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Technology as Quasi-object

A Serresian Perspective on Material Agency in Organizing

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Naturally occurring strategy talk during a major healthcare restructuring in Finland

Keywords: Material Agency · Michel Serres · Passage Point · Quasi-object · Strategy

MOTIVATION

Technology is agentic — but how does it organize as events unfold?

1

What we now know

Organization research has shown technology is an active, agentic participant in organizing — not a neutral tool (Orlikowski, 2007; Leonardi, 2011; Leonardi & Barley, 2010).

2

What we still don't know

Less attention has gone to how interaction becomes momentarily ordered as events unfold — the fine-grained, temporal movements through which technology configures collective interaction in real time.

3

Our move

We turn to underutilized philosophy of technology of Michel Serres and his quasi-object to trace how technology circulates through interaction and temporarily organizes collective orientation in-situ. This gives a Serresian perspective to the role of technology in the material agency of organizing.

- In his philosophy, Serres re-imagines philosophical concepts, generalises his philosophical ideas and finally asks what is to be human in the era of ICT on Earth (as disturbances mediated by technical objects remake the human and we relationally evolve with technology).

Serres: passage points reconfigure the collective and quasi-objects circulate. But how various technologies operate as quasi-objects in organizational settings?

Passage point

A relational node where agency shifts between actors through circulation — a dynamic space of translation marked by asymmetry and unpredictability, not a fixed bridge. Passage points are the crossings that enable transformation in the collective and quasi-objects circulate. Like our findings later show, passage points function as a moment where the rules of the game (or institutional logic) are exposed and renegotiated.

Quasi-object

A relational operator — neither pure subject nor object — that circulates within a collective, redistributes agency, and creates new relations. “The quasi-object stabilizes time” (Serres, 2015b, p. 89). Its materiality is incidental; what matters is how they condition knowledge and bind actors, and their capacity to create transformative passage points as they circulate.

- The circulation of technological quasi-objects not only shape organizing but also introduce passage points where reorganizing occurs. Quasi-objects maintain their existence only as long as they remain in motion. This interplay of quasi-objects and passage points illuminates material agency as a distributed phenomenon

Finland's Health & Social Care Reform

After 25 years of political debate, responsibility for health and social welfare services moved from municipalities to 21 newly established Welfare Regions on 2023 — with new technology positioned as central to gaining efficiency.

Our case: strategy workshops in one of the new smaller Welfare Regions with 12.500 employees, sparsely populated areas, and one major university hospital.

Tasked in developing a preliminary service strategy amid budgetary pressure and a digitalization mandate.

25

years of political
debate before
reform

21

new Welfare
Regions established

2023

reform takes effect
(1 January)

Reform aim

Introduce new technology — chatbot and remote services — to gain efficiency in health services under an aging population and rising cost pressure.

Watching strategy in the making

7

video-recorded
strategy workshops

~23

hours of
video recording

308

pages of
transcribed talk

Nov '22–
Mar '23

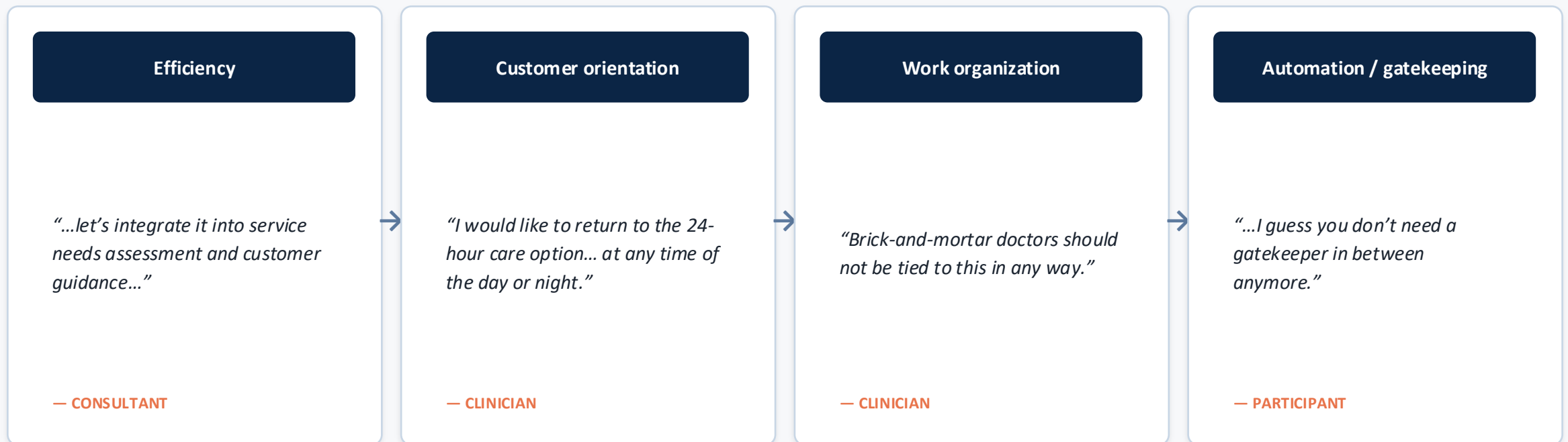
Analytical approach: Using video-recorded strategy workshops as a methodological choice allows to trace the "passing of the ball" (to use Serres' football metaphor) in real-time, capturing the micro-moves that retrospective interviews would miss.

- 1 Familiarization — watching video alongside transcripts to identify recurring technological entities (chatbot, remote services)
- 2 Tracing circulation — following the quasi-object's movement across turns and translations to see how meanings, roles, and authority were reconfigured
- 3 Identifying passage points — negotiated thresholds where competing interpretations were provisionally aligned and circulation was redirected

Two episodes trace this circulation — the dynamics it produces, and technology's agentic role.

Everyday work: the chatbot circulates and reorganizes roles

A consultant introduces the chatbot for service guidance. As it moves from speaker to speaker, its meaning shifts — and with it, whose expertise and priorities matter.



Passage point: automating cancellations reframes whether a human gatekeeper is still needed — reorganizing access to care and professional responsibility.

Institutional conditions: from tool talk to governance

The same quasi-object re-enters the conversation and folds operational (technology as a tool) decision into governance talk with questions of regulation, revenue logic, equity, and resourcing.

Learning & speed	<i>"Soon it will be teachable... we are probably on the threshold of such a transition."</i>
Sector divergence	<i>"The private sector has developed more rapidly... their revenue model is different."</i>
Power & authority	<i>"That power should be here with the organizer... those choices are made in this electronic world."</i>
Fairness / equity	<i>"...is it as unequal as the fact that people who are unable to use digital channels are only offered digital solutions?"</i>
Regulation	<i>"...Finnish healthcare legislation doesn't recognize this. So, there's a legal problem here at the moment..."</i>

Passage point: authority over technology choices settles with "the organizer," turning a technical decision into a governance one.

Two passage points reorganize strategy work

1

From development to decision rights

The conversation shifts from developing the technology itself to who decides how it is used — authority settles with the organizer, not the tool.

2

From channel to governance space

A predefined communication channel becomes a digital contact interface — no longer a conduit, but a space where access, regulation, and resourcing are negotiated.

Circulation was conditioned throughout by institutional constraints — public/private revenue logics, staff capacity, and a reversed “digital divide” where offering only digital channels can itself create inequity.

Organizing the collective, organizing material agency

Theoretical

Our core contribution: material agency happens at the level of interaction — through a Serresian lens, technology is not merely present in talk; it has agency:

1

Collective organizing through interaction

For Serres, the collective — the “quasi-us” — is not given in advance but organized through circulation: material agency is distributed through interaction itself, not held by stable actors.

2

Passage as transformative crossing

Our passage points are not mere checkpoints but a dangerous, transformative “Northwest Passage” where institutional logics are exposed and renegotiated.

3

Beyond static objects — agency, not property

Differentiates the quasi-object from more static interpretations of objects in sociomaterial literature: material agency is not a property technology holds but something organized moment-to-moment through its circulation.

Methodological

Video-recorded, in-situ analysis captures the microtemporal emergence of material agency — circulation, translation, and passage points as they unfold, rather than inferred post hoc.

Critical / practical

Disrupts managerialist narratives of technology as a neutral efficiency tool; offers CMS a material-relational lens, and practitioners a way to host passage points as decision nodes.

Boundaries — and where this travels next

Scope

The analysis attends to interactional dynamics within strategy workshops in a single sectoral setting and does not follow the technology beyond the moment of situated encounter.

Paper must be developed, especially methodologically and developing management insight.

Future directions

- Trace circulation longitudinally across implementation phases
- Compare sectoral ecologies to understand the context of the fluid, circular dynamics of organizing.
- Follow passage points as decision nodes across settings

Reframing: strategy work becomes navigation of material movement — technology does not accompany strategy, it organizes it.

THANK YOU

**Technology does not merely
accompany
strategy — it organizes it.**

**Ville Kivivirta, Nina Lunkka, Anniina Rantakari, and Ville Pietiläinen, 2026: Technology as Quasi-Object:
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