EDITORIAL – Unpacking the Social in the Information Systems Domain

In one of the first programmatic pieces on the nature of the IS field, Land and Hirschheim (1983) put forward the idea that information systems are to be conceived, in the first place, as social systems that use technology. This vision, whose sociotechnical nature constituted *per se* a significant theoretical innovation, gave birth, with its application over time, to a profoundly novel way of reading the relation between technology and society. Its originality, with respect to existing visions of technology, consisted in putting forward a view that, in opposition to a sheer technical-rational focus, transcended the boundaries of the artefact, and focused on the multiple consequences of technology on the social systems in which it is immersed. In this approach, therefore, the unit of analysis at the core of thought is not anymore the artefact *per se*, but the ensemble constituted by technology and the social environment surrounding it.

In this issue of the iSCHANNEL, we present five articles that, albeit through different theories and diverse empirical contents, all represent substantial embodiments of the vision stated above. These papers, while preserving the thematic diversity that has characterized our journal since its first issue, are unified by a common denominator: technology, within them, is not conceptualized as a self-standing unit, but as the centre of a field of social, cultural, and cognitive forces (Avgerou 2001). The ensemble view of technology, as it is detailed by Orlikowski and Iacono (2001), is strongly reminded here: the relation between technology and society, as it features within these articles, is one of mutual shaping and interaction, which makes it difficult to disentangle the elements that relate to each other in its constitution. Thirty years after its theorization, the vision by Land and Hirschheim is now interpreted and embodied by the pieces presented here, which make it come alive in the current context of our research domain.

In "The Organizing Vision of Patient Access: Reflections on the New NHS Information Strategy by Healthcare Professionals", Gizdem Akdur focuses on a patient-centric innovation in healthcare technologies, constituted by online patient access to medical records. This innovation is studied with reference to its polymorphous perceptions by healthcare professionals, in the light of its social consequences and of the objectives of patient empowerment that it is aimed to reach. As she looks at this, the author proposes a methodological innovation in the analysis, which consists in observing her empirical data from the lens of the organizing vision of patient access: this theory, applied to the object in point, offers a deeply novel way of conceptualizing the technology and its multiple interactions with the environment. As a result, the author depicts technological innovation within the social system in which it is applied, illuminating the complex web of relations through which these domains are interlinked.

In "Perspectives on the Relationship between IT Investment and Economic Performance: A Firm-Level Critical Literature Review", Fuqiang Guan looks at the diverse ways in which the relation between IT and firm-level economic output has been studied in IS literature. Grounding on a wide set of theoretical sources, the author proposes a taxonomy of the literature that is articulated in three streams, centred respectively on the concept of productivity, complementary factors related to organizational changes, and the costs induced by IT in economic exchange. In the article, the author goes in depth into the assumptions and perspectives of each stream, examining how these are reflected in the study of the relationship between IT and firm-level performance. In this way, the author reads IS through the lens provided by the economics of innovation: this means, in fact, not only offering a powerful synthesis of existing literature, but providing a neat image of the complex interconnection between IT investment and economic output.

In "The Internet of Things: Research Discussions and Directions", Saidat Giwa-Osagie provides a classification of the multiple depictions of the Internet of Things in IS literature. Based on the traditional distinction between techno-rational and socio-technical approaches, the author applies it to the observed phenomenon, looking at the consequences that this has for the study of the theme in point. In this way, the author provides a strong embodiment of the vision of IS as social systems: indeed, as she reviews the literature, she firmly places technology in the field of social forces in which it is situated, looking at the ways in which it influences the diverse environments of reference, and is, in turn, modified by them. Furthermore, in this piece, the substance of a well-established theoretical division – that of technical-rational approaches vs. sociotechnical ones – finds application in a very practical domain, constituted by the Internet of Things and its multiple representations in the literature.

In "Knowledge Management: An Epistemological Perspective", Oxana Dubovik looks at how diverse epistemological approaches observe and conceive the domain of knowledge management. Through conceptualization of positivism, interpretivism and pluralism, the author explains the basis of each vision, observing how it is related to the study of knowledge management within the IS field. In this way, the author shows how the intrinsic abstraction of epistemology is, in fact, converted into very practical consequences

when applied to IS phenomena, and how this results in an illuminating reading key for our research domain. Also, with this piece, the author provides a deeply informative focus on knowledge management, a theme of highest relevance in the current historical phase, characterized by the overarching power of information in the economy and society.

In "Matchmaking by Machine: A Socio-Technical and Socio-Cultural Perspective to Online Dating", Linda Yang studies the online dating phenomenon through the social, political, and cultural nature of the technologies implicated in it. The article, starting from the notion of IS as inherently social systems, uses online dating as a paradigm of how digital business models tend to transcend economic objectives, producing changes in the wide sphere of societal behaviours, attitudes, and images connected to this. The inherent power relations, among the actors involved in the online dating phenomenon, are observed through a sociocultural perspective, which sheds light, once again, on the multiple interconnections between the technological and social domains. This article, for how it is constructed, constitutes another study of technology within the social reality in which it is immersed, where the mutual shaping between these elements constitutes the core of attention and analysis.

The vision of IS as inherently social systems, stated by Land and Hirschheim and profoundly rooted in the recent history of the field, is embodied clearly and strongly by the articles in this issue, illuminating different perspectives on the dynamics at the centre of analysis. The five articles contained here constitute, therefore, five diverse routes to unpacking the notion of the social in information systems, and to making the vision by Land and Hirschheim come alive in the dynamics that characterize the field. Theorizing the social, and seeing it in action in multiple ways and perspectives, is a key task in our research domain, and one that poses profoundly relevant questions as to how we conceptualize the social, and how we see it as related to the changes that technology brings into the systems that we observe. The articles in this issue, with their theoretical and practical attempts at unpacking the social in the IS domain, constitute a set of implicit answers to these questions.

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