Chapter II

Email: Message Transmission and Social Ritual

Eileen Day
RMIT University, Australia and
E-Wordscapes Consulting, Australia

Abstract

In considering the implications of what it means to be moving towards an Interaction Society, my research into intraorganisational email illuminates some of the inherent social complexity and the subtle nuances of its use within organisational life. A range of significant insights emerged through a deep hermeneutic understanding of the ways that people within the study were constructing email as an everyday part of their workplace. As a consequence, I have constructed a new concept, message web to encapsulate the social interaction and human sense-making activities around email in association with its technical capabilities as daily life is being played out within organisational cultures today. In this chapter, I tell an ethnographic story concerning just one strand of the case study organisation’s message web: the copying function of email. And being an ethnographic story, I’ve also embedded reflective glimpses of my research processes.
Introduction

Electronic mail (email) has emerged as the key application for Internet-based communication in both contemporary organisations and personal domains. As such, it has the potential to be one of the major determinants in shaping the emergence of an interactive society.

This chapter presents an ethnographic story about intraorganisational email that is grounded in my practice-oriented qualitative research. I undertook a case study to find out more about what is actually going on with email in organisations. In doing so, I delved deeply into the study participants’ intertwined layers of meaning of, and experiences with, email through their interpretations and descriptions of such experiences.

And while ethnographies remain an alternative to mainstream approaches of knowledge construction in information systems research, increasingly such methodologies are being drawn upon to construct additional understandings (based on real-life examples) around people as social actors and their interactions with the technologies and systems they use (Schultze & Bolard, 2000; Stahl, 2003). A theme which Lamb & Kling’s (2003) recent work directs attention to is the need for information systems research to make more use of this “social actors” metaphor, claiming it “readily expands the scope and scale of the social space of people’s interactions” (p.224).

In crafting together the ethnographic data and the theoretical arguments, I discovered a range of interesting and even unexpected interpretations about how the work environment is continually being socially constructed by the social actors present and the multiple significances of email within such constructs. These discoveries provide a vivid and multi-faceted interpretative window on organisational life that indicates some of the fluidity and connectiveness that is happening as we move towards a more interactive society. The spaces visible through such a window can be viewed from different perspectives and so it was with my research.

I adapted Carey’s 1989 model: he used the concept that communication could be looked at from two different dimensions, that is, communication as message transmission or communication as social ritual. Although Carey’s research concerned mass communication, I applied the two dimensions of his model to my email research. Numerous themes emerged around email as both message transmission and social ritual and at times, it was difficult to maintain such a dichotomy as specific themes could be considered in association with both dimensions of the model.
Developing Organisational Stories through Grounded Theory Data Analysis: A Case Example for Studying IS Phenomena
Elayne Coakes and Anthony Elliman (2013). Knowledge and Technological Development Effects on Organizational and Social Structures (pp. 52-67).
www.igi-global.com/chapter/developing-organisational-stories-through-grounded/70561?camid=4v1a

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