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THE POWER OF AN INTELLECTUAL ACCOUNT: DEVELOPING STORIES OF THE DIGITAL AGE

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Developing compelling stories is perhaps the most important mission of the qualitative information systems researcher. Indeed, our discipline “has a powerful story to tell about the transformational impact of information technology” (Agarwal and Lucas 2005, p. 381), and I am sure that we all feel that we would like to contribute. A powerful story can inform and explain. A powerful story can guide, intervene, and come with policy implications. However, most importantly, it may inspire us to take action, whether it is within the realm of knowledge, the realm of practice, or at the intersection between the two.

How can the stories of the digital age be developed? Even though there is no silver bullet, I offer some thoughts below as a comment to David Avison and Julien Malaurent’s thought-provoking piece on information systems and its suggested “theory fetish”.

DEVELOPING STORIES OF THE DIGITAL AGE

The power of an intellectual account cannot be underestimated. Compelling stories in information systems research almost never rest on the mere recording of what is going in our digital world. They rather rest on the intellectual practice of the researcher, engaged in thought-trials, reading literature, making observations, discarding working hypotheses, making sense, networking. Qualitative research is therefore not only messy, full of breakthroughs, detours, and setbacks, but it is also an active process of thinking and doing with the intention to carve out the most insightful narrative. Indeed, just like Karl Weick (1989, 1995) suggest, considering theory’s incorporation in the practice of theorizing may be useful.

Recognizing the power of an intellectual account, one may ask how we can rationalize our intellectual practice in a way that suggests pathways for developing stories of the digital age. Avison and Ma-

laurent suggest a number of questions relevant for assessing what they refer to as theory light papers. Reminding of prior ones, I am wondering if the questions (or criteria) will make much difference in terms of the “dullness” the authors attribute to research published in our journals. Just leaving out criteria related to the contribution to theory and prior research may not work.

Perhaps we can become better storytellers though and then theorizing will be an important element. In what follows, I propose that the development of stories of the digital age involves four activities. They all stress the activity of the researcher, that is, her intellectual practice. I am not saying that following these activities make stories better, since, as Barley (2006) points out, papers are like rock and roll bands: what band is the most interesting one is a matter of perspective.

Making sequences of events meaningful: The raw material of a case story consists of events, activities, and choices (Langley 1999). However, those events almost never point in the same direction. An empirical setting typically hosts a multitude of potential case stories. This fact suggests the importance of the storyteller, and her ability to generate meaningful stories from a sequence of events. The researcher actively constructs the narrative by making particular sequences of events meaningful, serving as basis for both description and explanation (Pentland 1999). Of course, oftentimes it is difficult to distinguish the most meaningful story (if there is such a thing). Developing a meaningful story from the raw material of a case is essentially a search process, where perspectives need to be taken and oftentimes theory may be very useful input in this process. Academic peers and informants also play an important role in shaping the narrative as a meaningful sequence of events.

Even though I am using “meaningful” in a relatively loose way here, it should be noted that a story always suggests a causal tendency. The story is meaningful because it offers a direction, a trajectory, along which events unfold. The story is meaningful because it expresses a view on what drives that temporal progression of activity (cf. Langley et al. 2013). In this regard, the story itself may serve as useful material for generating new theory, or bear resemblance of existing theory.

Building ties to cumulative tradition: When I think back on papers that I find compelling, they oftentimes manage to capture something that I can relate to without finding it trivial. The narrative

grounded in the empirical work speaks to the larger story of the research area, or sometimes, in rare cases, even the discipline. Indeed, there is a beauty of managing the dialogue between the empirical phenomenon and cumulative tradition.

In Youngjin Yoo's (2010) research on "Computing in Everyday Life", he offers a fascinating dialogue between the new digital world of smartphones, connected cars, and digital cameras, and the extant view of our discipline. Using examples we know from our everyday experiences, Yoo manages to uncover hidden assumptions about computing as an activity performed to achieve "other activities with higher goals", and argue for the expansion of the intellectual boundaries of the information systems discipline. Ties are built to cumulative tradition, yet this is done from the vantage point of a contemporary phenomenon.

Indeed, compelling stories of the digital age captures the tension between the conventional wisdom of the past and the emergent activities of the future. The mere description of new use patterns, digital technologies, or entrepreneurial activity does not create a powerful story. Strict application of received knowledge does not either serve the purpose. The challenge for the qualitative researcher is to tell a story in which the new phenomenon speaks to what we know, and vice versa.

Naming and framing: Compelling stories successfully name and frame the processes studied. Naming is about putting sticky labels on them. Framing would then be about drawing boundaries around the phenomenon of interest. The activity of naming and framing is essential for developing stories, since it serves as glue between the empirical world and the conceptual world of ideas. Consistent with the idea of the hermeneutic circle (Klein and Myers 1999), this activity is characterized by reciprocity, where the conceptual labeling shape, and is shaped by, the sequence of events identified through empirical observation.

The activity of naming and framing may involve using existing theoretical perspectives to develop the story. Preferably though existing perspectives rather work as under-laborers in the process. As such, researchers conduct thought-trials to explore the feasibility of different theoretical angles. Learning from these thought-trials, compelling digital stories may evolve. In the best of worlds, deliberate naming

and framing processes may discourage unreflective use of theoretical concepts, which indeed may risk taking away much of the beauty of what could be an interesting case.

Stress-testing the intellectual account: An intellectual endeavor cannot start in criteria by which to assess the quality of research (e.g., Sarker et al. 2013) of the type it represents. The compelling story does not originate in the application of such criteria. However, they certainly serve as a useful way to stress-test the emerging story. Using some of David Avison and Julien Malaurent's questions, the researcher would challenge the research by assessing if it is, for instance, rigorous and plausible enough.

As an activity which is part of intellectual practice, stress-testing would primarily serve as a way of making the intellectual account more coherent and consistent with the philosophical and methodological assumptions on which its scholarly value rests. In other words, it would be seen as an input in the process of generating new and powerful accounts of the digital age, rather than as a summative evaluation of the article resulting from the research.

CLOSING REMARKS

Is theory king? I think theorizing is. While I agree that there exist "theory-heavy" papers without an intellectual account, I cannot imagine an intellectual account that would take theory lightly. Theory is an important element of developing powerful stories of the digital age. It is worth emphasizing that such development is very much an intellectual practice, since data seldom speaks for itself.

Yet, I have the feeling that my position is not too far from that of Avison and Malaurent. Perhaps it is the somewhat awkward label "theory-light"? This naming of the phenomenon reflects a position of viewing theory as a noun, rather than thinking of qualitative research as a practice. As qualitative researchers we need to embrace the verb. In this vein, I propose that we increase our chances to develop compelling case stories if we (a) make sequences of events meaningful, (b) build ties to cumulative tradition, (c) name and frame, and (d) stress-test the intellectual account.

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BIO

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