ABSTRACT

This chapter discusses the use of media in knowledge-intensive organizations. Media is defined here as the integration of technologies, practices, and institutions serving to record, inscribe and circulate speech, writing, and images. The presence of media in organized activities remains relatively unexplored, even though various media “enframe” the life-world of the organization. New media do not only constitute assemblages of integrated technologies and tools (e.g. the telephone, the computer, pens and pencils) which are used en route in day-to-day work, they also gradually break down the line of demarcation between inside and outside, between embodied and technological matter.

INTRODUCTION

The concept of knowledge has from the outset been of central interest within philosophy and social theory. Plato addressed the nature of knowledge in some of his dialogues (e.g. Theaetetus, Protagoras, and Meno) but failed to establish a clear and unambiguous line of demarcation between knowledge and non-knowledge. In contemporary times, the sociologist Karl Mannheim (1936) instituted what the called “sociology of knowledge” in the field of academic sociology, a tradition that Robert Merton (1957) then continued. In the 1960s, Fritz Machlup published a seminal work in which he conceived of knowledge as a major production factor in American industry and society. In organization theory, knowledge has always been an “absent present”, that which is always present yet rarely articulated, in the analysis of organizational practice. In the mid-1990s, arguably with the publication of a special issue of the Strategic Management Journal edited by Robert Grant and...
J.-C. Spender (1995), the idea of a specific and privileged theoretical perspective on organizations known as “knowledge management” (or “the knowledge-based view of the firm”) (Foss, 1996), drawing on the debate on the “resource-based view of the firm” in strategic management quarters, e.g., Barney, 1991) was proposed. However, a few significant contributions to the field were published prior to 1995, perhaps the most notable of which being Nonaka’s (1994) discussion about the conversion of forms of knowledge. Since 1995, the knowledge management perspective has become established as a legitimate component of mainstream organization theory and management studies. Journals, conferences, and professional associations are dedicated to the topic and no less that two handbooks have been published, aimed at providing state-of-the-art overviews of the field (Dierkes, Berthon, Child and Nonaka, 2001; Easterby-Smith and Lyles, 2003). Today, knowledge management is a progressive and heterogeneous field of research hosting a great variety of theoretical, methodological, and practical orientations (for an overview, see Tsoukas and Vladimirou, 2001; Newell, Robertson, Scarborough and Swan, 2002; Styhre, 2003).

In this paper, knowledge management and knowledge work will be examined as something fundamentally shaped and influence by media; technologies that are capable of producing, manipulating, distributing, and storing information in various forms (i.e. as text, images, sounds, symbols). To date, the knowledge management literature has only addressed to a limited extent the central importance of media in the constitution of knowledge, knowledge work and, most importantly, the subject-position of the knowledge worker. In this paper, media are defined as “enframing” and structuring knowledge work; they constitute the infrastructure of most knowledge work and thus media need to be carefully examined. While there is a substantial literature exploring the co-alignment of new technology and organization (Barley, 1986, 1990; Prasad, 1993; Woicynec, 2000; Orlikowski, 2000; Edmonson, Bohmer, and Pisano, 2001; Lanzara and Patriotta, 2001; McGail, 2002), the interest in media in the humanities and social sciences (e.g. McLuhan, 1962, 1964; Kittler, 1990, 1997, 1999; Bolter, 1991; Bolter and Grusin, 1999; Hayles, 2002, 2005) has only been restrictedly mirrored in organization theory. One exception to this is the interest in actor-network theory in organization studies, a theoretical perspective that points to the mutual constitution of knowledge, inscription procedures, media, and organization. Scientific knowledge is embedded in procedures of inscription (Latour, 1987, Latour, 1991), that is, the rendering of what is contested and not-yet-fixed immutable or possible to circulate in the form of mathematical formulae or visual representations (or in a more mundane case, in the inscriptions on a bottle of water; Jorges and Czarniawska, 1998); such inscriptions are the outcome of the effective alignment of organization and technology. Technoscience, in actor-network theory, is an assemblage composed of humans, technologies (e.g. media), and inscription procedures (Law, 1986; Lenoir, 1998). Seen in this way, actor-network theory bridges knowledge management and media theory in terms of emphasizing the use of media and technology when “inscribing the world”.

Media and their accompanying instances of speech, writing, and code are inextricably entangled with the process of organizing. The presence of new media (a term reserved for media based on digital technologies) such as electronic mail (e-mail) and computer-based information technologies in organizations implies new modi operandi in organizations (Brown and Lightfoot, 2002; Kallinikos, 1996a). For instance, the use of e-mail, representing a form of the inscription of everyday conversations into computer systems (Lee, 1996), implies a new set of problems and challenges for organizations; e-mail systems demand certain procedures, agreed upon routines for handling incoming and outgoing mail, and an ethos guiding the thoughtful use of the
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