Chapter 8

The Everyday Practice of Information: Tales from the Field

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This chapter discusses the nature of information, the way it appears in everyday life. However, the way information is presented and discussed in this chapter is also a little unconventional in that it uses rather a large amount of interview and other document transcripts (in Times italic font). The interview texts are largely unedited because I want to retain some of the flavour of the conversations that took place. Moreover, the limits of a conventional conference chapter are pushed even further because the text is also littered with comments from several other voices (represented in a sans serif font). Doing so allows a degree of reflexivity, albeit in the limited format of a conference paper, where we can explore things contained within the text that directly relate to the topic (Woolgar & Ashmore, 1991).

Commentator A: I hope he knows what he is doing! Going too far beyond the bounds of convention may mean that we never see the light of day as information about information at all.

INTRODUCTION

Philip Agre finished the first paragraph of his paper on the future of information by saying, “The concept of information, then carries a certain connotation of neutrality—it is homogeneous and noncontroversial.” He then went on to add “The
reality, of course, is more complicated.” In this chapter, I intend to look at some of the ways information manifests itself in reality. Why do I do this? Well there are many reasons. Firstly, I am an Information Systems professional and I want to know and possibly understand something about the nature of this thing “Information” that as a professional I deal with. Secondly, I feel that an exploration and I really intend it to be an exploration of the type I am about to take you, the reader of this chapter, through, will reveal a multiplicity of facets that enhance our understanding of the people and things we deal with in day-to-day activities. Thirdly, like Agre, I think that reality is complicated and the nature of the real-life of information is complicated and it may prove to be an interesting exercise to unravel some of this complicated web.

Have you noticed the way I left the Agre quote unreferenced? I did this deliberately. I supplied you with incomplete information. In fact, at this point you just have to take my word for it that a person Philip Agre did write such a paper which contains the sentences I quoted above. Information can be incomplete and unverifiable. It could also be false, disinformation or deceiving. That is where an illusion is created that brings advantage to the perpetrator (Hutchinson, 2000, pp. 88-91). But, of course, like most professionals I try to be ethical, so you will find a reference to the Agre paper I used in the references. This, however, reveals another side of the nature of information. The paper I quoted from specifically asks that people not quote from this version because “This article appeared in Information Technology and Libraries 14(4), 1995, pages 225-230” and this version that I obtained from the web “differs slightly from the printed version” (Agre, n.d.). So what have I done here? Have I been unethical by ignoring the author’s request? Maybe, maybe not. I did it so I could raise several issues. It gave me a chance to highlight the incompleteness of some information. We can reflect on the ethics of going against the authors wishes. It sensitises us to issues of information veracity and it also shows that texts can exist in different forms and versions.

“So what?” I hear you ask. There is little new in all this. It has been written about before (Cooke, 1999; Moravec, 1988; Myburgh, n.d.; Poster, 1995; Rhyno, n.d.; Roszak, 1986; Stafford, 1997; Sveiby, 1998). Well, yes it has, but I hope what I am about to do will make you think anew about these and other issues. Before continuing I should say something about the method of presentation of this paper, this text, this information if you like.

This chapter draws heavily on interviews and other materials I have collected whilst researching the internet and libraries, principally from the State Library of Victoria (SLV) and VICNET (the internet information provision and access service established by the SLV). Where necessary, I have supplemented it with mate-