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Beyond the Common-Sense of Practice - A Case for Organizational Informatics: A comment

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Henfridsson *et al.*, the authors of the article “Beyond the Common-Sense of Practice - A Case for Organizational Informatics” which is the subject of this comment postulate that Scandinavian IS research only rarely uses organizational theories and that ‘our’ research being mainly practice-oriented only considers some of the many aspects of organizational life. Am I agreeing with this position? No surprise, I am not; otherwise I would not put forward this statement. However I do not do this solemnly out of my own motivation. Bo Dahlbom, one of the editors of the Scandinavian Journal of Information Systems (SJIS) diplomatically, very distinctly asked me whether I would like to counter-argue the presented position. And after some initial hesitation—my own research was qualified by

the authors as not being suitable for critical reflection beyond common sense interpretations and I do not want to be mistaken for answering out of personal, hurt pride or for attempting to counterattack—I agreed. The topic is important and, after all, common sense interpretations as helpful as they are, they are still too often ignored by practice and by academia. And isn’t it practice which to a large extent informs theory? But let us come back to this later and return to the article to clarify some misunderstandings.

The authors implicitly suggest that Scandinavian practice-orientation is not based on the use of theoretical approaches to understand IT in organizations. They support their argument by analysis of all articles published so far in the SJIS. They are in search of publications which explicitly refer to literature and frame-

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works of organizational science. For me however most of the articles in the journal as far as it is possible to take the journal as a realistic representation of what kind of research is done in Scandinavia are - implicitly or explicitly - based on a view which finally was broadly published in Scandinavia 11 years ago. Andersen *et al.* in their book *Professionel Systemudvikling* in 1986 (eng. transl. *Professional Systems Development*, Prentice-Hall 1990) argued that system development consists of all those activities that aim at changing an organization through the use of information technology and as such means organizational development. This might not be the kind of literature the authors are in search of, but this work is definitely informed by organizational theory and has influenced many of the researchers in Scandinavia and beyond since its publication.

So what is Henfridsson *et al.*'s point? They want to put forward the concept of organizational informatics, a term which originated in the US and which recently in an electronic mail has been portrayed by one of its major proponents Rob Kling as not less, but also not more than "Findings and theories belong to Organizational Informatics when they can be characterized primarily in terms of the participants of a specific organization." A valuable perspective indeed, but is it so different from what Andersen *et al.* and others in Scandinavia request? I do not think so. Organizational Informatics as a term, a buzzword, may be useful for rising the awareness and attention of a wider part of the academic and practical community in computing to underline that a traditional engineering perspective is not sufficient for understanding, and

on this basis constructing meaningful IT support for organizations.

I am not saying that the whole Scandinavian IT community is holding such a view; quite the contrary, we, the readers and contributors of the SJIS, are a minority, a small minority. And how often do our students after graduation in their daily practice forget what they have learned and get caught again, with all its perils and pitfalls, by the traditional way of solving problems in parts of industry and commercial life.

So, yes let us continue to articulate loudly and clearly the importance of organizational issues and let us continue to work for relevant frameworks and theories. But to reach the large majority, do we need more seemingly scientific and complex theories which do not appeal to practitioners because they do not reflect their reality.

I do not think so, nor do I think that organizational informatics is such a framework that supports a position which postulates that proper science is only based in philosophy and mathematics separated from practice.

Again, what then are Henfridsson *et al.* looking for. They look for work that explicitly treat the development and use of IT in organizations by taking into account structural and behavioral properties of organizations as described by Leavitt, Giddens, Mintzberg, March and Williamsen, leading organizational or social scientists. But in the late 1990s their frameworks are very much common-sense. So, the whole argument stands on a weak basis and does not support the authors' claim that Scandinavian IS research is limited to only some organizational aspects. I will thus not go into a detailed argument to further refute

the authors' position and their assertions by myself analyzing each of the quoted articles or by further analyzing the authors' interpretation of these papers.

The authors are right in that the topic has to be taken seriously and the battle for better quality research to inform practice has to be fought. But it has to be fought on the right battlefield with a proper historical and conceptual background, with strong arguments and in a constructive way. I hope to have contributed to such a debate.

■
K. Kautz 60