14). In Virtual World the marketing team strove to distinguish ‘their’ version of RFID from competitors, pronouncing the term [AR-EF-AI-DI] rather than [AR-FID].

18 Account managers are responsible for establishing and maintaining relationships with the accounts, or customer organizations.

19 These interactions are usually kept concealed from audiences outside the corporation. The analyst reports are construed in such a way as to present independent evaluations of corporate products and performance.

20 The marketing and public relations managers attempted to persuade the ethnographer that the tools of the trade came out of some lengthy deliberations among themselves, to which Elena had not been admitted.

21 Managing the materiality of the RFID demonstration was rendered an important bottom line. Elsewhere (Simakova, 2006), the ways the corporation was held accountable for having a material demo on display and was trying to manage its absence is discussed.

22 By the time of Virtual World’s first attempts to issue public statements on RFID, the IT world had been carefully watching the RFID trials mandated by one of the largest retailers, Wal-Mart, and the US Department of Defense. There was no agreement on the outcomes of the trials in terms of the business value of RFID (Business Week, 31 Jan 2005; e-Week, 22 December 2004).

23 We acknowledge that a better insight could be gained if the first by-line could be cited. This does not seem possible due to non-disclosure requirements.

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Elena Simakova is a postdoctoral associate at the Department of Science and Technology Studies and the Center for Nanoscale Systems at Cornell University, USA. Her research interests mainly focus on marketing knowledge and emerging technologies. Elena has worked on the constitution and functions of accounts of technology at the intersection of the social science research and commercial settings, including ethnography of innovation in the telecom industries, and the accountability relations performed around and through nanotechnologies and converging technologies. [email: es537@cornell.edu]

Dan Neyland is a senior research fellow of Said Business School. He works on a broad portfolio of projects focused on issues of governance and accountability (covering RFID, the global textile trade, the movement of electronic waste, the production of vaccines for neglected diseases of the developing world, airports, traffic management, household recycling and CCTV systems). He publishes widely including a 2006 book entitled Privacy, Surveillance and Public Trust and has two forthcoming books on Organizational Ethnography and Mundane Governance. Dan also contributes to Science
and Technology and Research Methods teaching at the School. Address: Saïd Business School, University of Oxford, Oxford, UK, OX1 1HP.
[Email: daniel.neyland@sbs.ox.ac.uk]