Chapter 1

A Systems Theory of Organizational Information

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ABSTRACT

Standing on both the Peircean pragmatism semiotics and the Churchmanian systems thinking, this chapter is an empirically grounded conceptualization of the phenomena of organizational information in terms of the nature and the formulation process of information in organizations. By the author’s systemic conception, organizational information would be a unity that comprises six nonexclusive aspects: structure, function, process, context, time, and epistemology. From the relational perspective, organizational information would manifest itself as a dynamically triadic process that comprises three states of mind (i.e., surprise, doubt, and belief) and three human activities (i.e., experience, abduction, and inquiry). The author’s system of organizational information introduces a foundational framework for both information and organization domains, which offers that information and organization constitute each other. The author also posits that the model of organizational information would imply an information paradigm for and hence a theory native to the information systems and knowledge management field.

INTRODUCTION

The influential management guru Drucker (1999) reminded us that the biggest challenge to the contemporary age is the very information, which an executive needs for his/her specific knowledge work. It was warned that the key point may be the
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own way the knowledge worker works on data to formulate his/her information that, emphatically, needs to be specified contextually.

Given contemporary organizations as information-bond systems (Gharajedaghi 2011), information has been the central object in several information related fields, including information systems (IS), knowledge management (KM), and management science (Mingers 2006), to name a few. Unfortunately, although knowledge of the nature of information was non-trivial, there was still no agreement on what information is (Mingers 2006) and it is further acknowledged that IS field is lacking of an information paradigm (McKinney and Yoos 2010).

Several studies have recently attempted to construct conceptual models of information. For example, Mingers (2006) proposed a comprehensive theory of semantic and pragmatic information, in which information, an object of information system, is associated closely with meaning, an object of human cognition. Despite those contributions, the extant studies have neither modeled completely the nature of organizational information nor developed satisfactorily the formulation process of organizational information. First, there exist several contradictory views with regard specifically to the information and knowledge hierarchy (e.g. Tuomi 1999). For example, most researchers simply take one sort of hierarchy either conventional or reversed (see e.g. Ackoff 1989). But few contextually recognize the value of both hierarchies (e.g. Bach and Belardo 2003), or suggest a conception that could be emerged beyond the two hierarchies (e.g. Stenmark 2002). Second, the contradictory views in the information and knowledge hierarchy could be in turn caused by a lack of a satisfactory distinction among the notions of information, knowledge, and data. This shortcoming has not resolved yet in the literature, although it has been long time (Gourlay 2006), and considerable to the body of knowledge of IS and KM in particular (Mingers 2008). More fundamentally, Mingers (2008) emphasized that it was just the weakness of all approaches to the definitions of information and knowledge as well. Third, the formulation process of organizational information or knowledge in almost extant studies suffers from ill theoretical (i.e. logical, psychological, and sociological) foundations because the underlying notions (e.g. tacit knowledge) are not well defined conceptually. For example, Nonaka’s (1994) classic model of organizational knowledge creation, which has ever achieved the paradigmatic status since the mid-1990’s (Gourlay 2006), has been criticized as “seriously incomplete and selectively blind” (Zhu 2006, p.109), or as cracked in its conceptual framework of knowledge conversion process (Gourlay 2006). Additionally, Nonaka’s model could hardly explain how to generate new ideas and how to maintain collaborative work (Bereiter 2002), which are inherently crucial to knowledge creation in general and under the community view of knowledge in specific. Fourth, the formulation process is inadequate because the process is developed onto several underlying concepts taken for granted, or the entity-centered view is mostly assumed and it
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