Ethnographic Praxis in Industry Conference Proceedings 2011, p. 240–255.

Replacing the network society with social foam: a revolution for corporate ethnography?

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What would it mean for corporate ethnography to think of society not as a network, but rather as an agglomeration of bubbles that constitute foam? The article offers a comparison of the metaphors of network and foam and their implications for the analysis of contemporary sociality. It draws on the philosopher Peter Sloterdijk's theory that we live not in one mono-spherical society but rather in apluralityofmicro-spherestobedescribedassocialfoam. Anemphasisonatmospheres,affectand contagiousness follows from this conceptualization of the social world. These consequences are discussed, and some suggestions offered of how Sloterdijk's ideas might shift the focus of corporate ethnography. Although primarily a conceptual intervention, the article also describes how organizational theory has started to deploy the concept of social foam. It concludes with a reexamination, through a focus on atmospheres, of a previous study undertaken at Intel, which shifts the emphasis of the analysis.

> "I said "Brr. It's cold in here/It must be something in the Atmosphere!"" (Cheerleaders' chant from Bring It On, dir. Reed, 2000)

To many consultancies that provide ethnographically-informed research to corporate clients, it is increasingly clear that these clients believe transactional data will soon achieve a complete "360° view of the customer", effectively rendering qualitative research redundant (Slobin & Cherkasky 2010). When faced with the prospect of data from field observations and interviews, one client of SapientNitro exclaims: *"Why are we spending time learning about our customers in their homes and at their jobs? We know what our customers do – they show us online and in the stores every day!"* (ibid:192). For this executive, everything there is to know about the market can be gleaned through an analysis of transactional data, broken down into the categories of purchase history and preference, preferred media channels, transaction response behaviour, influence of social media, brand affinity and loyalty scores. The emergence of ever more sophisticated ways to consolidate and visualize transactional data seems only to reinforce the compulsion to look to this data as the primary, or, in the worst case scenario, *only* way of understanding contemporary consumer behavior.

This article was motivated by the worry that an underlying, yet unexamined, reliance on the network as the primary metaphor for social relations might be exacerbating the trend towards analytics, a trend which has prompted concern not only in relation to corporate ethnography, but also by academic sociologists who are rethinking the politics of data in the age of mass digital data (Beer & Burrows 2007; Savage & Burrows 2007). In this article I want to address directly the ways in which a new theoretical framing of society – or more precisely a shift in metaphor for characterising sociality – might be a useful device in corporate ethnography's toolbox. In advocating for the potential

complimentarity between new quantitative data analysis and practices more normally associated with corporate ethnography, perhaps in the field of corporate ethnography there has been a reluctance to acknowledge and question the increasing dominance of an underlying form of social relations for which one sociologist has given the name 'network sociality' (Wittel 2001). Of course it is risky to generalize in a field so diverse that even the label 'corporate ethnography' is subject to debate.[1] Nevertheless, the stakes are high for those who recognize themselves as named even partially by such a label, whose work is always subject to the politics of 'being of use' within organizations. Unless it can develop new kinds of ways of characterizing social relations which cannot be subsumed under the rubric of networked sociality, and unless it explicitly names these, ethnographically inspired work may increasingly be seen as more marginal, left to explain only the gaps or inconsistencies in the newly celebrated 360° view.

In 1996 the sociologist Manuel Castells published a book that was to frame the first generation of sociological research about the internet, and the new economy more generally. In *The Rise of the Network Society,* Castells, drawing on extensive empirical data, outlined a global macro-sociology that proposed the primacy of the network as a way to understand contemporary social change. In the 'network society' information becomes the key ingredient of social organization and "flows of images and messages between networks constitute the basic thread of our social structure" (Castells 1996, p.477). This analysis has been challenged, due to its perceived technological determinism (Webster 2006), and more importantly for the argument offered here, it has been criticised because of the way in which it seems to suggest society is driven by structures of points and links. A network view of society offers only an 'anemic' view of social relations (Borch 2009). This article advances the position that we should consider ourselves as living within (atmo)spheres. Bruno Latour contrasts the capacities of these two metaphors:

> While **networks** are good at describing long-distance and unexpected connections starting from local points, **spheres** are useful for describing local, fragile and complex "atmospheric conditions"[Sloterdijk's term] (Latour 2011)

In order to investigate the way in which both terms might operate, I begin with a description of Castell's analysis and the associated concept of 'network sociality' that was developed as part of an ethnographic project looking at life in the network society (Wittel, 2001). By looking at the aspects of sociality that appear to exceed the flows of images and messages, I will explain why I want to put forward the German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk's 'Sphereology' as a potential starting point - moving us from networks to micro- spheres and the idea of 'social foam', from connectivity to atmosphere and the transmission of affect. What I'm interested in here is not so much the historical accuracy of

[1] Corporate researchers in this field may align themselves with a number of labels, including business anthropologist or experience modeler, and many doing identical work have flexible identifications. For example, Donna Flynn, who works at Microsoft states: "I have described myself as a design anthropologist because my background as an anthropologist is deeply held as part of my own professional and personal identity. I could alternatively describe myself as a business anthropologist, consulting anthropologist, symbolic anthropologist, economic anthropologist, development anthropologist, or applied anthropologist depending on the context of my career stage, projects at question, or audience". (Flynn in (Cefkin 2009).

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Sloterdijk's immense philosophical oeuvre, but the conceptual possibilities of some of his key ideas for researchers faced with the dilemmas highlighted at the outset of this article.

NETWORK SOCIETY AND NETWORK SOCIALITY

In *The Network Society* Castells argued that the new global economy requires almost instantaneous flows of information; to be linked into the informational network is vital for individuals, organizations and the nation state. There is no aspect of contemporary life that remains untouched by the operation of networks. This heralds a truly new form of society:

> Networks constitute the new social morphology of our societies, and the diffusion of networking logic substantially modifies the operation of outcomes in processes of production, experience, power and culture. (1996:469)

This "networking logic" infuses everyday life. In Castells' network society, culture becomes dominated by electronic communication. People inhabit locales that are increasingly segregated and disconnected. To be absent from the informational network is to be marginal to this new 'space of flows'. Power comes from being able to control the connection between the networks, as well as determines which entities are present or absent in a network.

Castells treats a network as "a set of interconnected nodes". However nodes are not necessarily individuals, but social entities that vary radically as units depending on the network under consideration. Amongst the examples he gives are stock exchange markets (nodes within network of global finance), street gangs (nodes within network of drug trafficking) and mobile devices (nodes within global new media network). Networks are enabled and mediated by "light-speed operating information technologies" with the dominant role assigned to the space of media (rather than politics) in which information and communication circulate.

This description of society, with its emphasis on flows between nodes, the increasing collapsing of distance, and the shift from vertical to horizontal relations brings together many of the key concerns of contemporary sociology (Giddens 1991; Beck et al. 1994; Lash 1999), and has extensive explanatory value. The 'network society' provides a way to talk about the forces of globalization as well as more specific shifts in communication and connection between people – foreshadowing the rise of social networking sites such as Facebook, which seems a logical extension of the increasing dominance of electronically mediated lives.

In the fifteen years since *The Network Society* was published, the technological infrastructures of electronic communication have become increasingly complex and more widely diffused, and sociologists and others studying the contemporary social world have caught up to the potential impact of such communication. However research has suggested a far more complex (and often counter-intuitive) pattern of social and economic impact than we might expect from Castells' totalising theory (Woolgar 2002; Wakeford 2003). For example the idea that the key problem was access to the network - getting people online - was challenged by an analysis of internet abandoners and non-users (Wyatt, Sally et al. 2002). Some social scientists have adopted a stance of 'analytic skepticism' towards the idea

that we are inevitably progressing to a network society or 'virtual society' (see contributors to Woolgar 2002).

Nevertheless, perhaps particularly due to the spread of social networking in the last few years, the fundamental idea that we now live in societies in which individuals are defined *primarily* by their position on/off networks does seems to hold considerable currency within organisations that employ corporate ethnographers, as suggested by the client comments reported by SapientNitro colleagues above. Even though Castells is more interested in social entities such as markets and gangs, his emphasis on electronic communication does suggest that such clients are justified in wanting to know about networked social lives, whether in settings familiar to design and development, or more remote emerging markets. However, as I discovered in my own study of the way in which social science knowledge travels between academic settings and the corporations, corporate ethnography finds it extremely difficult to connect such large-scale analyses of social change with day-to-day demands of internal or external clients for research.[2] In order to make that connection clearer in this account, I will introduce the idea of 'network sociality' as it has been developed by one ethnographic project (Wittel, 2001). This concept demonstrates how we might develop a more micro- sociological analysis of Castells' ideas. It also provides a contrast with the alternative model of contemporary social relations that I will outline, that of 'social foam'.

Network sociality can be defined as the form of social relations that occurs in the network society. Derived from a study of new media industry professionals, and referring to both face to face encounters as well as electronic communication, Wittel suggests that network sociality will become the 'paradigmatic social form' of late capitalism and the new cultural economy (ibid:71). 'Network sociality consists of fleeting and transient, yet iterative social relations; of ephemeral but intense encounters' (Wittel, 2001: 51). Network sociality contrasts to community-based sociality. Whereas the latter relies on strong, long-lasting ties and proximity, the concept of network sociality recognises the informational nature of social ties, and the fact that social relations are based on an exchange of data; "catching up" rather that "narrational" (ibid:51).

In his ethnography of the new media industry, Wittel sets out five features of network sociality, connecting the form of social relations to wider social change. First, network sociality is strongly connected with processes of individualisation, a process (Wittel draws on Giddens, 1990) in which people are 'lifted out' of their 'traditional' contexts and live in largely disembedded sets of social relations, which they constantly, reflexively construct and reconstruct Second, network sociality is characterised by intense, focused, fast and overloaded social ties. For this Wittel uses his observations of new media workers, and the injunction to be a 'good networker' – ie to maintain a large number of social contacts. The third feature that characterises network sociality is a distinction between narrative and information, in which the shared points of reference implied by a common narrative are no longer

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[2] Economic and Social Research Council grant RES-000-27-0205 "Beyond Translation: the use of social research in the design of new technologies" www.esrc.ac.uk

present. A narrative or experience-based sociality becomes an informational sociality – information as currency. Fourth, Wittel suggests that there is coming together of work and play, emerging from the blurring of the boundaries between paid employment and private life (he cites parties at Razorfish in this regard). Lastly, he claims "network sociality is technological sociality" due to the fact that sociality is now embedded in communication technology, transport technology and technologies to manage relationships. Sociality has become de-localized and operates over a distance – whether through emails or via electronic databases of contacts.

There has been agreement that network sociality is "a useful metaphor to describe the many directional, interconnected and rhizomatic features of social activity in contemporary techno-society", with particular reference to social forms mediated by the internet (Willson 2010, p.494). We can indeed find strong resonances of network sociality in the accounts of social networking sites (boyd 2010). However I propose that even in Wittel's examples of network sociality, other forces are at play. This is particularly true when Wittel puts forward the activity of SpeedDating as evidence of "intense, focused, fast and overloaded social ties" in leisure time (2001: 66). His focus here is on the content of the questions in SpeedDating events – 'What do you do for a living? Where are you from? What's the most exciting thing you have ever done?' – which leads him to highlight the informational nature of these questions, rather than any other aspect of the encounter. Thus he concludes "It is an exchange of data rather than a romantic date" (ibid:68). However SpeedDating, I would argue, is as much about the general atmosphere of a live event, with rushed talk, frenetic changing of seats and more generalised affective states of anxiety and/or excitement, as it is informational or data-driven. My suspicion is that the intensity of the encounters generates not so much relations of exchange but something more like 'atmospheric attunements' where sensory knowledge is brought to the fore (Stewart 2011).The concept of network sociality, even as it insists on the intensity and ephemerality of such interactions, pigeonholes such activity back in the realm of the network. Is there a way to see an alternative mode of sociality? What kind of theory might enable us to think differently about the social relations generated in such settings?

SPHEREOLOGY AND 'SOCIAL FOAM'

One possibility is that we begin by thinking about ourselves not as 'being on earth', but rather as 'being in air' (Irigaray 1999). Peter Sloterdijk's work takes the proposition of *being in air* to be the basic condition of human existence, arguing further than we live in spheres sustaining air conditions. This enterprise he calls "Sphereology". It leads directly to the consideration of atmospheres, for in our spheres we breathe the same air, share the same ideas, and so on (Borch, 2008:55).

There has been a recent upsurge in interest in the Sloterdijk's work in the social sciences (Elden & Mendieta 2009). Despite the fact that his three volume work outlining the principles of 'Sphereology' ("Bubbles", "Globes" and "Foam") is yet to appear in full in English, his ideas have begun to influence leading figures and publications in, for example, Science and Technology Studies (Latour 2009) Cultural Geography (Thrift 2009) , Art (Frieze Art Journal 2009) and Design (Harvard Design Magazine 2009). Sloterdijk explains his aim as "to bring the atmospheric dimension back to the perception of the real", a shorthand for a philosophical project which covers a vast historical scope to

demonstrate the crucial role of being-in-space in the development of humankind, from the Greek agora to contemporary forms of urban housing.

Sloterdijk developed sphereology in part to counter the concept of the network, which he describes as comprising "excessively reductive geometry...the network intimates the notion of expanded points that are connected...a universe for data trawlers" (cited in Borch, 2009). Sphereology, he claims, is a radical critique of the individualism latent in this model. He proposes that "human beings are constantly overlapping" (interview in Ohanian & Royoux 2005, p.225). The relation between 'individual existents' precedes and sustains individuals themselves.[3] Therefore it doesn't make sense to separate humans into individualized points or nodes. Rather than thinking of the social as a network, following Sloterdijk we should rather consider the importance of atmospheres. In fact he wants nothing less than the transformation of sociology into a general theory of air conditioning or atmospheres (Borch, 2008:552). To show the kinds of challenges that this might pose to corporate ethnography and related endeavors of applied social research we need to look in some detail at how Sloterdijk makes his argument.

In this article I focus on Sloterdijk's analysis of the contemporary epoch, which is outlined in the third volume: *Sphären III – Schäume, Plurale Sphärologie* (2004). In this volume, part of which has been published as *Terror From the Air* (Sloterdijk 2009), the philosopher is primarily interested in the ways we live together and apart in conglomerations, particularly in urban environments. The significant metaphor for sphereology of the contemporary is foam. He describes his choice of metaphor in the following way:

> In order to describe the present situation, I propose the metaphor of foam, a term which in its own polyvalent nature expresses very well the multi-cellular composition of the big, rather amorphous structures which correspond to the popular landscapes of our era, and especially to the urban conglomerations that are like veritable foams composed of individualistic cells, compositions formed by collective centres...the collective centre as such is the atom of the social foam." (interview in Ohanian & Royoux 2005, p.236)

Captured in this notion of foam is Sloterdijk's argument that we live in a plurality of spheres. Foam is an aggregate of micro-spheres - bubbles - adjacent but without being accessible to or separable from, each other. Each bubble in the foam is what Sloterdijk calls a 'co-isolated association'. As one reader has pointed out, it makes sense when trying to grasp this concept to think of actual foam: a multichamber system consisting of spaces made up of gases and surface tensions, which restrict and deform each other (Borch, 2009). In a sense, each bubble makes up its own world. Inside the bubble, there is an atmosphere – air conditions that are shared. A single bubble is never really completely separate from others - adjacent cells in foam share the same wall - so a feature of each bubble is a shared membrane and co-fragility.

[3] For a useful explanation of these terms see Marie-Eve Morin's discussion of Sloterdijk (Morin 2009)

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A crucial part of Sloterdijk's theoretical framework is that micro-spheres do not communicate with each other, but rather the relationship of transmission between spheres is one of 'imitation' and 'contagion' – much less controlled, or controllable, than a point to point communication system. We can think of physical structures such as foam architecture providing some containment of atmosphere, but what is important is also the way in which foam is always changing and mutating. Borch explains:

> Foam theory thus suggests that foam architecture is not only endowed with specific air conditions (odours, light, etc), but these air conditions produce affective states in the foam which can be transmitted from one bubble to the others (2008:561).

Thus the concept of foam also includes a concern with how transmission occurs between bubbles, and what kinds of 'immunity' bubbles can develop against the atmospheres of other units. Again, considering actual foam gives us an idea of how Sloterdijk imagines the mechanisms of generation, but also destruction, of the social. Spheres are expansible, but may also burst or implode (ibid:550).

The idea of a multiplicity of spheres and their contagious relationship to each other challenges core sociological assumptions about the nature of the social. Christian Borch's commentary on the idea of social foam succinctly explains that Sloterdijk is replacing both the idea of society as 'mono-spherical container' (as asserted by Durkheim) and also the 'non-spatial communication process' (suggested by systems theory). For Sloterdijk society is rather

> an aggregate of micro-spheres (couples, households, companies, associations) of different formats that are adjacent to one another like individual bubbles in a mound of foam and are structured one layer over/under the other, without really being accessible to or separable from one another (translated in Borsch, 2008: 553)

Another commentator on Sloterdijk offers:

> In this aggregate, each bubble is a 'world', a place of sense, an intimate room that resonates or oscillates with its own (interior) animation/life (Morin 2009: 67)

This last observation indicates the extent to which Sloterdijk resists any fundamental individualism. Even when alone in a bubble, Sloterdijk does not think of a single human body as totally separable from others. This is difficult to grasp, although well rehearsed in anthropological literatures (e.g. Strathern 2004). In an interview, Sloterdijk explains his reasoning:

> I try to show how the dominant form of the modern habitat corresponds to a form of subjectivity through which the individual has learned to form a couple with himself. We don't necessarily need the real other to form a couple....We sometimes form it in paradoxical relationships with absent partners, as proved by the mystic's relationship with God or long- distance couples. There's even a dyadic relationship between the nationalist soul and his nation, which is an

> impossible and pseudo-concrete partner... (interview in Ohanian & Royoux 2005, p.235)

For Sloterdijk even environments of a single person have atmosphere, in so far as they constitute "workshops of self-relationships" (Borch, 2008: 559). Even the figure of the lone bachelor in an urban apartment, held up by Sloterdijk as the epitome of individualized existence, can live in a relationship with the "individual to come who contains the sum of my future, existential possibilities" (interview in Ohanian & Royoux 2005, p.235)

As we might expect from a thinker interested in developing a speculative philosophy of space, Sloterdijk is often concerned with structures that contain environments, and many of the examples in *Sphären III* explicitly engage with architecture, from the mobile structures of Buckminster Fuller to contemporary apartment blocks, conventional centres and sports stadiums (Borch 2008). Sloterdijk is interested in how buildings function as ways to protect a set of air conditions, and his discussion of the apartment block is useful in showing how foam sociality can be reflected in relation to the built environment. The apartment building itself can be understood as a "rigid body of foam" in which the individual apartment units are situated. Co-isolated in the foam, but with shared walls, a single apartment immunity may be breached, for example by the sounds of neighbours. Affective states thus can be transmitted from one bubble to others.

Returning to the example of SpeedDating can help us understand the innovativeness of the concept of social foam. Understood through network sociality, SpeedDating was considered primarily an informational exchange, suggesting its importance was in formats of communication between individuals. Using Sloterdijk's theory of social foam, an evening of SpeedDating can be understood as generating an atmosphere that is transmitted contagiously through shared air conditions to participants, and perhaps to others who might be sharing the space. The participants could be said to form a micro-sphere, workshopping self-relations as well as generating affective states through interaction with others, and depending on the boundaries of the event, this atmosphere might spread to non-participants (for example, to those co-present in a bar). As in an apartment block, the SpeedDating event may be notionally contained by physical boundaries of a room. However it is plausible that the zones of encounter exist within a bigger meeting space, and the immunity between one sphere and another may be demarcated by other specific air conditions – by sound (overhearing) or senses (picking up a 'vibe'). Rather than focusing on a series of dyadic communicative exchanges as might be the case when adopting a model of network sociality, thinking through social foam might point us to the way in which micro-spheres constitute themselves – the work involved in constituting bubbles, maintaining their structure/co- fragility and the dynamics of making the foam.

DEPLOYING 'SOCIAL FOAM' IN RESEARCH

At Copenhagen Business School, Christian Borch has been developing ways to apply Sloterdijk's theory of social foam in the social science of organizations. He has proposed a research agenda for organizational theory that focuses on 'organizational atmospheres' (2009). Borch has also attempted to apply the theory to the management of crime in urban areas (2008).

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Directly following Sloterdijk's analysis of architectural spaces, Borch proposed foam sociality as a way to understand the contemporary business office. This is a useful example for corporate ethnography as it often encounters business office settings as the context for 'user' behaviour, and furthermore the corporate anthropological practice itself is frequently created within these same cube/meeting room infrastructures. Social foam might be used as part of a reflexive account of the making of corporate ethnography itself.

Aspects of architectural design allow for specific light, odours, climate control and so on, and, through the concept of foam sociality, we can understand these as being of central importance to the generation of the atmosphere. More specifically the politics of the organization may be fought out in terms of these air conditions, and who can create their own space (bubble) within them. We can think here of the huge efforts that are made in large organizations to control the organization of materials in cubes, offices, meeting rooms in relation to their assumed function (Martin 2003), and how this creates a sense of living in distinctive atmospheres within bounded spaces. However the politics of organizational atmospheres is not only about aesthetic design, temperature, cube wall height, but also "may focus on how atmospheres are created by more psycho-social means, say, by attempts to evoke a particular team spirit" (2009:236). Resistance might include trying to strengthen the boundaries of your own space. Borch suggests the foam bubble can be seen as "the 'hot nesting' employee who personalizes his or her workspace" (ibid:237). It could also be used to describe the behaviour of groups within larger organisations who attempt to distinguish themselves by sharing attempts to subvert standardized spaces, so that the cube walls which divide them are literally and affectively broken down.

Thinking through the idea of foam sociality focuses our attention not only on the physical structures which signal co-isolated associations (such as the cube wall) but also the importance of the transmission of affects, and the attempts to embrace or resist atmospheres. Recalling Sloterdijk's initial interest in foam as a physical structure can direct our attention to different aspects of social life in large organizations. If we want to think through social foam, we could look for the multiplicity of cells and what makes up their thin, permeable, membranes, and examine about how real or virtual boundaries are constructed in organisations to contain atmospheres. We could focus on the co-fragility of the structure, and the mechanisms by which transmission happens between cells – the contagiousness of moods or ideas between colleagues or groups. The fact that foam has no centre and is generally disorganized could also be a dimension for investigation, uncovering the way the atmosphere cannot be simply read off formal infrastructures. Lastly we might want to focus on the fact that for Sloterdijk foam reminds us about the spontaneous eruption of atmospheres – where and how might this happen, and what are its impacts?

Another attempt to apply Sloterdijk's theory shows that we don't need to translate every aspect of the physical structure of foam to its literal social counterpart. Borch addresses the fear of crime in modern metropolitan areas, and in particular the attempts by urban planners to use environmental design to manage crime (2008). In contrast to Sloterdijk, who celebrates the unregulated spontaneity of foam, attempts at designing for sense of community and immunity of bubbles in urban spaces speak to a more managed, communitarian, ideal (ibid: 566).

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The idea that communities should establish "defensible space" has been popular since the 1970s. This proposition was allied with attempts to build new senses of community in anonymous urban environments and resulted in plans for "the physical expression of a social fabric which defends itself" (ibid:563) such as benches or planters which show shared territory. Translating into the perspective of sphereology, Borch explains attempts to build 'defensible space' as:

> a strategy that protects an apartment block from criminal activity by creating a foam sociality that transcends the singular apartments...a social and material sphere which is clearly felt by inhabitants and strangers alike, and which is sensed and observed so intensely that a criminal can be deterred from even contemplating entry. (ibid:563)

Particularly in high-rise blocks, this supports a sense of local 'we-immunity', and Borch suggests that environmental defensive space designs are 'atmospheric installations' in so far as they regulate ordinary, everyday interactions in public. This is what Sloterdijk would understand as the management of co-isolated associations. Work on fear of crime suggests we might trace the presence of atmospheric installations that attempt to work with shared experiences.

This application of foam theory emphasizes attempts to build atmospheres that go beyond the figure of the individual subject. Just like network sociality, the idea of social foam attempts to describe forms of social relationships. However the rejection of individualism sets sphereology apart from uses of the network metaphor that assume a bounded and self-contained human subject. This is not to suggest all theorists using the concept of the network make this assumption, and contemporary anthropological accounts are extremely useful in rethinking what personhood might be given the prevalence of networking logic and the popular culture of networking (Leitner, forthcoming). Nevertheless shifting the metaphor to one of bubbles and foam emphasises multiplicity both at the level of what we would normally treat as the individual subject and also highlights the co-dependencies of the structure of the social.

This becomes clearer if we further explore the idea of an affective 'contagious' form of transmission between spheres. How are we to understand processes of contagion, especially if we have had to abandon the notion of the individual? It is useful to draw on the work of Kathleen Stewart who proposes 'atmospheric attunements' as a way to talk about the labor of becoming sentient to bodies, rhythms and ways of being in noise and light and space (2011). For Stewart tracking the movement of affect is about asking a specific set of questions about our everyday settings. These are quite different questions to those that we might ask if we limited ourselves to thinking in terms of network sociality.

> What happens if we approach worlds not as the dead or reeling effects of distant systems but as lived affects with tempos, sensory knowledges, orientations, transmutations, habits, rogue force fields? What might we do with the proliferation of little worlds of all kinds that form up around conditions, practices, manias, pacings, scenes of absorption, styles of living, forms of attachment (or detachment) identities and imaginaries, or some publically circulating strategy for self-transformation? (Stewart 2011, p.446)

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Borch suggested we thinking about team spirit as being one way in which we could understand attempts to transmit atmospheric conditions in organisations, and corporate campaigns of many kinds might be accused of similar 'air-conditioning' objectives. Reframing projects using 'social foam' offers us a further way to remove ourselves from a systems (or network) approach as suggested by network sociality, or the taken for granted mode of point to point communication. Rather we could, following Sloterdijk, examine the ways in which micro-spheres develop systems of protecting themselves using atmospheric tactics while at the same time taking into account that as part of foam they have co-fragility with the spheres which adjoin them.

Furthermore, the concept of social foam puts the emphasis back on the liveness of co-presence and therefore the local. This runs counter to some of the focus on global audiences whose primary identification is with a technological device or service. We might begin by formulating enquiries in terms of discovering or tracking atmospheres, rather than using connectivity or communication. As I suggested with SpeedDating, this moves away from analysing social relations as primarily informational, and instead it encourages us to consider the literal and affective 'air conditions'. The location might be in a small-scale setting – the micro-sphere of the household – or it might take an aggregate of micro-spheres (the foam itself) as the point of departure. Here we can imagine a physical structure such as the apartment block that Sloterdijk finds so useful to think with, or we could look at other sites where atmospheres might be under creation. Spaces that are bounded or contained in some way, but area also permeable, such as car interiors, would lend themselves to atmospheric investigations.

One recent piece of research that appears well suited to re-interpretation using sphereology comes from the 'User Creating Content' project of Intel Corporation's Digital Home Group. This study included an interview-based survey of people who were creating 'online spectacles' and an analysis of how they managed their audiences to achieve their goals (Faulkner & Melican 2007). Although this study is framed by the idea of individual reputation – building it up, its effects in other media, risking its loss – re-examining the study through Sloterdijk's framework demonstrates how questions and approaches can be shifted as a different model of sociality is emphasized.

Susan Faulkner and Jay Melican researched the strategies of publicity adopted by those actively engaged in the creation and distribution of original content on blogs, video blogs (vlogs), and social networking sites. They were concerned not only with the individual behaviour of the content producer, but how they manage their relationship with the audience of readers and/or viewers. The study suggests a remarkable consistency in the understanding of this setting as live and emergent:

> Across the board, our informants describe the online realm of user-generated content as having an untamed-frontier, anything-can-happen quality to it at this point in time (2007: 63).

This orientation leads each interviewee profiled – located in New York, Los Angeles, Dubai and Seoul – to build a set of strategies to work with the liveness and unpredictability of the environment, which I suggest represent attempts to work with atmospherics rather than networks. Some want to attract the attention of others to their content, for example accelerating hits on a blog in order to get the attention of national media ('Gregory K' in New York). However this can be interpreted as being

as much about the creation of distinct atmospheres as it is about building the number of hits on a blog. The clue is that each participant has a strategy not only for the generation of excitement, attachment, and enthusiasm, all of which are intended to spread to others (Faulkner and Melican talk of 'building momentum behind viral contagion' (ibid:62)) but simultaneously one of containment and boundary-making around their micro-sphere. The co-fragility of the micro- sphere and the larger foam is evident in the simultaneous need to generate specific atmospheres, while keeping others at bay.

Although I think that the concept of reputation proposed by Faulkner and Melican is proved a productive starting point to characterise the shared concerns of the sample, there may be another way to look at the phenomena at play. The accounts reveal a marked differentiation in the ways each content creator works within social foam, including the extent to which they present themselves as individuals such as 'Gregory K' or as entities *without* an identity which is clearly singular ('Secret Dubai'). This suggest that a focus on micro-sphere as constituted by different atmospheres might be productive, and would turn our focus to the specifically local conditions in which such atmospheres might be generated, and the mechanisms by which transmission happens between the micro-sphere (constituted partially by the blog or vlog) and the conditions around it which form the social foam. Gregory K whips up blog hits until his online interventions are so intense that he gets reported in the New York Times, and thus secures a book contract that has nothing to do with the content of his blog, but merely the fact that he has created a following (a shared atmosphere of expectation or possibility). His strategy is to choreograph excitement about himself by generating hits – an attempt to generate contagion - while at the same time containing and controlling the atmosphere by using a pseudonym, which marks the boundary around his micro-sphere. Of significance here is the way in which the nature of the social foam comes from the highly culturally specific interplay of the figure of the unsigned author and the workings of the media and publishing industries.

However the stories of others in the sample suggest this kind of atmospheric work is not universal. For 'Mary Jane' in Seoul, what creates atmosphere is a much stronger distance between her online presence and her real identity combined with a containment of content as far as possible to friends and close members of her online community. Her strategy of boundary maintenance is to never show her whole face in her videos, therefore always remaining in some sense partial, while at the same time keeping content as ephemeral as possible - regularly removing postings from public view so that online criticisms by strangers are kept to a minimum. The intrusion of negative comments (the atmosphere from outside) is described as highly disruptive, so each video stays up on the site for just a few days. In comparison to Gregory K, Mary Jane's micro-sphere is marked by much more fragile boundaries, and the fragility of her atmosphere has to be constantly monitored and managed.

In revisiting this research, I am not claiming that network sociality is absent. Rather I want to propose that by looking at the generation and transmission of shared affects which may transcend one individual, and by studying the way in which the boundaries of micro- spheres (as bubbles in foam) are created, we might find useful inroads into understanding the research question at hand, in this case, the development of 'user-generated content'. This might lead us away from staying with the actual content itself and its technical/infrastructural requirements, and rather provoke questions about the conditions under which people could create or restrict atmospheres, and the tools that might enable them to do so. There could be some provocative design challenges involved in this, for although there are tools

with which people expand and intensify their social presence (I'm thinking here of the combination of Facebook, Twitter and so on), there seem few that would allow us to unmake atmospheres. Put in a slightly different way, a starting point for research might be the question: How can we control the *porosity* of micro-spheres?

CONCLUSION

This article is an initial theoretical intervention that I hope will be a starting point for others interested in evolving the conceptual toolkit for applied social research. I have described two ways in which contemporary social relations might be characterised, one using the metaphor of the network, the other developing the metaphor of spheres and social foam. My aim was to suggest that corporate ethnography need not rely on the network, and that by developing some of the ideas proposed by the philosopher Peter Sloterdijk it could characterise social relations very differently.

I have set out the reasoning behind the term social foam in some detail as I propose that it holds great potential as a *conceptual* resource for corporate ethnography in its attempt to develop metaphors of contemporary social relations. The proposal that we live in an aggregate of micro-spheres could generate new topics and methods of enquiry. It could begin to expand the vocabulary of corporate ethnography. One of the possible obstacles in the way of this is difficulty of translating ideas that were written as speculative philosophy into topic areas and methodologies that are more familiar to corporate ethnographers. I have offered a small provocation in this regard – as such this is a *speculative* intervention rather than primarily a *programmatic* one. Speaking to the thematics of EPIC 2011, the article perhaps plants more of a revolutionary seed than it provides evidence of a large-scale analytic transformation that is already in progress.

Researchers are attempting to apply the idea of social foam to specific social settings and problems, suggesting that moving from abstract models to more concrete sites of everyday sociality is indeed possible. By reinterpreting data from a previous study I attempted to show how one research project could be augmented. Expanding the range of topics of sphereology is the next step in constructing a more wide-reaching exploration of how this philosophical framework might work in terms of a new approach for social research, so that it can form part of a set of devices that can be used to recognise the liveness and on-goingness of the social world (Lury & Wakeford, forthcoming). Vital to this activity will be the necessity of recognising that corporate ethnography has to take on its ambivalence about accounts and theories of social change, particularly those which seem remote from the immediate matter at hand.

NOTES

The author gratefully acknowledges the support of the Economic and Social Research Council grant which made possible the development these ideas: RES-000-27-0205 Beyond Translation: the use of social research in the design of new technologies. The paper also benefitted from the work of the session co-ordinator Shelly Evenson as well as comments by anonymous reviewers. Thanks are due to

Sasha Roseneil of Birkbeck College, University of London for discussions about relationality and her insistence that there should be a psycho- social turn at EPIC.

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