Chapter XI

Systems Design Meets Habermas, Foucault and Latour

Michael Arnold
University of Melbourne, Australia

ABSTRACT
This chapter begins with a review of the theoretical foundations that are common in the systems design literature, before moving to draw upon the work of three prominent social theorists to analyse and critique a particular case of information systems design. It is argued that in different, but complimentary ways, each theorist offers systems designers compelling insights to guide their work. In particular, it is argued that Habermas’ understanding of “Ideal speech”; Foucault’s understanding of “power/knowledge” and “discipline”; and Latour’s understanding of systems as “networks”; confirms that social theory is able to offer systems designers concrete recommendations to guide their work.

INTRODUCTION
This chapter presents a case study of an information system currently under construction, and critiques the design decisions that have been made from the perspectives offered by three prominent social theorists—Habermas, Foucault and Latour. It is argued that in different but complimentary ways, each theorist offers
conceptual tools and insights that enable specific inferences to be drawn about the system’s functions and features. These insights confirm that social theory is able to offer systems designers concrete recommendations to guide their work, and is able to offer critics of sociotechnical systems a theoretical contextualisation for their analysis.

A BRIEF REVIEW OF THEORY

Information systems design and research is a diverse practice with its own internal tensions and fracture-lines. It does not speak with one voice, and it is not homogenous. Different theoretical and philosophical assumptions position the IS designer and researcher in an orientation to her work; different questions are asked in different places, different forms of information and argument are regarded as constituting evidence, evidence is dealt with in different ways, thus drawing out different characteristics of the case. A theoretical orientation points to what might be attended to, what one might expect to find, how one might recognise it and what its implications may be. It offers an orientation to analysis, in that it provides a number of powerful and well-developed concepts, and a language by which those concepts might be explicated and applied in particular circumstances. Although most designers and researchers do not explain or justify their theoretical assumptions (Iivari, Hirschheim, & Klein, 1998, p. 176), theory remains vital to IS design, and to an understanding of the implications of IS design, and IS designers and researchers are encouraged to be explicit in bringing forward the use of theory (Iivari et al., 1998; Mingers, 1984; Orlikowski & Baroudi, 1991; Preston, 1991; G. Walsham, 1995).

Of all the theoretical approaches, IS design and research has most clearly been shaped by positivism (Iivari et al., 1998), and today positivism remains hegemonic (Vickers, 1999). Positivists see their work as a continuation of a 300-year tradition, flowing from the European Enlightenment through to Modernity, in which reason displaces custom and superstition, and increases our possession of Truth, and therefore our power over our world and our fate (Wilson, 1997). This positivist approach is manifest most notably in the Natural Sciences; and IS design and research, though not a classical science, is traditionally built around the realist metaphysics of classical science. At the heart of the differences between positivism and other theoretical approaches are the answers that are given to the ontological question (what exists?) and the epistemological question (how do we know it?). The positivist answer to “What exists?” is “an objective, law-abiding universe,” and the answer to “how might we know it?” is “through the application of the scientific method, composed of formal propositions, disprovable-hypothesis testing, use of quantitative data in both experimental and field work, use of controlled and
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