Chapter XVII

Web Management and Usage: A Critical Social Perspective

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INTRODUCTION

This chapter seeks to apply learning from the fields of social theory and information systems to the specific context of the Internet. Key to this understanding is the extent to which the scope of information systems (IS) analysis is often seen to be problematic: IS “problems” are frequently “solved” by redefining organizational and human issues in technical terms, and developing the necessary technical solution. Studies on which this chapter are based have raised significant questions regarding such approaches, exposing many IS developments as not susceptible to a technical solution, but exhibiting complexities stemming from high levels of human activity. Arguably, such findings are of particular importance in Web development and management, depending as it does on the understanding and commitment of users who are often remote from and external to the organization. A clue to how such complex, human-centered issues may be dealt with is to be found in the scoping of these studies which, in systems terms, implies a need to assess the system boundary. Within this chapter an approach to such boundary setting is described, together with the way in which this may be used to inform choice of intervention strategy.

These approaches are then applied to the specific problem of Web management. The scope of the problem context is discussed, and an approach to determining how to progress Web development, having full regard for issues informed from our knowledge of social interaction, is outlined. An intervention framework is recommended which takes account of these social issues.

Finally, conclusions are drawn, and recommendations as to possible future directions are discussed.

Specifically, the objectives of this chapter are:

• To critically review both technology-based and human-centered approaches to information systems, and from this to situate IS and, by inference, Web design, implementation and management, as a domain best informed by social theory.
• From this background, to “scope” Web intervention and propose potential intervention strategies.
• Having regard to these findings, propose future directions for Web management, and potential implementation and management guidelines.

BACKGROUND: TECHNOLOGY-BASED AND HUMAN-CENTERED APPROACHES TO INFORMATION SYSTEMS

The Technology-Based Approach

It has been argued that the design and development of information systems (IS) has been traditionally dominated by technical, problem-solving approaches, leading to tensions when the system to be developed is more user-based. The need for discovering the requirements of users seems not to be disputed by information systems developers, but is typically achieved by including a user analysis stage within an existing problem-solving approach. This approach, inherited from computer systems development, relies primarily on the systems development life cycle (Figure 1).

The systems development life cycle is a stagewise or waterfall method, whereby each stage is undertaken in a linear sequence, and in principle requires the completion of one stage before the next is commenced. So, for example, work on system design would not be authorized until the system specification was written and approved. User requirements specification fits uncomfortably into this process, since such requirements are seldom fixed, but change over the life of a project.