

ANALYZING POWER AS INFORMATION IN ORGANIZATIONS: THINKING ABOUT HOW TO DO IT!

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ABSTRACT

Understanding the power dimension of information use is important in developing and implementing information systems. The essay is a description of a research model for conceptualizing the politics of information within organizations. The essay presents a perspective on organizational culture as an information landscape, its dimensionalities, and the political frame of information use. In introducing the political frame of power as information, the paper summarizes a conception of information frames. The politics of information is about the use of information and information resources as sources of power and control within an organization. The political frame of information use consists of several possible domains. These are the technological, the monarchist, the feudalist, the federalist, and the anarchist. The paper presents a view of quantitative and qualitative field research for the purpose of understanding the nature of information governance and control in organizations.

Keywords: information landscape, politics of information, information and power, information control, information governance, information culture

INTRODUCTION

Information systems are created to control information and its use. Information use within situations is represented by informing objects. Information systems and technologies are informing objects and providers of informing objects. Informing objects are symbols. A symbol (of information) represents within a frame what informing objects are valued, either as a means of achieving things or as an end-in-view (something to be accomplished), within a particular situation. An informing object is an affair, an informational symbol which encapsulates in its details or content its frame of understanding or interpretation, either implicitly or explicitly. An informational symbol is a remark inferring, in its configuration and contents, a situational frame or model [17] and an organizational frame or structure. An informational symbol or informing object may be sparse or dense, ambiguous or unambiguous in harmony with the situation whose structures may be affording or constraining [20], tacit or articulated [17]. For example, a course's syllabus, a firm's balance sheet, or a corporation's policies are informing objects. Information use (informing

objects) is symbolic of power. Inherent to any information system is its political use, i.e., its use to initiate and sustain influence and power throughout an organization. Rhetorically, information systems are created to structure and organize what is perceived as unorganized and unstructured information which is basically unusable and unvalued by people of an organization. Information systems are viewed as significant for organizational productivity growth and innovation [41] [49]. Planning for effective and efficient information use depends upon understanding information use as a means to influence and power. A political frame of information use contextualizes informational or decision making situations. The frame is about much more than use; it is about information as a power symbol. Information is always in use as symbol. The symbolic use of information shifts according to the frame in use at the time. There are several major (primary) frames in any organization: the political, financial, legal, ethical, psychological, historical, and technological [44].

The politics of information is the use of information to obtain and maintain power in organizations. The political dimension of information is about affairs of power and control [53] [12] [16] [28]. Power can be conceptualized as a relationship of dependency [20] between or among people. Different cultures have different ways of arranging these dependencies. Power is a deep "primary frame" [15]. The symbols of power representing distance in relationships are a means of keeping order [21] as organizational (as personal, or tacit) rules and policies and are a means of giving structure in situations inherently uncertain and unstable [55] [34] [20]. A deep rule of power symbolized in information use is about "...get[ting] others to do what he or she wants them to do, as well as to avoid being forced by others to do what he or she does not want to do" [24, p. i]. For example, an information use symbolic of power is the use of a Personnel Annual Activities Report (PAAR), an informing object sometimes known as a performance review, whereby an employee is required to report, or document, activities done over a year's time in a certain format and with required evidence which warrants the report. Such an informational symbol provides in its contents an individual's take of the situational and organizational takes; the individual's take settles the situation. A PAAR as an

informational symbol embodies in its content a situational model [17] which is a class or domain of an organizational structure. The situational model or frame is a pattern of demonstrating “productivity”; productivity is an ideological aspect of the organizational frame. Another symbol of information power is the turning of a five-minute informal conversation into a formal document which uses in preparation perhaps a hour of time (a managerial scarce resource). This controls and usually stops, in time, the informal (and undocumented) flow of information; it is a type of information game [23]. Symbols of power in situations are reports, documents or proposals, and information devices, i.e., email or mobiles such as Blackberries [50]. These symbols structure and define ambiguous and risky situations. This leads to observations and questions aimed at attaining an understanding of the deep rules of play [45] [13] [46] [47] [17].

Linguistic and social affairs of power are symbols of frames, rules, purposes, and intended possible outcomes. In terms of this paper, the broader domain is “politics of information use” which subsumes the domains of “the technological,” “the monarchical,” “the feudal,” “the federal,” and “the anarchical” [6] [48] [7]. The theme of politics of information use is power: its getting, its keeping, and its rewards [23]. If we denote certain affairs or symbols as socially meaningful, as practices or rituals, then we make observations about the interactions and transactions of people within situations. Interactions are basic to any situation; they define and structure them. They are relationships holding between people, being short-term or long-term. Transactions are exchanges of information or propositions about things, and their use, of value and concern. Transactions are transformative of people and situations [8] [9] [18] [20]. If we denote certain affairs or symbols as linguistic games or affairs, then we observe how people use the words situationally, how the words are placed in a high (tacit or implied meanings) or low (articulated or explicit meanings) context [17], and, perhaps, how language forms and shapes situations and therefore actions, events, and affairs [54].

The Essay’s Goal

The essay is a description and discussion of a frame for a set of interrogative structures to use in observing, participating with, and possibly interviewing IT professionals in the field. The model presents a way of investigating the symbols and categories of informational power at their source, i.e., the political frame of information use. There are five categories or domains: the technological, the monarchical, the feudal, the federal, and the

anarchical. These categories are a basis for developing an empirical view about information behavior [7]. Presenting a research conception to study the general problematic of the politics of information [44] is a way of directing empirical inquiry into information control and governance. A problem statement or hypothesis of this frame is always about the phenomenon of organizational power. This is a research model that develops a conception of the political frame of information use in organizations to foster empirical study and to guide the empirical study of information control and governance with an organization.

Research Frame

The research frame is aimed at obtaining evidence of insiders’ points of view which enframe their actions, although it begins with an outsider’s view, of types of situations of information use, and eventually grounding an understanding of the political frame in the insiders’, or users’ conceptual and system models of information use [36]. By identifying categories and attributes (domains and components) of the political frame of information use, the research conception or model suggests possible directions for research questions [47]. The questions, when asked, are about the symbols (informational symbols or informing objects) of control and governance of information and are focused on how organizational situations and affairs function to maintain influence and power [12]. That is, the questions lead to observations about information acquisition or creation, information access, information ownership, and information sharing [7] as symbolic manifestations of power organizationally, ways of controlling action and effort. The questions make up an interpretive frame for the description and analysis of information use which allows deep inquiry into situations and their contexts [13] [39]. The research frame and its questions are our best guess at understanding what might be going on in situations and how to analyze and design information systems in organizations [45] [46] [47].

Questions to Observations

Asking questions leads to making warranted observations on situations. Some general research questions aim at discovering the political infoscape. These questions involve inquiry about the informational symbols or informing objects in play in various organizational situations. The example of the PAAR allows us to ask questions about its function from an organizational point of view and an individual’s point of view. Such questions may be: What information makes up the content, Who decides this, What hierarchical structure is in place for

appraisal, What is the purpose of the informing object, How is the informing object used in the present (and will be used in the future), How does it fit the productivity and loyalty ideologies of the organization [45] [46] [47].

More focused questions using the contextualized domains or structures afford discovery of how informing objects are particularly used in situations and affairs. Understanding organizations and their situations as systems (ecologies) allow specific questions to be asked about the goings-on in terms of situational types and individuals' styles of information use. The researcher must focus questions on the informational symbols as they may be used in any number of ways in any number of situations, as well as who controls and uses them, and why they are used. For example, an informational situation and its symbols whose leader may have a "directive" style may cause questions to be raised which are different than the ones raised if the situation was "consultative" and the leadership style was "conceptual" [32] [37] [7, pp. 67-68] [45] [46] [47].

STRUCTURES CONTEXTUALIZING POWER

Organizational Systems of Meaning

Every organization can be pictured as an informational landscape, or infoscape. An infoscape is a geography of communities of action or practice, situations of information use and information flows and repositories as well as symbols (for example, policies) of information use. Complexity increases in magnitude in relation to an organization's size [35]. To survive and grow, organizations are always concerned about information. This means that an organization must be concerned about its acquisition, its architecture and articulation, its storage, its accessibility and its use. By viewing an organization as informational landscape [44], an analyst or designer of information systems assumes a synergistic relationship among information users, information flows, and things to be done. These are the most basic characteristics of a situation of information use. A ecological picture [7] of an organization is useful for relating information acquisition or creation to its articulation and use over organizational boundaries. Informational applications are symbols which shape situations. Informational use, as symbols, shapes situations. Situations afford and constrain informational use. Situations are semantic structures [45] [47]. An informational situation is a local ecosystem within the infoscape. The forms and shapes of an organization's infoscape [44] are frames of information use.

Policies are informational symbols of frames. Frames form and shape an organizational ideology. The ideology contextualizes the management of information and its organizational use, and legitimizes organizational power [55]. Dimensional domains of transactional actions show up as policies. Policies operationalize an organization's ideology. Policies describe many states of affairs, but chief among these are the sharing of power and the handling of ambiguity. Policies, as informing objects, represent (reify) organizational culture. They define attributes of frames. As informational symbols, policies are normalized statements of enduring and stable meanings and practices shared. An organization's culture as embodiment of its ideology is the ultimate social frame [29] [30] [33] [48] [18] [4] [19].

Most major cultural structures of organizations are about authority and status (hierarchical or egalitarian and centralized or decentralized situations) and uncertainty (open or closed and normative or practical situations) [20]. They are tacit definitions of power and influence [58]. The hierarchical structure is descriptive of a superior-subordinate relationship ascription where status is differentiated both physically and socially. The egalitarian structures is descriptive of a sense of equality in relationships based on achievement. Role and status differentiate physically, socially, and economically. The dimensional structures of centralized and decentralized situations means that governance and organizational control are diffused or not diffused throughout the organization. The open and closed structures refer to how accessible the organization, its members, and its ways of doing things are to members of the organization [51] [52] [20].

The organizational normative and practical structures refer to an interior-focusing organization via rules and regulations or to an exterior-focusing organization or market-driven one. This dimensionality varies according to functional area. Some affairs are about performance and productivity. The structures depicting the transactional domains of performance and productivity are focused on results or process. These orientations are about focusing either on the objectives and tasks to be accomplished as usually opposed to the ways and means of achieving goals. The ways and means are always subject to claims of efficiency and effectiveness. The structure of work mean that organizational performance and productivity focus on the work to be done. The task is most important. The structure focusing on the person means a concern for human capital and its significance in the productivity of the organization [51] [52] [20].

Other structures of organizational culture focus on employee behavior (afforded or restricted) and loyalty (to the organization or profession). The structures of an organization's culture that focus on behavior and loyalty mean that an employee sees the workplace as a home and has a sense of pride in the job and the products. A professional affair means that an employee's allegiance is to the social entity that grounds the employee's work via education and even an ethical code. Constrained and unconstrained structures refer to the amount of control (affordances and restrictions) that the organization has over an employee's life, actions, dress, manner of speaking, both in and out of the physical confines of the organization [30] [51] [48] [18] [4] [19] [52] [20].

Communities of Action

An organization is a social structure framing communities of action or practice [8] [3] [55] [9] [16] [4]. These are social groups focused on doing organizational things. They are goal oriented. Communities of action are places of shared activities dependent upon shared enduring and stable meanings. Communities of action or practice are symbol users. These shared practices and meanings, symbols, are the culture of the organization [35] [51] [52].

Communities of action and practice are structured situations of information aimed at achieving an organization's mission. Communities of action and practice define situations of information use or the informational spaces of an organization. Information flows are embodied in the software and hardware of information systems. Informational situations occur in offices, meeting rooms, cafeterias, wherever information is acquired, processed, and used to make decisions bearing on the life of the organization. Communities of action and practice are work teams, committees, departments, coffee-pot groups, going-to-lunch groups, etc. they are structures of an infoscape. An infoscape is a place also of differing personal styles of information use.

Informational Situations

Situation of information use consists of people, relationships, information (content), processes and tasks. Situations of information use are recurring affairs in an organizational culture [44]. They set up an ecology of communication, a context of use [17] [27]. Situations of information use are usually clearly marked by their usual location, their usual time of beginning and ending (no one wants situations to run over), a common agenda, and the members (of a community of action) who are involved. Situations of information use if they persist and exist over a period

of time develop a community of action, but mostly information users come from different communities of action (homes) into a situation of information use. And they speak in their native language; they speak in code [50], the language of their home community of action. Each information user uses the language and information of his or her "home" community of action and practice.

Situations of information use are the locales of communities of action and practice. A corporation has its own habits of doing things, practices or social affairs, its own language, or language affairs. Every culture has dimensional domains, structures or ontologies of transactions (shared meanings and practices). The landscape metaphor suggests that the constitutive situations of information use within an organization work together. Situations of information use as the open or closed informational spaces, structures of a firm are the hills and valleys that channel information flows between communities of action and practice within the organization. [44] [5].

Typical situations of information use are directive, informational, consultative, decisional, or negotitative [32]. A situation of information use, an existential and empirical reality, is never neatly bounded by directives, information, consultations, decision making or negotiating a deal. Directive situations are occasions of giving orders to be followed. Such occasions may also be a situation where a project is given to a group to complete. It is a situation wherein responsibilities are handed out. It could also be a disciplinary situation. Informational situations are occasions of providing facts about a case. Situations that are informational in nature are also aimed at information determination and analysis. Consultative situations are circumstances of seeking advice for decision making. Situations of the consultative type are preludes to problem solving and decision making when superiors make decisions (hierarchically). Decisional situations of information use are times when alternative action are evaluated and determined. Negotitative situations are circumstances of bargaining and dealing about something [32].

Situations are social and linguistic places of information affairs. People are a important part of any situation. They are the users and wielders of information. From within frames of use, they apply information and processes to accomplish objectives and tasks. Information is dense or sparse. Processes are tacit or articulated. Tasks are clearly defined or vaguely defined. People approach information use with a variety of styles. Situational interactions are rule governed or relationship-based. Situational

relations are competitive or cooperative. Situations are professional or emotional. Situations are private or public and collective. Situations are contexts of achievements or ascriptions of roles. Situational time is monochronic or polychronic. Situations are fatalistic or libertarian. These situations, structures, of information use, symbols, are the organizational information spaces of a firm's infospace [17] [52] [44] [20].

Situations of information use are always creatures of communities of action and practice. Such communities are intentional locations, structures, of activities aimed at accomplishing tasks. They are actively engaged in and focused on whatever the situation has to offer. Situations of information use are local structured uses of information focused on things to be done.

Managerial Styles

Managing is using information to deal with organizational uncertainty in getting things done and dealing with people [43] [37]. Styles of information use are ways of playing information games. Typical styles are "directive," "analytic," "conceptual," and "behavioral" [37]. Styles or patterns of information use are personal habits and rituals for dealing with ambiguity, tasks, and other people. Styles are ways of responding cognitively and emotionally to relationships. They are mental models [36] of interactive behavior. Styles of information use are the patterns of acting within a situation to achieve a particular state of affairs. They are reflections of stable or unstable affairs, recurring or not, whether a stable situation can be achieved, and how this will be done. They are patterns of knowing all the informative details of the situation by knowing what is assumed, and what constrains the situation. Styles of information use are patterns of thinking visually about the decisions, using various algorithmic and heuristic models, and about seeing (foreseeing) the consequences and results, and using these to choose the best way of acting [26] [36] [37] [43] [51].

FRAMES OF INFORMATION

Frames are ready-to-hand-theories [1] or expectations of why persons in a given situation act and speak to an end, using information as a means (either its lack or its abundance) to control what goes on. Analytically, frames can be approached as domains or meta domains [45] [46] [47]. There are many different frames in play. They interact and form a matrix of understanding and action. They are commingled and complex. In a very real sense, they are the stuff of, the structures of, an organization's reality. Frames are enduring and stable shared

sensibilities that define situations of information use within organizations. Frames are habits of cognition, perception, emotion, and action. Frames shape shareable experiences of a perspective. Frames define the rules and tokens of information use games. Frames provide implicit and explicit boundaries to thinking (such as Simon's [43] bounded rationality when they are explicit and formal). As shared understandings of how things work (and have worked), frames are interpretative structures of the infospace. They control the play of meanings in informational situations. They are axiomatic confections of information behavior [5] [11] [14] [15] [13] [36] [38] [40] [44].

Frames of information use define cultural scenes and social situations, shaping the knowledge people use everyday. They are implicit systems of meanings and practices. Frames are social habits or patterns information use within organizational and personal situations, sometimes constituted as procedures of information use. They provide the conceptual and organizational architecture that orients information behavior and culture. Frames, as social and language affairs, organize experience, providing a presumptive and taken-for-granted background for common practices. They are ways of relating to people, the world, actions, and present a common view of things. Frames of information use create communicative processes and spaces [10] [7] [14] [15] [17] [18] [20] [31] [45] [51].

POLITICAL FRAME OF INFORMATION

The political frame of information use is about information governance and control. Power and control over information allows a manager to deal with ambiguous situations by handling tasks and personnel via access to information. Strategic information use is about strategies of power [16]. The politics of information is about the control and management of information resources which is aimed at getting and keeping power (leverage for the squeamish). Information governance is the politics of information. Control and management of information is important for an organization. Political frames of use are about authority and responsibility over information flows and information behavior. Information ownership creates power. Roles and hierarchies are repositories of power. A difference in status is a difference in social distance. Social distance is a symbol of power (and shows up in physical distance) [17].

Technological and informational complexities intertwine creating a confection of competitive or consensual ontologies [35]. In the political sphere, a principle of information use is whoever controls

information access and the flows of information has organizational power [7]. Information systems are tools of power favoring those who control the system. Power is control of information to control actions [53] [25]. Power is the ability to achieve intended objectives. It is the ability to force the issues [32] [2] [42] [5] [6] [31] [11] [22]. Within the political frame of information use, there are several different modes or domains of information governance or control. They are the technological, monarchical, feudal, federal, and the anarchical domains. Political domains of information use are managerial ideologies about sharing and using of information [29] [6] [48] [7].

Technological domain

Information systems and technologies are a means of information control. The technological domain or category is symbolic of power-as-information structures present in a computer information system or the networks, databases, and applications in use in an organization. The forms of technology determine the level of control over information and communication [50]. Power and thus information are affordances and constraints inherent in the information technology structuring the activities (space and time) of an organization. The more technology in place the more control. Information technology and systems define boundaries of interaction and access. For example, a recent study found that Blackberries are considered a tool of productivity and that they are symbols of work being done, of time being spent on tasks, even to the detriment of meetings' focus. The Blackberries force a constant awareness of being on call (as many physicians are through pagers and cell phones) [50, p. 45]. Policies on information technology and its use in the running of the corporation are present as structural and functional control of information use. Information systems or technologies structure information ownership and use, the basis of corporate power.[2] [6] [22] [31] [48]. A technological ontology provides a canonical set of categories which frame other possible domains in play. The ontology symbolizes an approach to and technique or vocabulary for information use. The technological domain provides logical (cultural) space wherein the monarchist, feudal, federal, or anarchist domains function to further structure the situations and affairs of corporate information use.

Monarchist domain

A monarchist domain or category symbolizes a robust and concentrated approach to control of information use. Information systems and technologies function to focus authority and

responsibility of subordinates. Technologies are used to extend the range of control and to create a bounded universe of discourse to achieve corporate results. Information policies reflect a centralizing tendency. The departments are semi-autonomous, but function corporately as mere extensions of the central person- or functional-area-in-charge. Information need (requirements) and ownership policies reflect central authority and responsibilities. There is a common vocabulary of discourse, a common ontology, across the enterprise. In the monarchical mode of information use, information ownership or control is invested in one person or in one functional area of an organization. One individual designates significance and meaning of informational affairs and manages the interpretive models of information application [6] [48] [7] [22].

Feudalist domain

A feudal domain or category symbolizes a reciprocity of authority and responsibility. Information systems and technologies function to structure the channels of communication ontologically, providing shared conceptualizations, to organize categorically obligations of information governance. The ontological structures in place focus transactions marked by reciprocal practices. There are department-level information control policies about acquiring, processing, and sharing information at the local level. The department is seen as autonomous, dependent only in its obligation to further the aims of the authority of the organization. There is no common enterprise-wide information architecture, other than the common architecture of obligations concerning information use. Information is not shared, and there are no policies mandating sharing, across functional areas. Each department has its own vocabulary for information, its own ontology. The feudal mode of information use suggests that the separate corporate entities or functional areas control and manage their own information culture and behavior [6] [48] [7] [22].

Federalist domain

A federalist domain or category symbolizes a centralist tendency of organizational informational governance coupled with the influences of interest groups and task forces aimed at achieving their own agendas. Influence in the form of accomplishing corporate goals structures information use. Information use for the achievement of objectives is a rhetorical device for the grasping of power to achieve the goals. There are policies that focus on centralizing information control. Information sharing is a policy. An understanding of the value of information for the enterprise is present in the form

of policies and vision statements. Ontologies of discourse are rhetorical grounding of information culture and behavior. In the federal mode of information use, information control is shared across organizational boundaries of functional areas. Within this kind of political frame of information use, corporate interest groups define and interpret informational flows according to their situations and affairs [6] [48] [7] [22].

Anarchist domain

An anarchist domain or category symbolizes a distinctive lack of shared ontologies, or universe of discourse organizationally concerning the use of information. Information use is diffused, and so is the power accrued. The structures of information governance are idiosyncratic to the functional areas. This perspective on information use is rather impractical for a corporation, but may show up in a lack of common policies about information. In the anarchical mode, control over meaning and the significance of information is personal and individualistic to the situation and the affair-at-hand. There is no common sensibility of information use, no common culture or behavior [6] [48] [7] [22].

CONCLUSION

The essay is a description of a research frame for understanding the politics of information within organizations. The politics of information are about the use of information and information resources as sources of power and control within an organization. The paper presents a methodological perspective for conducting field research for the purpose of understanding the nature of information governance and control in organizations. Using the metaphor of information landscape, the essay presents a perspective on organizational culture, its contextualizing structures and dimensionalities, and the political frame of information use. The paper describes the political frame of information use as being made up several possible domains. These domains are the technological, the monarchist, the feudalist, the federalist, and the anarchist. Understanding the political (power) dimension of information use is important in developing and implementing information systems.

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