

An ethnographic report of the 8th OAP Workshop

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Introduction

The present report is an attempt to relate my personal experience of the 8th Organizations, Artifacts and Practices (OAP) Workshop, which took place in Amsterdam in June 2018, in a straightforward and lively style. I am a third-year PhD student in social sciences and organizational sociology at the University of Liège, currently completing my thesis on “New Ways of Working” – managerial projects of modernisation that entail spatial, temporal, cultural and technological dimensions. As such, I was delighted to learn that the 8th OAP Workshop would be themed “New Ways of Working: Rematerializing Organizations in the Digital Age”. My promoters and I therefore decided to submit two abstracts for the event – both of which were accepted. A few weeks before the colloquium, the organizers contacted all registered PhD students by email, asking them to be involved in the OAP Workshop through one of three roles: ethnographic reporter, keynote interviewer, or media reporter.

Reading the email, I immediately thought that involving PhD students through such activities was actually a great idea. Some days later, while reflecting on my initial enthusiasm, I think it might actually have stemmed from a combination of factors. I was having a very positive impression of the event: my two papers had been accepted; the overall theme was very close to my own research interest (more than any other scientific manifestation I attended so far); the colloquium was free of charge (which, as a PhD student with a limited operating budget, I really appreciated); furthermore, the organizing team had done a great job so far communicating and sharing details about the event. Ultimately, I think the enthusiasm and the kindness from the organizing teams’ mails is what convinced me to accept to get involved. I immediately leaned towards the role of an ethnographer reporter, which I thought could bring me more than interviewing a keynote (a task which looked rather challenging to me) or taking pictures (which I thought was a bit pointless and not my cup of tea). More than a default choice, however, the ethnographic report was an attractive challenge to me. Practicing English writing never hurts and it could be a way to meet new colleagues and start discussions. The instructions we received were simple: I was told, along with three other PhD fellows, to “tell my own story of mine OAP”. I felt that inspiring, as it meant relatively free, unconstrained writing – devoid of the usual academic restrictions and precautions.

At the same time, it looked to me as if the exercise could turn into a more personal trial – the one of academic colloquiums. Ever since I undertook my PhD, I was always doubtful about the interest of joining such events, even if my experience to this day remains limited – I only went to three other colloquiums so far – and I always kept mixed feelings, between the enthusiasm of communicating about my research and meeting people, and the deception of finding nothing interesting there and wasting time (and money) that could have been better invested somewhere else. Although this is probably a question of personal preference and sensitivity, throughout the years (or the months, rather) I became inclined to believe that academic writing and submission is actually more rich and valuable than presentation and discussion. One question that I could not answer thus far is, “is it really worth gathering so much people and spending so much energy into the organization of such academic events?” As, at a much more modest scale, I am in charge of organizing monthly seminars of our research centre, I have discovered that such an approach is

also slightly hypocritical: there is a tendency to organize seminars for the sake of it. This might not be the place to delve deeper into the debate, but accepting the task of realizing an ethnographic account of my experience at OAP was also, to me, a way to make sense of the event. One could say that, starting with a positive impression of the colloquium, I wanted to commit as much as I could to testify of my own goodwill to play the game.

Day 1, AM: Discovering the event

My account begins on Thursday morning as the day was planned to start with a presentation of one of the three keynote speakers at 9.30 AM. It might be interesting to note that I would probably have skipped this part of the day if I had not agreed to play the role of an ethnographic reporter; paradoxically, I have always had the feeling that keynote speakers' presentations often turn out to be less interesting than workshop sessions. The reason for this, I thought, is that such presentations are usually longer than the standard sessions, while being less interactive. Joining the colloquium one hour later also meant one additional hour of sleep, which is always welcome, especially when you have travelled the day before. So one might say I decided to be present from 9.30 this Thursday morning specifically because of my ethnographic reporter mission.

The day began with a short introduction by one of the organizer – Sytze (I took the liberty, throughout this report, to use first names only, as my story seemed more natural this way) – during which we were informed that 69 abstracts had been retained for the colloquium on a total of 81 proposals. It seemed altogether a lot and few at the same time. As I mainly work with colleagues whose research interests vary substantially from mine, I felt proud to be part of such a community, who surely could be sympathetic towards my fieldwork, my concerns and my struggles. At the same time, I thought that 69 abstracts looked like a drop in the vast ocean of academic publications – and that 69 was, in the end, close to nothing. Sytze, then, also gave some information regarding a special issue that would follow the event. I could not refrain from viewing in his speech an attempt to create and strengthen meaning around the event, to convince the participants that a workshop on *New Ways of Working* was indeed relevant and useful for them at the same time, which I appreciated. As I mentioned earlier, it was never that straightforward to me that such a community was really needed to conduct or produce research.

Then the first keynote speaker, Timon, took the floor, for a talk on “the fetish of connectivity”, and I was confronted with my first dilemma as an ethnographic reporter. I accidentally sat behind a lady in the audience who was, obviously, a colleague of Timon, as she opened a PDF file on her computer with the full text of Timon's intervention. As soon as the presentation began, I was indeed surprised to see that the keynote speaker was reading a text that he had prepared, which I could follow thanks to her colleagues' screen – it would probably have been more difficult without it. For a moment, I was confused: should I, in my ethnographer's role, account for my very first impression of the presentation – the fact that the keynote speaker was literally reading his text just as we were advising third-year bachelor students not to do two days earlier? I remembered that the organizer who invited me to play the role of an ethnographic reporter – Albane was her name – mentioned in her email that our reports would be posted on the Facebook page of the community. Surely, then, refraining myself from mentioning such trivial (and probably not really politically correct) observation should be the best option. However, I suddenly thought that best ethnographers had probably more to win from being honest in their accounts than from trying to format their writing (and thinking). So I decided to translate my surprise through those two lines on my field notebook: “reading notes??”

The presentation, at least what I understood from it, seemed truly interesting. Timon described what he called a “quasi-religion of connectivity” that had achieved moral superiority in our daily lives. He introduced the concept of “digital healthism” made of different kinds of discourses on disconnection. Those discourses resist digital technologies, such as the use of social media or overworking while being connected (like I am doing this Thursday night, transcribing my notes of the day in my hotel room); by doing so, they are a part of the digital culture that they criticize. Timon presented various forms of disconnecting – temporal (delaying, pausing...) and spatial (separating, hiding, disappearing...) I found the ambition of theorizing disconnection very interesting, and I had never heard of similar works before. What I retained was the criticism that was addressed to the actor-network theory (a perspective I frequently refer to in my work): as the ANT states that networks always keep expanding, and that the researcher always needs to be surprised by new actants or new problems, it would not be sufficiently equipped to account for disconnection; that is, for the absence of those new actants and for the absence of connections. Being rather impressed and convinced by Latour’s works, I found this remark most intriguing and interesting. Paradoxically, I thought, the speaker was advocating for disconnection in the midst of an event that was mainly about connecting researchers together.

The session was followed by a question/answer period during which participants were invited to speak up by throwing a “catch box” to each other. The catch box, a small foam device containing a microphone, successfully diverted the public (while gaining the attention of most of the audience). A participant argued that we still needed traditional, non-digital forms of connection to engage into collective action such as union action. Timon later mentioned that there was nowadays a public discourse of disconnection against the ubiquity of technologies: now, you have to work to disconnect; connectivity is taken for granted, which was not the case before. Another participant noted that “we” are the last generation who is able to remember a life without connection – which might be a threat to studying disconnection.

I decided to take some notes of the points that seemed interesting to me. From the start of my ethnographer mission, I had the feeling that my report could take two directions: I could either report on the sessions’ content – on the communication – or of my perceptions of the sessions’ content – on the metacommunication. As I recalled Albane’s wording – “tell your own story of your OAP”, I decided that the latter was more relevant – and more in line with what I wanted to write anyway. Summarizing the keynote speaker speech looked rather pointless to me, especially since the full text of his intervention was already available in a digitalized file somewhere.

One additional observation came to my mind during this first presentation. I realized, not for the first time, that I, as a third-year PhD student, was terribly equipped to take part to the discussion that followed Timon’s speech. Research, from my modest opinion, tends to rely on two key principles (among others) that are carefulness and humility. While accounting for events, a researcher should be careful not to distort his material (theoretical and/or empirical) and should refrain as much as possible from adding meaning or interpreting this material. This affirmation, which is probably controversial, is according to me at the heart of the “ethos” of a researcher. I might have adopted this line of conduct after reading Callon & Latour works, including Latour’s famous book “Reassembling the social” (2005). At any rate, I have always had the feeling that what made a good researcher was his ability to provide “faithful” accounts of events, cleverly and creatively articulated with appropriate and enlightening analytical frameworks. In that perspective, and although this is probably stated in a somehow naïve way, I have always believed a researcher should refrain from making statements on events he does not know about (carefulness) and be aware of the topics he is an expert of, while recognizing his ignorance on other subjects (humility).

Interestingly, this already gave rise to interesting debates we had with senior researchers of our faculty (of social sciences). We once created a series of interdisciplinary seminars around the topic “research and

politics”, which was created by senior researchers to bring together academics and researchers of the five research centres that are part of the faculty. Academics were convinced that every researcher could have something to say on the matter, as every research was in one way or another related to politics. PhD participation, however, turned out to be very low. It appeared that most PhD students did not identify their work with the thematic, and were reluctant to communicate or discuss presentations on topics that they estimated too far away from their own research expertise. Some academics saw in this attitude a lack of interest or engagement, and while it might have been partly true, I had the feeling that it dissimulated a wider divergence of opinions. As PhD students, we are progressively trained to master a specific research topic, while simultaneously being invited to remain careful and humble in doing so; therefore, we tend to be reluctant to expose ourselves by taking part to discussions on matters that we do not fully understand and master.

This is what came to my mind as the Q&A session of the first keynote speaker was going on: I found myself incapable of coming up with a question that would be of any interest for the audience. The session eventually ended and there came the first break of the day. I found my colleague Giseline (we came from the same research centre) as well as two other colleagues from the University of Louvain; we gathered for a while, speaking French – which at the time feels reassuring and great, but, I realized, may deter non-French speakers to join you and meet. After the short break, the first wave of workshops began: workshops lasted for one hour and a quarter and entailed fifteen presentations split into five tracks, each track hence including three presentations. Choosing a track is not always easy. You might be interested in several presentations which are not always gathered in a single track, or you might not be interested in any presentation at all. If you fail to choose adequately, you run the risk of losing one hour of your day in listening to subjects that you are not interested in; conversely, it is also possible to make great discoveries by choosing the right track. I realized – a bit too late though – that the organizers had sent us the abstracts from all the sessions, and that, by reading them, I could have had a good picture of what the sessions would be like. After some hesitation, I decided to join Track 3 – the titles of the presentations seemed to be the closest to my research interests.

The first presentation was about ICT, organizational space and disconnection. The presenter, Anouk, made a direct link between disconnection and the need for the people to focus. Space, as he explained, expands and collapses at the same time when people engage into activities involving a screen. Their world is expanding through the screen, while being limited to this very same screen. Space, then, becomes condensed on a single point: the screen. Someone in the audience noted that this phenomena was not quite new, as people lived the same kind of experience when they were reading books or newspapers. Anouk answered that those experience were continuous, whereas the digital was designed in a much more disruptive way, making them different. He stated that “*technologies had a bigger impact on your mind than books*”. I wondered how this could really be scientifically measured and claimed, and to what extent such statement was ideological.

The time ran out and the presentation was over. Time is always an interesting thing in such events. As the timing of the day is rigorously framed (in the case of OAP, presentations were supposed to last 15 minutes, and discussions 10 minutes), it often appears as a ruthless constraint that all participants have to respect. The workshop’s chair embodies those time constraints, even if most presenters are very well aware of them and can regulate themselves in most cases. If they exceed the 15 minutes allowed to their presentation, they lose time for feedback and questions. Fifteen minutes is a very short timing to summarize a paper, an ongoing research, or even a research project in all its complexity. Conversely, fifteen minutes may also turn out to be a very long period of time if you do not feel interested by the presenter. After all, we are assessing a risk there, the one that the audience loses interest in the presentations, and eventually, in the event itself. So I would guess fifteen minutes is, nowadays, a common compromise between scientific interest and the

risk of participants' boredom. Anyway, time did not turn out to be very problematic during the event, as I thought it was very well managed from the beginning to the end – which had not been my experience at other colloquiums, in which for example the last presenter of a workshop would only have ten minutes or so remaining to present his works as the previous presenter had taken too much time. I was impressed, at OAP, by the seemingly tacit and collective understanding of all participants that respecting the established the schedule was important.

The second presentation was about how do physical environments and digital tools merge in software development tools and practices. Although the presenter spoke very fast, the content seemed rather interesting and original. At some point, he wanted to show a video, but could not find a way to use the audio system of the room. This reminded me of some of our university teachers who always had issues displaying their Powerpoint presentation on the screen. As students, we used to ask ourselves how came that our erudite teachers, despite all their knowledge, were unable to understand something as simple as a straight connection between a laptop and a data projector. I believe that not being able to understand and use an IT system at a basic level makes you lose some credibility, especially when you are studying such systems in your research. Do we, as social scientists, lack technical understanding of those systems? I would definitely think that it is the case.

An interesting question was raised by the audience once the presentation was over. The presenter stated that a series of interaction – collaboration, private interaction for instance – were performed both in digitalized and physical workspaces, and that the work of the IT specialists combined assemblages of physical and digital elements. Someone said that the computer was nothing more than an augmented paper machine, and asked if we could not ease the opposition between digital paper and IT systems. To this, the presenter said, *"I totally agree with you"*. I was momentarily confused by the answer. Is research really about agreeing? I thought that either the presenter has sufficient data or knowledge to state that it is indeed the case, and that computers are augmented paper machines, in what case he can answer, "I have data that prove your case"; or he does not, and he should recognize his lack of knowledge by saying, "I do not know". Agreeing, however, seems to refer to an arbitrary value judgment that does not reflect the quality of the presenter's works.

The third presentation, on New Ways of Working, was made by Bertrand, a PhD student from Switzerland. Interestingly, I had met his supervisor some weeks ago – my own supervisor and him were working together on some research projects. Bertrand said that he looked at NWoW as organization change, and used sensemaking and Greimas actantial model to account for what he witnessed in his case studies. I found the approach very familiar – processing empirical data through an analytical framework. At the end of the presentation, which I followed with great interest, someone in the audience warned Bertrand that sensemaking was not researched anymore, and that higher journals did not really value contributions based on sensemaking approaches. I wondered how came those journals were attributed intentions and opinions, and how their agenda was set up. To me – but I believe many PhD students feel the same – the expectations of high journals (or rather, of editors and reviewers of high journals) have always been mysterious and unclear. The first workshop of the day ended and the lunch time began; Giseline, Bertrand and I went for a lunch in the university restaurant.

Day 1, PM: Dosing the criticism

The event resumed in the afternoon with a second keynote speaker, James, who talked about the disappearance of work. The presentation was, from my point of view, difficult to follow and rather confusing. James claimed that we currently worked ourselves to death, that there were enough jobs but

that those jobs did not pay enough, that income inequality had not changed and was getting worse. This sounded to me like very questionable statements, and he did not illustrate its points with research results. If we, PhD students, had come up with such arguments in our work, we would have been told to go back to the field to find tangible evidence to back up our claims. James further stated that producing information was a worthless labour, as information, nowadays, is free. I wondered if the whole audience – scientists, academics who basically do nothing more than producing or manipulating information – felt worthless.

Another reason which made it hard for me to follow the keynote speaker was his philosophical background. As he kept talking about “Hegelian perspective”, “Kantian arguments”, and many more that I forgot or was not sure I could spell right, I realized I was totally ignorant about philosophy. Our training as sociologists only included a minor philosophy course in our first year of study. I believe, however, that both disciplines were more closely related by the past, in a way that older generations of sociologists are more at ease with such authors and debates than I am. It is not easy to publicly acknowledge in such an event that you do not understand what the presenter is saying. Interestingly, once the presentation was over, Sytze cleverly phrased a question, starting with: “Maybe my intellectual skills are limited, but you could explain to me (...)” The audience laughed, and I saw in that scene a collective relief – we were not the only ones to not understand anything all along.

Once the session was over, another round of workshops began. I opted once again for the Track 3 on New Ways of Working in academia, as one of my case study is a university department which is currently implementing New Ways of Working. The first presentation was made by Minou and Rianne, who used a quantitative design to account for the ways location choices in activity-based environments were made for academics. Their conclusion was that personal characteristics had a strong effect on such choices. Although the presentation was very clear and close to my research interests, I felt a little uncomfortable. In my sense, an empirical study of a phenomenon should ideally depart from the field actors’ perspectives and points of view, as they are knowledgeable agents who know, better than the researcher, what they are doing, experiencing and living. However, in such a quantitative perspective, the relevant categories of analysis are defined and coded *a priori*, in ways that are not always made clear. I wondered, then, what was exactly the reality described through their study: was it effectively the actors’ reality (if seizing this is really possible) or an artificial reality reconstructed by the researchers?

Dick, the second presenter, was very clear and pleasant to follow. He explained the process of implementing New Ways of Working at the University of Amsterdam, with a comparison between two faculties. A survey had been made among the people, and revealed a rather strong dissatisfaction towards the new working environment. This time, I had many questions in mind, and could only raise a few during the discussion. Eventually, Bernadette did a similar presentation on the experience of The Hague University with New Ways of Working. Her conclusions were also far from rejoicing, as it appeared some people in her case were even calling the new workplace the “cemetery”. Her presentation was easy to relate to the previous one. Globally speaking, I appreciated the consistency of the tracks – I could feel the interest of putting the three presentations together, and I thought there had been a careful work of planning and thinking ahead of the event.

Something interesting occurred in the final discussion of this workshop. As Bernadette finished her presentation, someone asked the permission to speak. It was Harry, the architect who had lead the NWoW project at The Hague University. He wondered how came that educated academics, who “*had the knowledge*”, had “*not thought about bringing in the process the people with this knowledge?*” His intervention was rather critical (although very respectful). As an observer, I found it quite funny and immensely interesting, but I could not help wondering how tense the situation could potentially be: sure,

Harry and Bernadette apparently knew each other well very well, but what was at stake in the discussion seemed partly to be the responsibility of the project's failures.

I believe there is a general consensus in most colloquiums around "benevolence" or scientific sympathy, a shared assumption that presentations should not be welcomed by unnecessary shaming or harsh reactions. The reason for this might be quite simple: no one would appreciate to be humiliated in front of an audience of peers; therefore, everyone (with some exceptions, of course) generally refrain from being too critical towards the presenters. We cannot deny that this benevolence is usually welcomed by most researchers (especially my fellow PhD students), as it prevents negative experiences due to harsh feedback and potentials conflicts. If you define a colloquium as being "benevolent", your colleagues usually understand that you had a positive experience. On the other hand, it also promotes the appearance of a shared hypocrisy climate – have you never had the feeling that, even if no one was speaking against you, no one was actually convinced by your presentation neither? – as well as a lack of confrontation and animated debates¹. One could wonder, then, if such a benevolence climate could in fact harm the scientific value of colloquiums. Another way to put it is, if, as a researcher, you are looking for serious feedback on your work, you will not likely go to colloquiums. If we follow this line of reasoning, such events would not really be places of serious and passionate debates anymore (if this was ever the case); rather, they would mainly serve as informative and networking spaces. To go back to the workshop, what was interesting was that the architect did not seem aware of this implicit "benevolence" rule – or if he was, he decided to commit to a more passionate debate nonetheless, which got everyone's attention immediately. Unfortunately, the time ran out, and the chair of the workshop invited the participants to take a break.

The last event of the day was a panel session on higher education. Five panellists were supposed to take the crowd's questions. I must say I felt rather drowsy and tired at this time of the day; furthermore, I thought that the space we were in – a large auditorium, compared to the small convivial rooms we had for the workshop – did not especially favoured participation and interaction. It also looked to me like the panel lacked a general direction. The panellists successively spoke of their own personal experiences, which were most of the time interesting of course, but without a clear red line. I found the exercise of co-constructing a coherent discussion with the panel and the crowd rather difficult. After the panel, we were supposed to relocate to attend the conference dinner. Instead, I took the decision to go back to my hotel to prepare my two presentations for the following day and to take some rest. I always find myself in a dilemma when faced with such social events; should I run the risk of losing two hours in my evening (and hence, most likely, two hours of sleep) or to miss a dinner which might be the ideal place to meet new colleagues or interact with peers? As I decided that I had had enough for one day, I opted for the second option and left this first day of OAP with a deep feeling of satisfaction, as the workshops sessions had been closely related to my own research interests.

Day 2, AM: Getting involved

For me, whereas Thursday was about passive observation and description, Friday was supposed to be the day of participation and involvement. Indeed, one of my presentation was scheduled in the first workshop session, and the other was planned for the afternoon. The first presentation I had to give was the result of a collaborative work with my colleagues, Giseline and Sophie, who attended the event. The second

¹ In some colloquiums I attended to in the past, one way to escape this benevolent attitude was to clearly state that you were a PhD student: some participants in the audience felt like they were then entitled to give you more directive and critical advice as if you were their own PhD students. From what I saw, it was not the case at the OAP colloquium.

presentation, which I was more familiar with, reflected my thesis interests and resulted from a paper I had developed in the previous months. As I prepared both presentations the day before, what I had to say was rather clear to me and I did not feel particularly stressed or anxious at the idea of speaking.

The first workshop began at 9.30 AM. I was very careful to the first two presentations: as I realized, you might feel more involved and aware in a session in which you are a speaker. The first presentation, given by Karen, was about the significance of Lefebvre's works for organization studies. I followed it with great interest as I was not especially familiar with Lefebvre. In a second presentation, Andrea offered a framework for analysing tensions in new workspaces. Again, I paid close attention to the presentation, as analysing tensions in new workspaces was precisely what I was doing empirically. I appreciated her interest for paradoxes, latent and salient tensions between conceived, perceived and lived space; however, I found the framework in itself rather intricate and not backed up by empirical evidence. So, despite my initial interest and my strong belief that we shared a lot in terms of research interest, I could not come up with a question that would help me understand how I could use her framework in my own works.

I also began to feel a little nervous as our paper was scheduled immediately after. My colleagues and I had decided the day before that I would do the presentation and that they would be available for answering questions – their argument being that presentations involving multiple speakers or co-authors always felt a little awkward. I agreed immediately: I had no issue with taking on the whole presentation, as I was the one who made the PowerPoint file anyway. As a matter of fact, my nervousness did not stem from the anxiety of speaking in front of an audience; rather, it came from my scepticism towards the robustness of our research paper. While I was preparing the presentation and mentally practicing it on my way to the colloquium, I realized our paper had several flaws in its design, and I thought those flaws would not escape a careful examination. For instance, whereas we claimed to use sensemaking (see Weick, 1995) as a theoretical framework, we ultimately decided not to rely on it in our analysis as we lacked sufficient empirical data to do so. A close review of our paper, or even an attentive follow-up of our presentation, would reveal that we announced a theory that we later on did not exploit fully – an issue that would for sure be brought up by a critical audience.

All the painful discussions and debates that I had foreseen, however, did not happen. We received a lot of questions – all of them very polite, most of them interesting – which left me with a feeling of relief. I retained two potential contributions for our paper. Our aim was to confront discursive conceptions of space in NWoW projects (in a nutshell, supposedly fluid and activity-based) and the actual lived spaces (which, based on our observations, were far from being “fluid”). Based on our empirical observations, we described a series of tensions emerging between both conceptions of space. Someone from the audience asked how those tensions would evolve through time, and eventually stabilize, which was an interesting point since we did not take a processual view in our paper. Someone else came back on the nature of the workers' operational constraints. What if someone has to be available for the phone all day long? How can he ever make use of the “quiet zones” of the building (in which you cannot use your phone), and fulfil the activity-based work conception of the NWoW promoters? In my point of view, those so-called “constraints” were socially constructed by the actors themselves, who could use them strategically; a participant, however, believed that those constraints were givens that could hardly be negotiated. Following an interesting discussion, we realized we had to better support and explain the underlying assumptions of our paper.

We then had a short break, during which someone who heard about my presentation came to see me to advise me reading a paper. Papers, I thought at this point, are a bit like researchers' music. As with music, there are various genres and currents, coming from different ages and times. Papers, like music, might inspire and motivate those who read them. Both papers and music are commonly used as icebreakers, as the first are certainly a way to start a conversation in colloquiums, whereas you might meet new people by

having shared musical tastes. Whenever someone advises you to read a paper, you react exactly as if this person had told you to check a musical reference that she likes: you listen politely, mentally assess whether it might be of some interest to you, and either forget it some hours later or write a quick note wherever you can in the hope of remembering to check it after the colloquium. I remain rather sceptical towards the paper-suggestion practice, and I would be curious to know how many suggested papers are actually followed and read. Just as suggesting a track you enjoyed to someone whom you have no clear idea of music tastes, advising a peer to read a paper when you have at best a vague idea of his research interests seems a questionable strategy. Yet, as I was involved in the discussion, I thought that there could be a chance that the paper might be of some use – so I noted the references anyway.

After the break, we moved on to another session of workshops, again organized around three presentations. I once again opted for the Track 3. Marie, the first presenter, discussed the visualisation of hot-desking and the rise of the trend of flexible offices. I believe she lost a part of her audience by taking time reminding us what hot desking meant – when you find yourself presenting on the second day of a scientific colloquium on *New Ways of Working*, you might not want to explain in detail what a “locker” is or what “flexible workplace” entails. I had thought, earlier in the morning, that I would have to adapt my second presentation as well, as it contained a slide on how we defined NWoW; participants, at this point, had most likely heard dozens of definition of NWoW and flexible spaces already. That being said, I really liked Marie’s methodology – she did a visual ethnography to understand how space was lived and understood in a hot-desking environment, and she received a lot of interest and questions from the audience on the way she had proceeded.

The second presenter, Melanie, gave an inspiring talk on the issue of control while implementing NWoW in public bureaucracies. She seemed seriously concerned about the anonymity of her case, asking the audience if anyone was from the same country, and carefully limiting the empirical elements allowing for the identification on the company she studied. I thought that, while case anonymity was a rule of thumb in research, it should probably not be overemphasized. After all, the risk that someone in the audience could guess the identity of the company was probably low, and the subsequent risk that this would affect the research process in a negative way was still much lower. Nevertheless, I was highly interested in the topic, as I had taken part in another colloquium the year before on the issues of control and panopticism in NWoW environments. I did ask her several questions after her presentation. I had the feeling that participating to the debates was easier now that I had presented my own research – as if I was now properly introduced to the other researchers and academics.

The third presentation, given by Blandine and Wim, was original to say the least. They took a playful perspective by introducing to the audience a game that they had been developing and using for several years. In the game, the participants had to answer questions by selecting one of the four suggested answers, before defending their answer and debating together. I found the exercise very pleasant, and it seemed like most of the audience liked it as well. Academic colloquiums should maybe rely more on such playful moments, as they trigger cheerfulness, bring people together, and allow for a momentary intellectual respite and amusement. What was more difficult for me was to admit that the presenters were using the game as a scientific method of data collection – that is, they collected people answers to their questions and used them to build statistics. As we tried the game, I realized I was participating on a recreational mode, not being serious about my answers; could the risk of having people “playing the game” in a literal sense skew the statistics? On a side note, in the break following the session, I discussed with a participant who told me that he had experienced the aforementioned game in a real-case situation and that the game had not worked at all and was not really worth anything.

Day 2, PM: A question of atmosphere

After the lunch break – which I took outside in the company of Bertrand, the Swiss PhD student I had met the day before, and Ayomikun, a researcher from London – the third and last keynote speaker of the event gave a talk on driverless cars and the social deficit of the technology. Despite my initial interest for the topic, I missed most of what the talk was about, for three reasons. One, I was growing tired – the event had been intense – and I had the feeling that the other participants began to feel this way as well. Second, the keynote was reading her notes all along, speaking too fast and not really trying to be interactive. The following discussion also seemed a bit disjointed. I once again thought that the auditorium setting was much less favourable to discussions than the smaller, friendlier rooms used for the workshops. Third, I did not always agree with what I understood. As she deplored the limited influence of sociology on the field of social robotics and in the programming of artificial intelligence, I could not help wondering if the reversal was true, that is, if she as a sociologist was integrating the knowledge of robotics in her works, and if she had a good understanding and mastery of programming languages and AI systems. I did not dare to raise the question. Eventually, I must admit I found the presentation less interesting than the morning workshops.

In colloquiums, there is quite often the presumption that all participants are avidly interested in everything. Of course, everyone knows that it is illusory. Participants have limited cognitive capabilities, so that they cannot follow all the sessions with the same degree of attention. They might decide to do something else that they believe is more interesting, such as answering emails or reading papers (a colleague of mine told me that the best place to read papers was in colloquiums, because you could not do anything if you were feeling bored; even if I did not read a single paper during the OAP Workshop, I am inclined to believe that it is an excellent advice). Finally, people might simply not been interested in the presentations. However, it seems socially unwelcome to openly show your boredom: chatting with a colleague during a talk, falling asleep, leaving the room prematurely, or even staring at the ceiling, are all examples of behaviours that might be understood as a lack of interest and interpreted as impolite or inadequate. Expressing boredom, then, is frowned upon in colloquiums; conversely, feigning interest is a common, polite strategy.

As we began the last workshop of the day, I had the feeling that the atmosphere was slowly declining. The room was emptier than ever and the audience seemed tired. I was the first presenter, and I had to discuss a paper I knew very well, as I had worked on it intensively for the last few months. The research, however, was difficult to summarize in fifteen minutes, and I had to omit many details to respect the time limits. I was left with a slight sensation of frustration: I could not fully reproduce the paper in its complexity, and I had the feeling that I had lost most of the audience. A few participants asked questions though, some looking genuinely interested, others mildly polite. I also had the feeling that we, in fact, were consistently discussing the same subjects for two days in a row. While I felt somewhat overloaded with NWoW-related topics, I did appreciate the responsiveness of the audience and the exchange that we had after the presentation.

The second presentation, given by Dubravka, aimed to understand the emergence of *New Ways of Working*. To the extent that my own paper had looked into the legitimation process of the same phenomenon, we were interested in similar questions. As I mentioned before, the tracks were organized in a highly consistent fashion, and the presentations clearly related to each other. Dubravka had examined a change process similar to mine, while using a different way to account for it, so that her story was truly interesting to me. Finally, Marie, the last presenter, gave us an overview of her research thesis which was based on a Lefebvrian approach of different types of offices. She argued that an NWoW project, in the case she studied, had separated two categories of workers who were used to work together, hence resulting in a failure. Her presentation, at least for me, concluded the day and the colloquium: even though a final panel and a social

event in the evening were planned, I had to leave straight after the last workshop of the day due to my train reservation.

Conclusion

Writing this conclusion a few days later, I keep in mind a very positive impression of the 8th OAP Workshop. I would say that the event had numerous key strengths that should be mentioned. First, although totally free, it was very well organized, both in advance (the communication to participants was clear, numerous and friendly, and the papers' proceedings were made available prior to the event) and on the spot (the schedule was rigourously respected throughout the event). Second, the organizing committee managed to offer a consistent workshop around *New Ways of Working*, hence gathering researchers and academics who share similar interests. Third, I had an agreeable experience meeting new people and hearing from their research. I especially appreciated, after being a PhD for two years and a half, to finally be able to meet peers working on NWoW.

Yet if I return to my introductory question – that is, are academic colloquiums really worth it? – I do not think I have entirely made up my mind. While the event was undoubtedly pleasant and engaging, I am still not entirely convinced on how it might serve my research in practical terms. Surely, the comments and questions I received during my presentations will be of little use for pursuing the papers' writing. Despite having met and heard several people researching the same objects, I did not find immediate ways to collaborate and build something with them (such as starting a paper together for instance). Perhaps my expectations for colloquiums in general are too high; or perhaps I still need more experience of such events before taking a clear position.

To conclude, I must admit that, if the 8th OAP Workshop turned out to be a great experience, it was also due to the ethnographer's role that I was offered to endorse. As I was determined to take it seriously, I was careful to follow and keep record of the debates throughout the event. Furthermore, reflecting on my own experience in the present report, I realize the value of having written such an ethnographic exercise. The attitude of detachment, the rigorous consignment and treatment of empirical experience, and the structuration of thoughts through writing, are key values at the heart of research that may be practised and trained by producing such a report. Although the ethnographic exercise is certainly not that easy, I would without doubt recommend to any PhD student to at least try it once, as it brings obvious benefits and contributes to reinforce the value and interest of attending colloquiums.