Chapter IX

A Classification Scheme for Interpretive Research in Information Systems

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INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade tremendous progress has been made in the area of interpretive research in information systems. Whereas interpretive research was virtually non-existent within the IS research community at the beginning of the 1990s (Alavi & Carlson, 1992; Orlikowski & Baroudi, 1991), some ten years later interpretive research articles are regularly published in our conferences, journals, and books. The workshops, conferences (Cash & Lawrence, 1989; Lee, Liebenau, & DeGross, 1997; Mumford, Hirschheim, Fitzgerald, & Wood-Harper, 1985; Nissen, Klein, & Hirschheim, 1991), and special issues of journals devoted to qualitative and interpretive research in our field (Markus & Lee, 1999, 2000; Myers & Walsham, 1998) have had their intended effect, in that qualitative and interpretive research approaches are now ac-

art of the mainstream of the information systems research (Markus, 1997).

Given the increase in the number of interpretive research articles being published in IS today, we believe it is timely to develop and explain a classification scheme of the literature. Such a classification scheme draws attention to the tremendous variety and breadth of interpretive research today, from the most abstract and general philosophical foundations to the most in-depth, detailed field studies. The explicit consideration of different types may contribute to a more effective division of labor among scholars with different research interests. It should also help interpretive researchers to better focus their work and to identify their research priorities.

Interpretive Research Defined

It is important to explicitly define what we mean by interpretive research. Following Myers (1997b) and Klein and Myers (1999), we make a clear distinction between qualitative and interpretive research. Qualitative research can be positivist, interpretive, or critical, depending upon the underlying philosophical assumptions of the researcher. The foundational assumption for interpretivists is that most of our knowledge is gained, or at least filtered, through social constructions such as language, consciousness, shared meanings, documents, tools, and other artifacts. Interpretive research does not predefine dependent and independent variables, but focuses on the complexity of human sense making as the situation emerges (Kaplan & Maxwell, 1994); it attempts to understand phenomena through the meanings that people assign to them (Boland, 1985, 1991; Orlikowski & Baroudi, 1991). This has implications for the types of theories and methods upon which interpretivists can draw. 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, pp. 4-5). In summary, interpretive theories, methods, empirical investigations and interventions differ from their positivist counterparts in their epistemological premises. For a more detailed discussion of these terms we refer the reader elsewhere (Klein & Myers, 1999; Myers, 1997b; Orlikowski & Baroudi, 1991).

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