Guest Editorial

Exemplifying Interpretive Research in Information Systems: an overview

With increasing interest in qualitative or 'intensive' research within the information systems community, this special issue is devoted specifically to interpretive research. Interpretive research can be distinguished from other kinds of research by the underlying philosophical assumptions which guide the work (Myers, 1997). Interpretive studies generally attempt to understand phenomena through the meanings that people assign to them, and interpretive methods of research in IS are 'aimed at producing an understanding of the context of the information system, and the process whereby the information system influences and is influenced by the context' (Walsham 1993, p. 4–5).

In the call for papers we stated that the aim of the special issue was to publish a set of articles which exemplified the interpretive perspective. We believe that we have succeeded in bringing together a diverse group of such papers, the articles in this collection illustrating the wide range of interesting work which is being done by interpretive IS researchers. Some of the papers are conceptual, while others are more empirical; some illustrate the use of ethnography, while one paper uses material gathered from public discourse; the range of theoretical perspectives employed is also quite diverse.

We received 22 submissions for the special issue, of which we were able to accept seven papers (an acceptance rate of 32%). Some of those that did not make it into the special issue were of good quality, but were rejected because the authors were unable to complete the required revisions in time, or because they did not appear to be aligned specifically with the goals of the special issue. A few of these papers, after subsequent revision, are likely to appear in later regular issues of the *Journal of Information Technology*.

The first four papers in this issue exemplify an interpretive approach to the conduct and analysis of empirical research. The first paper, by Lee Komito, discusses the implementation of an electronic document management system within a government department in the Irish civil service. Komito clearly describes the

historical context and explains the multiple perspectives of the stakeholders. His ethnographic research shows that, although Lotus NOTES became an integral part of the work process, the information sharing and knowledge storage functions which senior management expected were not adopted. Lee investigates why workers within the organization preferred paper documents over electronic documents.

The second paper, by Kylie Sayer, discusses a Business Process Reengineering (BPR) project in a large public sector organization in Australia. Describing her research method as a 'postmodern ethnography,' Sayer shows how middle management were able to deny the technology and disable the BPR change project. Her paper investigates issues of power and control in BPR projects.

Lorna Heaton examines the social construction of systems for computer supported cooperative work (CSCW). She compares the design of CSCW systems in Scandinavia and Japan in order to illustrate the importance of culture on the resulting software products. Heaton argues that, by looking at CSCW systems as texts which reflect the context of their production and the society from which they come, we may be better able to understand the transformations that operate when these texts are 'read' in the contexts of their implementation.

In the fourth paper, David Phillips draws on theoretical work on framing to provide an account of the social construction and mobilization of particular interests in relation to the introduction of a new technology. He examines public discourse to illuminate the processes by which issues of anonymity, surveillance, security and privacy are integrated into public understandings of, and interactions with, electronic consumer payment systems.

The final three papers in the special issue are primarily conceptual in nature. Tom Butler offers specific guidance on a hermeneutic method for interpretive research in information systems. The paper provides an

overview of concepts and principles from phenomenology and hermeneutics, and illustrates their application in an interpretive case study on the information systems development process.

The sixth paper, by Bill Doolin, argues that interpretive researchers need to consciously adopt a critical and reflexive stance. He suggests that information technology should be analysed as a condition and as a consequence of a broader set of social and political relations. Doolin provides a brief example of such an approach in his study of the implementation of a 'casemix' information system in a public hospital in New Zealand.

Finally, the paper by Fitzgerald and Howcroft offers an interesting resolution of the perennial debate between 'hard' positivist researchers and 'soft' interpretive researchers. They use the device of two amusing 'tales' of extreme positions to undermine such extremism. The paper suggests the metaphor of magnetic polarity as a way of resolving the debate. Just as all magnets have a north and south pole - and cannot exist without each other - so Fitzgerald and Howcroft argue that both hard and soft research are necessary within the IS field.

We hope you enjoy reading these papers as we did. Special thanks must go to our reviewers for the special issue. We set ourselves a tight timetable for publication, and this put additional pressure on the reviewers to complete their reviews in a timely fashion. The reviewers for the special issue were:

Fran Ackerman
Liam Bannon
Michael Barrett
Richard Baskerville
Brian Bloomfield
Richard Boland
Angele Cavaye
Bill Doolin
Bob Galliers
Niall Hayes
Ari Heiskanen
Lucas Introna
Matthew Jones
Donncha Kavanagh
Ned Kock

Joe Nandhakumar
Celia Romm
Sundeep Sahay
Kylie Sayer
Chris Sauer
Steven Sawyer
Susan Scott
Graeme Shanks
Steve Smithson
David Targett
Julie Travis
Cathy Urquhart
Dave Wastell
Leslie Willcocks

References

Myers, M. D. (1997) Qualitative Research in Information Systems. MISQ Discovery, 2, http://www.misq.org/discovery/

Walsham, G. (1993) Interpreting Information Systems in Organizations (Wiley, Chichester).

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