

The Information Society

Call for Papers: Special Issue

Regimes of Information: Embeddedness as Paradox

Hamid Ekbia, Jannis Kallinikos, and Bonnie Nardi

The friction between situated modes of interaction and the structural arrangements into which such interaction is embedded is intrinsic to the modern way of life. As social order, modernity thrives on the mobility of people and resources, which require the support of complex, standardized and decontextualized systems of measurement, exchange and control (Heller 1999). Social practices, by contrast, have always been constituted as regional or domain-specific arrangements, clearly marked off from the background of wider societal and institutional orders. While neither can exist without the other, the social dynamics characteristic of our time can perhaps be understood as transient and manifold resolutions of the ever-present friction between institutional orders of wider reach and the particular contexts or domains within which social practice by necessity unfolds.

This friction acquires new forms as the result of social and technological developments that are associated with the deepening penetration of the social fabric by various kinds of digital information. Since the advent of writing, information and the marks by which it is carried have been constituted so as to withstand time depreciation (Borgmann 1999; Bowker 2005) and to transcend the bounds of practice (Gleick 2011). Organizations, for instance, would have never been able to become the persistent social formations they are without standardized information on the basis of which resources and outcomes can be assessed and compared across space and time (Beniger 1986). Similarly, practices in domains such as medicine and education often need to be compared with practices derived from the sphere of economy, which requires the development of standardized cognitive idioms able to cut across domain specificities (Borgmann 1999; Kallinikos 2006). These standardized and decontextualized attributes of information have been carried to new levels of perfection by digital technology and its ability to separate and reassemble the marks (data and data fields) from the very content by which information is defined, through automated, machine-enacted rules.

On the one hand, information owes much of its value to the contingent nature of the events it helps illuminate and manage. The meaning and value of information is relative to the expectations of social agents, and only to the degree that it is recognized as relevant to their dealings — it is a *difference that makes a difference* (Bateson 1972). That relevance is, in turn, circumscribed locally in particular contexts that dictate the priorities, skills and tools of practice (Garfinkel 2008; Rawls 2008). One can even go further and claim that information cannot but be constituted (rather than simply interpreted) as information locally, at the moment its relevance to a background of practice is born, figured or traced. Information is in fact part and parcel of a complex web of significations, a regime, as it were, against which it is perceived and acted upon (Ekbja and Evans 2009). In this respect, information may depreciate rapidly as the contingent upshot of events against which it makes sense fade, despite the impressive technological structures that support its production, diffusion and storage. Practices by contrast, while locally bound and less standardized, can survive the ups and downs of events and maintain its integrity and persistence over time.

The friction between the specific and domain-bound nature of information and its context-free attributes has often been glossed over in contemporary social research, and occasionally suppressed by the epistemological and ontological divisions that afflict current academic inquiry, especially in the Anglo-American tradition. The purpose of this special issue is to expose and understand the inherent frictions outlined above. We invite theoretical and empirical contributions that explore this topic. Our aim is to reframe the problematic rather than provide definite answers, but we also welcome practically oriented research that shows ways of dealing with the tensions between the mandates of disembeddedness and the demands of specific situations. Individuals, organizations, and communities face these tensions in their lives and practices on a day-to-day basis, often with high psychological, operational, or political cost but also as occasions for creativity and innovation. We are interested in both the hurdles and opportunities. Our ultimate hope is to open up a dialogue in the information and social sciences on the socio-cultural, moral, and political challenges and implications of dealing with such tensions.

Interested authors are invited to email a long abstract (no longer than a thousand words) to the guest editors by December 31, 2012: hekbja@indiana.edu, J.Kallinikos@lse.ac.uk, nardi@ics.uci.edu. Authors of selected abstracts will be

invited to submit full submissions by August 31, 2013, which will go through the standard peer review process of TIS. The special issue is slated for publication in the summer of 2014.

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