

Writeup of Lee (1994)

Lee, A. S. (1994). Electronic mail as a medium for rich communication: An empirical investigation using hermeneutic interpretation. *MIS Quarterly*, 18(2), 143-157.

Summary

Lee (1994) provided an hermeneutic case study of the use of electronic mail by managers in a corporation, finding the richness or leanness of the medium was not inherent but depended on “the interaction of [it] ... with its organizational context,” described in hermeneutic terms (p. 143). He began by introducing Daft and Lengel’s information richness theory, which theorized that a given medium is richer when it provides more immediate feedback, uses a greater number of channels and cues, is personal in nature, and includes a variety of language. Since e-mail did not provide these advantages, it was considered a “lean medium” (p. 144); however, there had been a number of empirical studies of e-mail use which went against the theory. Based on this evidence, Lee stated that “e-mail can readily support rich communication,” but that there was still a need for understanding “how the richness occurs” (p. 144). He next presented his “integrative framework” (p. 146), based in an interpretive understanding of the world but also providing equal footing for positivism; Lee felt the two approaches should support each other, similar to the cyclical use of inductive and deductive methods. He drew on Boland’s (1991, p. 429, as cited in Lee, 1994, p. 148) consideration of hermeneutics as “the study of interpretation, especially the process of coming to understand a text.” He discussed five central concepts of hermeneutics, drawing from Boland, Ricoeur, and Weick: (a) “distanciation,” defined as “the separation, in time and distance, that occurs between a text and its author, its originally intended audience, and/or its originating culture and society” (p. 149); (b) “autonomization,” where “the text [takes] on a life of its own” (p. 149); (c) “appropriation” of someone else’s text as one’s own (p. 149); (d) “social construction”—termed “non-ostensive reference” by Ricoeur—referring to the social and cultural world behind a given text or interpretation (p. 149); and (e) “enactment” of an interpreted meaning of a text (p. 150). In his case study analysis of an e-mail chain in a company—based on data collected by Markus for a 1991 study—Lee found that an initial, relatively “straightforward and innocuous” request—at least for the original author—quickly became a very rich discussion. The original author’s words were distanciated—separated from her—and “took on a life of their own ... [becoming] no longer (if, indeed, they were ever) the property of only their author ... and their originally intended audience” (p. 153). Others

appropriated her words, interpreting and enacting “a politically sensitive and managerially troublesome meaning” for them based on the social, organizational, and cultural construction of the company (p. 153). The e-mail “conveyed, literally, a world of meaning” (p. 154). Lee concluded with lessons for managers, professionals, and researchers; for the latter groups he suggested managerial users should be seen as “processor[s] or co-processor[s] to be integrated into the system design” (p. 155) and that more interpretive studies of system use were necessary; they “need not be hermeneutic” but should use “forms of interpretivism” (p. 156).

Analysis

Lee provided an excellent and relatively easy to understand application of hermeneutical analysis, one that has implications both for a specific research area—e-mail use—and for the broader fields and disciplines of management information systems (MIS) and library and information science (LIS). Lee’s focus on socially constructed worlds, cultures, and organizations, and the process of interpretation and meaning-generation that takes place not just in individuals but in groups within these worlds, has many parallels with other social research streams in LIS in particular. I feel his article serves best as an illustration of how hermeneutics can be used within such research, helping readers to understand the connections between it and other philosophical, epistemological, and methodological approaches. Lee may not specifically state all of these connections, but a reflective reader would draw much, I think, from reading his consideration of hermeneutics. Unfortunately he does not mention the hermeneutic circle, and so his article could not be considered a stand-alone introduction to hermeneutics. It is an excellent complement to Chalmers’s (2004) discussion of other aspects of hermeneutics, however. I would highly recommend Lee’s article for both its introduction to (most of) the concepts of hermeneutics and its presentation of a case study of their application.

Keywords: hermeneutics, e-mail, management information systems (MIS), information richness, media richness, context, positivism, interpretivism, distanciation, autonomization, appropriation, social construction, enactment, world

Writeup of Chalmers (2004)

Chalmers, M. (2004). Hermeneutics, information and representation. *European Journal of Information Systems*, 13(3), 210-220. doi:10.1057/palgrave.ejis.3000504

Summary

Chalmers (2004) discussed hermeneutics and semiotics and their potential applications to the design of systems for supporting computer-supported collaborative work (CSCW), comparing this approach to traditional sociology and ethnomethodology as well as giving a practical example of applying hermeneutics to design. He started by agreeing with Bannon and Bødker that there had been a “lack of focus on the common information space (CIS),” arguing that “the design of these computational representations [systems and programs], and their status as symbolic or semiological artifacts, is central to CSCW” (p. 210). Focusing on Gadamer’s hermeneutics—where “the meaning of a representation or symbol is open to interpretation ... [and] not an absolute” (p. 211)—and also drawing from Ricoeur, Chalmers noted the necessary centrality of context and situation for understanding in dialogue, which should in turn be central to a CIS. “Hermeneutic theory,” he stated, “is based on accepting the effect of this indefinite, inevitable and infinitely detailed situational background” (p. 211). An important concept in hermeneutics, the hermeneutic circle, is a circle of interpretations and meanings given to a text or language. In such a circle, “the individual and their prejudice are changed through the use of language, and the language changes through its use by individuals” (p. 212). Formalizing the language and meaning “through scientific observational procedure” causes “distanciation ... between [the] dynamically evolving language” and the formalization, thus breaking the hermeneutic circle (p. 212). Chalmers presented a set of five categories (p. 213)—phenomena, sharing, interaction, adaptation, and configurationality—that he felt were important issues to be considered when designing or evaluating a system from a hermeneutical point of view. Next, he compared hermeneutics to ethnomethodology, noting many similarities between the hermeneutic circle and the “paradox of technomethodology” raised by Dourish and Button. Ethno- and technomethodology, Chalmers argued, did not provide the necessary “degree of dialogical communication” due to “their inherent distanciation” (p. 215). He restated the concepts of “space” and “place” used by Harrison and Dourish in building a CIS; the hermeneutic circle describes how places and spaces share or differ in their social norms and languages. The last portion of Chalmers’ article provided a discussion of two design approaches: collaborative

filtering (e.g. Amazon's book recommendations based on ratings and purchases) and the path model (basing recommendations off of paths or trails of activity, rather than binary ratings). The latter in particular takes a hermeneutical approach, determining "the 'meaning' of a symbol [activity step] ... by its pattern of occurrences ... [and] co-occurrence with other symbols" in previous activity trails (p. 218). A path model would "mimimise the scale and scope of [the] formalisation" of levels of abstraction, thus producing less distanciation and breaks in the hermeneutic circle. Chalmers concluded by claiming "the possibility [that] hermeneutics [could] be a unifying meta-theory" for CSCW (p. 219).

Analysis

Chalmers's article provides an interesting application of hermeneutics to a particular research area, one that crosses disciplinary boundaries. His background is in computer science and he refers to "informatics" (in the European sense) throughout the paper, yet his arguments draw from a number of other fields as well, much like CSCW that he applies them to. However, I am unsure whether all CSCW researchers would fully and completely understand some of the discussions made of hermeneutics; while the concepts of the hermeneutic circle, the centrality of context and situation, and of distanciation are relatively easy to understand—especially if the article is summarized or outlined—Chalmers unfortunately buries other arguments and concepts in language that is difficult to grasp, even after a second look. I feel his article would not serve as a stand-alone introduction to hermeneutics for CSCW or LIS researchers because of this; it is simply a little too dense in parts. I would definitely recommend it as an additional reading, however, that would help those researchers learn more about hermeneutical approaches and their applications to information system design once they have a grasp of the basics of hermeneutics from readings that are more consistently clear and understandable. Lee (1994), in particular, is a useful complement to Chalmers's discussion and examples; Hansson (2005) also provides additional LIS context which would help.

Keywords: hermeneutics, semiotics, application, computer-supported collaborative work (CSCW), ethnomethodology, technomethodology, system design, meaning, representation, symbols, context, situation, dialogue, hermeneutic circle, formalization, distanciation, collaborative filtering, path model

Writeup of Hansson (2005)

Hansson, J. (2005). Hermeneutics as a bridge between the modern and the postmodern in library and information science. *Journal of Documentation*, 61(1), 102-113.
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Summary

Hansson's (2005) article provided an examination of the relationship between the library and information science (LIS) field and the "epistemological point of departure" of hermeneutics (p. 103); he also presented literature "that in some way relate[d] to the discussion on hermeneutics in theor[etical] or empirical LIS research" (p. 103). He felt that any discussion of "epistemology and interpretative methodology ... [should] focus on the relation between ... the core concepts of LIS: libraries, information and documents" (pp. 103-104), and argued the trend was away from an information-centered discipline to one centered on documents and documentary practices. This trend, he stated, takes "a more diversified view of scientific knowledge" (p. 105), "break[ing] with the thought of universalism" and moving away from "the existence of objective facts" (Cornelius, 1996, pp. 18-19, as cited in Hansson, 2005, p. 105). Philosophical realism—such as that advocated for by Hjørland—is in Hansson's view mostly compatible with this and with hermeneutics. However, "mind-independent reality" is not "'objective' in the sense that is required in both positivism and scientific realism"; there are in fact "several mind-independent realities working simultaneously side by side," a distinction Hansson appeared to feel Hjørland missed (p. 106). He next discussed the use of hermeneutics in LIS, noting the field's efforts "to identify itself as a [modern] science ... must today be considered as major failures" because of a lack of common method and common consideration of an object of study (p. 106). This is not a problem, however, because a *post-modern* approach—with hermeneutics providing "a kind of bridge" to this without actually being post-modern itself (p. 107)—is in Hansson's opinion more useful and fruitful. He next moved on to the work of Capurro (2000, as cited in Hansson, 2005, p. 108), who argued that "the process of storage and retrieval of information" is hermeneutic. Hansson disagreed, noting Capurro had missed the distinction between an interpretive practice and interpretation *of* that practice; he stated others have also made similar errors, particularly within the cognitive view. Hansson felt Suominen and Burnett were two scholars who had gotten this right, arguing that to reproduce knowledge and understanding one must understand culture (from Suominen) and that

hermeneutics should be used to study the creation of meaning and understanding in the interpretation of texts generated by other interpretive and cultural activities (from Burnett). Such a “cultural hermeneutics” would “escape our traditional notions of what is real and what is not” while still remaining “firmly rooted in a modern conception of science and knowledge production” (p. 110). Hansson concluded by saying further consideration of “the role of hermeneutics in LIS” was necessary to “build a bridge between [the] dichotomies” of epistemology and philosophy and towards a “post-modern, pragmatic ... intellectual climate” (p. 111).

Analysis

Hansson’s article was very useful in placing hermeneutics in the context of ongoing debate within the LIS field on its philosophical, epistemological, and theoretical basis. Because such debate is, by its nature, typically denser than average research in the field Hansson is a little hard to follow in places; I found this especially true when he discussed philosophical relativism and Hjørland’s arguments. A careful reader will certainly be able to grasp his major points without too much trouble, however, and reading portions over a second time or summarizing the main points would aid this yet further. Personally, I do agree with the idea that there are multiple interpretations of a given text, activity, or object which may be equally right—Hansson’s presentation of hermeneutics echoed Rosaldo (1993) in this—although some interpretations are more right than others and there is still room for positivistic approaches as Lee (1994) noted. Both Hansson and Lee—and indeed hermeneutics itself—strike a good balance with this, allowing for a degree of formalization to take place but realizing the resultant effects of such formalization may distance it from culture and context. To that end, I would recommend Hansson’s article as one that provides the necessary culture and context for hermeneutics in library and information science, albeit not providing a beginners-level introduction to the topic; the latter role is better although not entirely served by Lee’s article.

Keywords: hermeneutics, modern, postmodern, epistemology, philosophy, interpretative, objective, subjective, philosophical realism, multiple perspectives, interpretive practice, cultural hermeneutics