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Boundary Technologies and the Segmentation of Trust

Acts of distrust in everyday life

Many people have fixed morning routines. They shower, eat breakfast, read the newspaper, and brush their teeth; they may also listen to the radio. In general, people are creatures of habit, and by and large every person has his/her own routines. Some people carry out these routines meticulously and in a specific order; others cannot be bothered.

People are different, and so are routines. Some routines can simply be ignored; others are carried out with great determination. A simple sociological test on the rigidity of routines can be done by observing the reactions when routines are not executed in their usual order. A somewhat stale taste in your mouth as you make your way to the train is a reminder of sloppy brushing but, with a shrug of your shoulders, you still continue to the train. You could buy some chewing gum at a newspaper stand, or perhaps you have a toothbrush at your office. Even a methodical person can be careless when it comes to routines.

However, there are some routines that even the most careless person always executes. Such routines cause the stressed-out morning commuter to go back home and check whether they have been carried out. Generally this type of routine has to do with the possibility of putting one’s life in danger. Did I check to see that the stove was turned off? Did I unplug the iron? Although other routines are not associated with danger in the same way, they still may cause people to return home. The routine of locking the door belongs in this category.
In spite of recommendations and professional advice, people can still be careless when it comes to their morning routines. Many people do not brush their teeth thoroughly despite their dentist’s recommendations; others skip breakfast despite the dietitian’s “decree” about the importance of starting their day off with a good breakfast. Yet few people are careless when it comes to locking their door. This routine is a form of rite that we all carry out every day, and at night we lock ourselves in. The imperative of this routine is so strong that many people seem unable to trust themselves to remember to lock the door each time they leave the house. It is not unusual for many people to turn to technology to make sure that they have locked the door, using one mechanism to close the door and another to lock it automatically. The imperative to lock the door appears to be so strong that some people would rather run the risk of being locked out than forget to lock the door behind them. Other mechanisms are more sophisticated. One such mechanism is a special kind of key; it is used in Berlin neighborhoods and has raised a number of issues for Bruno Latour (1992, 2000). The key is constructed in such a way that the owner of the key only knows that the door is locked once he holds the key in his hand. Evidently the key cannot be removed from the keyhole if the door is not locked; this applies irrespective of whether one is locked inside or outside.

The Berlin key is special for another reason: it ensures that the door is locked whether the homeowner is at home or not. In this way the key reveals the two basic functions of all keys: they lock in resources when one is not at home, and they lock out other people when one is at home. Thus the key materializes two social dichotomies, drawing a dividing line between guarded and unguarded resources as well as between inhabitants and strangers (Figure 2.1).

People guard their keys very carefully, and almost all keys have a hole that makes it possible to put the key on a key ring, place it on a chain to be worn around the neck or put it in a bundle with other keys. To part with one’s keys or leave them on a table is considered a sign of bad luck in some cultures, and many people, including the author of this text, further “safeguard” their keys by fastening them at the waist. On the whole the use of keys is an act of distrust, and fastening keys at the waist is another way of demonstrating both the importance of keys and the multifaceted nature of this distrust. First of all, the very use of keys indicates a distrust of others.