Image building in the information governance discourse: Steps to economies of meaning
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Re-conceptualizing governance and the role of meaning

‘The hegemonic principle of the manufacturing society is accumulation: that of the information society, circulation. In national accumulation, things tend to stay largely “under control”. In global circulation, things tend to fly out of control. This is at the heart of the contraction of the information society (Lash, 2002, p. 144)’

‘Anyone involved in governing, in whatever capacity or authority, forms images about what he or she is governing. Such images can be extensive in scope and based upon thorough analysis, but they can also be limited, and informed by personal experiences. Images can be clear and made explicit, or hover implicitly in the background (Kooiman, 2003, p. 29)’
Introduction

The first step in this research is to search for a deeper understanding of the global information order, the concept of governance, and their relation to each other. In this chapter I first present theoretical arguments about the evolution of economic elements in the transformation toward the information order. For this, I rely much on Scott Lash’s *Critique of Information* (2002). ‘[It] is one of the most ambitious and provocative works on the theory of the global information revolution to have appeared in recent years (Sandywell, 2003, p.109).’ I accompany the evolution of economic elements with a cybernetic argumentation on the deficiency of management concerning the information society.

Before proceeding, I must note that, although, this chapter makes frequent use of certain economic theories to develop my case, it does not intend to analyze theories such as accumulation of capital and value exchange. This also applies to the cybernetic theories I use on the concept of management. My sole and only purpose of exploring the economic and cybernetic domain in this context is to develop a grip on the idea why organizations must look beyond the established management models to make their way into the contemporary information society. Nevertheless, insight in the way economics changed in the information order – or better semiotic order as will become clear later – and how the concept of management works is required here to some extent.

To underpin the claim that management models no longer match the contemporary informational developments, another set of arguments follows on theories concerning the role of sign. This leads to the need for a concept that is complementary to established management models: governance. I then synthesize the preceding arguments for re-conceptualizing information governance and claiming the necessity of the concept of meaning in governance; hence the case for what I will denote as meaning-driven governance.

This chapter starts with the rise of new values that are inherent in the information order. This is specifically about the concept of sign-value. The chapter continues with a section that discusses the impossibility of managing sign-value and proposes the concept of information governance as a complementary discipline. It then embroiders on this theme by a section on conceptualizing the role of meaning as a core component of meaning-driven governance. The chapter closes with a conclusion of the concepts discussed and their implications in the research.

The rise of new values

Hamel (2009) has explained that the traditional management models no longer correspond to an era where information and knowledge make the difference. These models are rooted in the industrialization of the late 19th century and intended to solve two problems that were so typical for that era: the efficiency problem and the
scale problem. To be more specific, the problem of ‘getting semiskilled employees to perform repetitive activities competently, diligently and efficiently (ibid., p. 92),’ and ‘coordinating those efforts in ways that enabled complex goods and services to be produced in large quantities (ibid., p. 92).’ In the industrial era, the central theme in the management discipline was the optimization of scarce resources through well-defined structures and processes that permeate the entire organization. It is a legacy from capitalistic businesses, where transaction costs between contracted market parties dominate decision-making (Williamson, 1981; Ciborra, 2000). In the information era, however, the essence of management is no longer the optimization of scarce resources, but making responsible choices in the abundant informational opportunities offered by new technologies. Making responsible choices has different philosophical roots; it is associated with abundance, collaboration, durability, and is non-systematic. In this paragraph, I will investigate this idea from a socioeconomic perspective.

The focus on resource optimization is rooted in the ‘productionist paradigm associated with the great classics of political economy – the Scottish moral philosophers and Marxian economic theorists of history (Janos, 1997, p. 122).’ In brief summary, productionism is a three-tier construct on the premise, that when the means of production change, there is a change of social segregation as well as a change in the structure and exercise of the public authority (ibid.). Productionism addresses the relationship dynamics of humanity with its environment, such as nature and other human beings. The overarching idea is that ‘humanity is guided, first and foremost, by its material needs; that the prevalence of material scarcities requires a Promethean effort to control the forces of our object environment (ibid., p. 121).’ The essence of the productionist view boils down to the question of how productivity can be raised and made better, to a level still acceptable for the individual workers to have time left for their own well-being or leisure, all based on the assumption that man’s needs are increasing and its desire for wealth is endless. This involves a constant search for efficiency and effectiveness of resources used for production.

In the information order, the ‘mediation’ of society puts another perspective on the productionist view because it affects the traditional value systems. This is a central theme in Lash’s Critique of Information – following media theory, every practice, every activity, becomes ‘media-ted’ once a society comes under the sign of the information order. Lash explored McLuhan’s dictum ‘the medium is the message’ at depth, using Peirce’s semiotic triangle to answer questions such as ‘What happens if the medium replaces the manufacturing and industrial commodity?’ ‘What happens if information becomes dominant in accumulating value following the means-end scheme of Karl Marx’s labor theory of value (Lash, 2009, p. 84)?’ This theme is the point of departure for the remainder of the discussion on the rise of new values.

For the sake of my argumentation, I indicate the evolution of orders as the traditional order, the industrial order, and the semiotic order. If we examine the
means and the ends during the evolution of these orders, we see that they – means and ends – are changing over time. Traditionally ‘the good life was the end and manufacturing, i.e. the transformation of nature, was the means (ibid., p. 83).’ With the industrial revolution, a different set of means developed. Instead of using manual labor, the industrial means were ‘on the one hand, the informational and symbolic labour of clerks, bankers, professional engineers and the like, on the other, ideology. Ideology – as a superstructure – functioned as means to the end of the accumulation of industrial capital (ibid., p. 83).’ Lash (2009) has pointed out that our systems of belief with its symbolic power were at the basis to accumulate industrial capital. With the contemporary informational developments, information and ideology no longer are the means; they have become ends, the accumulated informational capital. Moreover, in this semiotic order, the ends of the industrial order, the instruments, the industrial capital, have become the means to reproduce information. Lash (ibid.) called this a second order instrumental rationality; indeed a great part of the industrial manufacturing sectors currently produces goods that enable the information society. For example, computers, communication networks and devices are all fueling those sectors that make up the information economy, an economy, where ideology and information have become the new capital and merchandize.

The changes we see in the means and ends, with the semiotic order succeeding the industrial order, is not simply a shift in means and ends that compares to the industrial order following up on the traditional order. With the rise, of the semiotic order, we are witnessing a fundamental change: means are becoming ends and simultaneously the economic value system as a whole is changing with it. It is typical for the industrial order that, from an economical perspective, value transfers from forms of life (labor) to goods as empty substances. Value becomes exchange-value, in a sense that it no longer represents the real value of labor, goods, and more specific, resources, but the subjectivity of rational choice and selection criteria that the market presents. Productionism of capital has its focus on resource optimization in order to increase value concepts such as exchange-value, capital value – constant capital as in machine and variable capital as in labor power – and money capital. According to Lash (2009), the dominant productionism of capital ‘destroys and negates value as inscribed in forms of life, in activities, in practices (ibid., p. 84).’ Lash argued that this becomes even worse, when the sign of the semiotic order infuses the accumulation of value. Although this still is capitalism, the idea of capital, value, has become fundamentally different in the semiotic order. Lash leaned on Baudrillard (1998) to use the idea of sign-value in order to emphasize the abstracted value that relocates from the commodity to the sign itself. Sign-value, similar to exchange-value and surplus-value, has more to do with the absence of value in the sense of Marxian labor theory of value (Lash, 2009). Sign-value was the argument from the early Baudrillard to supplement the Marxian economic theories with semiological theories to conceptualize the phenomena that arise with the increasing
awareness for *demand management* in the postmodern consumer society (Kellner, 2007).

Until now, I assumed productionism as the philosophical basis in my line of thought. At this point, I introduce its counterpart, consumptionism, in order to get a better understanding of sign-value in relation to the consumer society. Consumptionism, a term coined by the economist Reisman (1964), is a countering economic theory that puts consumption at the center of gravity and leaves the means of production for what it is. Reisman (ibid.) spoke slightlying about this opposing economic position as the *anti-economics*. He argued, ‘\[T\]he problem of economic life is now often believed to be how to expand the need and desire to consume so that consumption may be adequate to production [...] it proceeds [...] as though the problem of economic life were not the production of wealth, but the production of consumption (ibid., p. 544).’ The continuing attention to optimize production eventually leads to a saturation point where optimization is no longer possible. This drives capitalist corporations to reinforce the need for production by focusing their strategies on managing and augmenting demand. Put differently, corporations are following a regime that Baudrillard (1998) explained as sign-value. On Baudrillard’s account, ‘commodities are not merely to be characterized by use-value and exchange-value, as in Marx’s theory of the commodity, but sign-value – the expression of mark and style, prestige, luxury, power, and so on – becomes an increasingly important part of the commodity and consumption (Kellner, 2007, para. 1).’ Depending on, for example, the type, brand, or size of commodities, consumers gain prestige and standing in the realm of sign-value. For example, while both being a car representing a means for transportation, a Rolls Royce gives a different standing than the average family car. According to Baudrillard (1998), the proliferation of commodities together with how we market them, package them, display them, and the use of mass media, significantly increases the amount of signs and thereby creating proliferated sign-value. In his view, the rising mediated consumer society follows a different economic logic than Reisman’s, because use-value as well as sign-value are of importance to consumers. This is where Lash (2002) has advanced on, by designating the processes of signification, so common in the information society, to sign-value.

From the perspective of the evolution of orders – traditional, industrial, and semiotic – the preceding treatise shows that new values emerge with significant consequences. Developments in the contemporary information society violate the means-ends distinction. For example, disorganizations, in contrast to communities, are both means and ends in the semiotic order (Lash, 2002). Lash (ibid.) denoted the shift from traditional to industrial order as a change from a system of needs to a system of interests. As this chapter develops, we will see that sign-value is a significant part of many meaning-making concepts, making it appropriate to denote

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12 See also the discussion on disorganizations on page 4.
the shift toward the semiotic order as a shift toward a system of meaning. Table 5 summarizes some of the characteristics discussed here with the evolution of orders.

Table 5: Characteristics of the evolving orders

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aspect</th>
<th>Traditional order (Labor)</th>
<th>Industrial order (Production)</th>
<th>Semiotic order (Consumption)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Means</td>
<td>Manufacturing (transformation of nature)</td>
<td>Informational and symbolic labor of clerks, bankers, professional</td>
<td>Reproduction of information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Goods are the means to the ends of the good life</td>
<td>engineers, etc. (Marx’s economic base)</td>
<td>Production of information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Ideology (Marx’s superstructure)</td>
<td>Exponential growth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Computational reality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ends</td>
<td>The good life</td>
<td>Manufacturing and goods instruments (industrial capital)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Efficiently large quantities</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Value</td>
<td>Labor-value</td>
<td>Exchange-value, use-value</td>
<td>Sign-value</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ontology</td>
<td>Staying alive</td>
<td>Producing</td>
<td>Interpreting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Episteme</td>
<td>System of needs</td>
<td>System of interests</td>
<td>System of meaning</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From managing resources to governing the sign

In the light of the consumptionist view, how does sign-value relates to the semiotic order? The extensive digitalization of our society has made the reproduction of information much easier than its production – create once, copy anywhere. Information becomes abundantly available, making it more difficult to find our way in it, than producing it (Shapiro & Varian, 1999). Like Kallinikos (2006) has pointed out, information has its own self-referential logic to grow. Therefore, from a productionist perspective, producing information seems not much of a problem; it is always there, always available, and we take its availability for granted. The point I want to make here is that ‘management’ of superfluous always-available information, is from a different order than the management of resources. Managing resources pursues, among others, to keep processes efficient, handle scarcity of resources, with the objective of fulfilling contracted transactions. It assumes information as mere objectified resources, the optimization of information that is codified into systems as data. This enables us to practice the exchanging and trading of data; the dominant mode of operation that uses the laws of the perfect market to realize value (Huizing, 2007a). For example, organizations make frequent use of systems for enterprise resource planning, order management, or customer relationship management, which exemplifies the dominance of productionism from an information perspective. In the contemporary information society, however, we
do more than solely informing ourselves with data that is, for example, created by statistical analysis or database extracts; data that resides in systems as technological information (Kallinikos, 2006). Today, we are facing a mediated society that makes extensive use of information and technology immanently and abundantly available (Kallinikos, 2006; Lash, 2002).

From the notion that consumptionism corresponds to a society where information is always and abundantly available (Lash, 2002; Baudrillard, 1998), we must ‘manage’ the sign-value to control the informational processes in the semiotic order. The debate on ‘managing’ sign-value is exactly the argument I want to make in this chapter: sign-value is not manageable as in the traditional sense of management, as resources, as in productionism, as in the way we did in the previous orders – traditional and industrial. Put differently, how can we escape the dominant productionist view (paradigm) in the information society? I propose that governance models will better correspond to deal with sign-value.\(^\text{13}\) In what follows, I will explain that management concepts, in several ways, fundamentally differ from governance, using, among others, the theoretical insights from Introna (1997) that approaches the concept of management from a cybernetic perspective.

**A first-order cybernetic perspective**

It is quite common to see the term governance interchangeably used with good management, so the obvious question to start with is, ‘what exactly is management?’ Weill and Ross (2004) have made an explicit difference between management and governance: ‘Governance refers to what decisions must be made to ensure effective management and use of IT (decision domains) and who makes the decisions (locus of accountability for decision-making). Management involves making and implementing decisions [emphasis added] (Khatri & Brown, 2010, pp. 148).’ Drucker has defined management from a knowledge perspective: ‘Supplying knowledge to find out how existing knowledge can best be applied to produce results is, in effect, what we mean by management (Drucker, 1993, p. 42).’ Introna (1997) listed some examples from other writers: ‘Management may be defined as getting things done through others (Holt, 1987).’ ‘Management is the process undertaken by one or more individuals to coordinate the activities of others to achieve results not achievable by one individual alone (Donnelly & Gibson, 1990).’ Common in most definitions is that there is a wish to get something effectively done, through others in an efficient way (Introna, 1997). These sorts of definitions are for my purpose too obvious because they do not reflect on why we need management in the first place, and what the ‘mechanics’ are that makes management distinctively different than governance.

Introna’s exploration of the concept of management through cybernetic descriptions gives more insight in these issues (ibid.).\(^\text{14}\) He has pictured a first-order

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\(^{13}\) Henceforth I will refrain from using the term management if it relates to sign-value.

\(^{14}\) It concerns here the new cybernetics, the cybernetics led forward by the thinkers Maturana and
cybernetic description of management as a system in its environment, controlled by a management control system. The controlling system, the manager, decides what action to take, based on its inscribed logic and the signals from the controlled system in its environment. The latter is subjected to many varieties, due to its environment, therefore, according to the law of requisite variety (Ashby, 1957), the manager is focusing on handling resources in order to create a stable situation of the system (Introna, 1997). In organizational terms: managers are continuously aligning their capabilities, resources, to match the changing needs of enterprises business processes. To manage successfully, one needs to maintain equilibrium at all levels of the first-order description of management: the controlling system, the controlled system, and the environment. This needs an ongoing effort from the manager and reveals the flaw in this concept: explosion of varieties in the situation to be controlled, overloads the manager to maintain a stable situation. On the one hand, we need more variety to control, while on the other hand we try to reduce variety aiming for stability. Introna (ibid.) called this the management paradox and argued that many management models try to answer this dilemma. In first-order cybernetic management the underlying principle, the ‘mechanics’, of management is the control of resources, through negative feedback, in order to keep a stable system in its environment to ensure long-term survival. To achieve this, a system must match the variety of the environment and the management system must equally match the resulting systems variety. Organizations must continuously scan the environment, which makes strategic management from a first-order cybernetic management perspective a mere resource alignment exercise to fulfill supply to demand, fulfill contracted transactions. To put this in the perspective of the contemporary information society: resource alignment without the notion of sign-value in the processes that constitute the semiotic order.

A second-order cybernetic perspective

The underlying principle of the first-order cybernetic description of management is the separation of thinking and doing; to manage, is to control a system’s resources based on representations from its environment. In contrast to first-order thinking, the second-order theory approach is non-deterministic in a sense that it is rooted in, what is called, operational closure. When a system is operationally closed, it behaves according to its internal structure, aiming for internal coherence and perfection. The external environment only triggers system activities, but does not determine them. Operational closure does not mean that

Varela (1980) to develop the concept of autopoiesis, first introduced in their work Autopoiesis And Cognition The Realization Of The Living.

According to Ashby’s law of requisite variety, a system is controllable, if and only if the controlling system is able to handle all varieties that influence the system; if the control system ‘can generate the requisite variety to equal the variety generated by the system it wishes to control (Introna, 1997).’

Maturana and Varela (1980) explained the concept of operational closure with the analogy of an imaginary submarine with people who have never been outside the submarine. The people inside the
a system is isolated from its environment; the system can adapt to changes in the environment but has enough logic to maintain itself as a whole without determination by its environment. Input from the environment becomes a perturbation. To be more specific in the practice of management, ‘[t]he most primordial understanding that people have of their work is what is required to get the job done; be it answering phone calls, writing letters or having a chat in the corridor [emphasis added] (Introna, 1997, p. 103).’ This is a canonical example of what Maturana and Varela (1980) called an autopoietic system, a system consisting of a network of production processes that, through their interactions and transformations, continuously regenerates itself, in co-evolution with its environment. In what follows, I will show that a second-order management concept looks more promising to deal with sign-value, but still is insufficient for organizations to make responsible choices in the contemporary information society.

With a second-order perspective on management of organizations, two fundamental questions rise: 1) how do these (social) systems maintain internal coherence and 2) how do these systems evolve. In management terms, how do organizations keep up to get the job done, and how do they embrace change from the environment? First, organizations, like social systems, pursue identity, using organizational language as a mechanism to maintain internal coherence. This organizational language is a cultural web of symbols, stories, myths, and rituals that permeate power structures, organizational structures, and control systems (Ward & Peppard, 1996). Language is a semiotic system in which signification is a cardinal function, making sign-value inseparable connected with language. Therefore, sign-value is important because the interconnectedness through language makes a second-order cybernetics management internally coherent. This is promising, but, in order to make the second-order cybernetics management concept useful in making responsible choices in the contemporary information society, it needs more than merely focusing on getting the job done. In order to be successful, systems must maintain internal coherence – identity, as well as adapting to changes in their environment (Introna, 1997, p. 109). This concerns the second question: how do social systems evolve? More precisely, how do organizations develop against the background of the contemporary information society?

Maturana and Varela (1980) argued with their theory of autopoiesis that living systems – organizations – structurally couple with their environment through repeated interactions. This induces structural change in the system, be it though not determined by the environment because the system still defines by itself what submarine operate levers and knobs based on the reading of instruments. People outside the submarine see the submarine navigating carefully around dangerous cliffs. The people inside the submarine would have been most surprised and not even know what they where talking about, if the people outside the submarine would explain what they saw – they never heard of this thing called submarine.
changes it wants to make (Maturana & Varela, 1980). This shows that organizations make choices to what extent they implement changes in order to adapt the environment. If they go too far – applying radical change – change can jeopardize their internal coherence, their identity, and possibly destroy the organization as a whole. ‘If structural coupling is maintained, then radical change need not happen. It should only be necessary in situations of structural dislocation, violent intervention. A strategy of pre-empting structural drift may be very dangerous, yet sometimes the only option for survival, for structural drift takes time (Introna, 1997, p. 110).’ Many organizations cannot sustain in the contemporary information society by adapting small changes – structural drift – through structured coupling with the environment. They come to suddenly realize things must radically change or they will collapse. The question rises how they became aware that they need that radical change. Does cognition, following Varela and Maturana (1980), help organizations to advance on the changing environment, or are they, metaphorically speaking, the fish swimming in water without knowing what this water is? Cyberneticians would ask, ‘What, or who, observes the observer of the observed system?’

From the second-order management concept, we may gain the following insights with regard to management and sign-value. First, the language – and thus sign-value – that organizations develop is internal focused, on operational efficiency – getting the job done. It would take a long time to include the fundamental changes the contemporary information society brings along with it, as its evolution is more the result of perturbations from the environment instead of well-thought decisions. Second, the interaction with the environment is more an exchange of ‘energy’, as in the theories from Varela and Maturana (ibid.), than an informational exchange that could underpin responsible choices in a world of superfluous always-available information. Co-evolution assumes that system and environment evolve at equal speeds, neglecting structural dislocation or violent intervention concerning the environment. As soon as we start observing the relationship between the organization and environment, we ‘fall back’ into first-order thinking (Boxer & Kenny, 1990; Kenny, 2009). Put differently, we end up doing deterministic resource management.

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17 This is what Maturana and Varela (1980) have described as a theory of cognition, also known as the Santiago-theory, which directly connects to the theory of autopoiesis. Organisms decide by themselves to which external influences they react. This is the key to the Santiago-theory of cognition. Organisms store structural change over time. Because every structural change influences future behavior, the structure dictates the behavior of living organisms. According to Maturana and Varela (ibid.), the structure of a living system therefore determines its behavior (Capra, 2002).

18 To name a few examples: When Microsoft realized that the effect of the Internet on personal computing was exponentially increasing, it made a radical change to include internet technologies in their strategy. Nokia was the undisputed market leader in mobile telephony for years. The rise of the smart-phones put them behind the market substantially. They quickly changed their strategy and replaced the senior management team in no time without mercy.
The problem with a second-order cybernetic management concept is the constant dilemma organizations face: driving for internal efficiency or adapting to the changing environment – the logical consequence of operational closure. A second-order cybernetic management concept is insufficient for organizations to make responsible choices in the contemporary information society. Table 6 summarizes the differences between first and second-order management concepts.

**Table 6: First-order versus second-order cybernetic management concept**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aspect</th>
<th>Cybernetic management concept</th>
<th>First-order</th>
<th>Second-order</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Assumption</td>
<td>Input-type thinking</td>
<td></td>
<td>Closure-type thinking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Objective</td>
<td>Transformation of input through representations from the environment to control system resources (maximal fitting the environment)</td>
<td>Getting the job done with minimal environmental disturbances</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environmental coupling</td>
<td>Hierarchical (a system in its environment)</td>
<td>Structural (co-evolving self-producing systems)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behavior</td>
<td>Deterministic</td>
<td></td>
<td>Autopoietic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coherence</td>
<td>Determined structure controlled by inscribed logic of the controlling system</td>
<td></td>
<td>Interconnectedness through language</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**The changing environment**

The notion of the environment is a recurring theme when studying system theories – how should a system ‘behave’ regarding its environment? In the first-order cybernetic management concept, the objective of a system is to create a maximum fit with its environment through representations of this environment. Its characteristics will define the point where the system will exhaust – the system is no longer capable in following the environment. The second-order cybernetic management concept merely treats the environment as a perturbation because its focus is to get the job done – the concept of operational closure. Organizations working according to the second-order management concept are caught in between their quest for internal efficiency and their desire to adapt to the changing environment – the consequence of operational closure.

This reverts to Ashby’s law of requisite variety: ‘only variety can destroy variety (Ashby, 1957, p. 207).’ According to Schwaninger (2009) the law of requisite variety is greatly misunderstood because organizations often introduce

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19 Although Ashby’s original publication in *An Introduction to Cybernetics* of his theorem on the law of Requisite Variety states ‘only variety can destroy variety’, many state it as ‘only variety can absorb variety’. In his work on the ‘viable system model,’ Stafford Beer added the word ‘absorb’ to this (Schwaninger, 2009).
unmanageable structural complexities to manage environmental change. Organizations should rather look for their own variety, *eigen-variety* as Schwaninger (2009) called it, and attenuate foreign variety ‘as well as to select or create a milieu the organization can cope with (Schwaninger, ibid., p. 14).’ The challenge is to balance the *eigen-variety* and foreign variety. Probably the most comprehensive model able to handle the environmental dilemma is Beer’s viable system model (Beer, 1984). One of the core characteristics of the viable system model is that it separates operational tasks from strategic responses to the environment using a supervisory subsystem that balances the operational tasks and the strategic tasks. According to Schwaninger (2009) a complicated strategy does not work well to handle variety because it relies on too many elements such as agents or people. Adaptive strategies seem more effective because they ‘are based on enhancing the repertory of behavior of the agents or on strengthening their network of relationships (ibid., p. 15).’

This corresponds with the point I want to make: organizations must develop a range of skills — a repertory, a discourse — that allow them to make responsible choices because traditional management models do not match the contemporary information society. With the skills for developing responsible choices, I refer to the balancing act that organizations need to adapt to the contemporary information society — the environment. Following Beer (1984) and Schwaninger (2009), they need to include these skills in their strategic tasks while avoiding complicated management systems to do so.

At this point, we can pay more attention to the idea of *making responsible choices*, which is a logical implication of the contemporary information society for organizations. What do we exactly mean with ‘responsible choices’? To be more specific, what do we mean with *responsible* in this context?

**Making responsible choices**

If someone makes a responsible choice, it implies that this *someone* has knowledge about the context, the environment, in which *something* and an *other-one* reside. Being responsible for a choice in this, means that this *someone* has well thought about the choice; thinking about the implications for him, the *other-one*, the *something*, and the environment. It means this *someone* considers the condition of the *other-one*, the *something*, and the environment. It means this *someone* is making a choice holistically, weighs up the pros and cons, possibly thinks of alternatives, using a language — it involves thought — based on a philosophical belief and experiences. To do this, this *someone* assumes specific outcomes of the choice. These outcomes are the results of language that enables this *someone* to conceptualize them. This view is very different from making choices rationally, as we have seen in the first-order cybernetic management concept. In fact, from that perspective, we cannot make any choices with first-order management; it is input-type thinking, meaning the output is linearly depending on the input. The output follows the input mechanically based on the rules embedded in the control system,
and if we look back to the sequences of changes, they build up on each other, meaning, it is historical. In an organizational context, it would mean it follows the rules of capitalistic businesses, where transaction costs between contracted market parties dominate decision making (Ciborra, 2000). Making responsible choices for organizations in the contemporary information society means they consider the impact of new values—sign-value—against the background of the environment they operate in, do business in. They consider the social constructions, the new forming institutions that violate the means-end differentiation, which the semiotic order brings (Lash, 2002). Table 7 lists some aspects of rationally managing resources—making rational choices—together with aspects of making responsible choices.

Table 7: Rational management compared to responsible choices

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rationally managing resources</th>
<th>Making responsible choices</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mechanistic through feedback</td>
<td>Consider implications</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linear</td>
<td>Assume a certain outcome</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Historical</td>
<td>Consider alternatives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transaction costs</td>
<td>Holistic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rule-based</td>
<td>Include the other-one</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mathematical</td>
<td>Durable, long-living</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Logical</td>
<td>Based on philosophical belief</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Systematic</td>
<td>Through language</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the previous section, it became clear that a second-order management concept has some of the ingredients needed to make responsible choices, but it is stuck in the middle of the paradoxical problem of internal efficiency versus adapting to the changing environment. A third-order management concept includes the social aspects; as a matter of speaking—the way cyberneticians do—it considers the observer of the observer of the observed system.

**A third-order cybernetic perspective**

First-order cybernetics does not include the observer in the total description of the system; it focuses merely on the mechanics of the system. ‘The observer, whenever he did appear, was made to appear as if he was unilaterally and objectively set apart from the system he was describing (Boxer & Kenny, 1990, p. 2).’ The shift to the second-order cybernetics therefore included the observer as part of the system. Where the first-order cybernetics was clear about the purpose of the system, the second-order cybernetics did not clearly focused on the purpose of the observer. In the second-order cybernetics ‘we enter a domain of puzzlement and confusion insofar as the issues cannot be resolved in “right” or “wrong” or “true” or “false”. This is a domain of self-referential paradoxes, where the requirement is to be reflexive—to include oneself-as-observer in one’s explanations of observers observing observed systems (Boxer & Kenny, 1990, p. 2).’
The development of cybernetic concepts did not always result in crisp and clear definitions of the various cybernetic orders. This is due to the involvement of various disciplinary backgrounds and different opinions on philosophical points of view (Corona & Thomas, 2010). Sometimes order, cybernetic direction, and phenomena partly even overlap each other (Melnychenko, 2002). The work of Umpleby on cybernetics is noteworthy, because he has put the various points of view in perspective and developed it toward third-order cybernetics, a social cybernetics as he called it (Umpleby 2005a, 2005b, 2007a, 2007b). Where the second-order cybernetics tries to answer how the observer constructs a reality describing the system, the third-order cybernetics tries to explain how people deal with social systems through language and concepts (Umpleby, 2007a).

Umpleby (2007a) advanced on Von Foerster’s epistemological triangle – cognition, description, and world – by associating the three sides of the triangle with the three orders of cybernetics (see Figure 2) (Von Foerster, 1971). He has labeled the relation between world and cognition as pragmatics, as in ‘trial on error, learning by doing, and the development and use of methods rather than theories (Umpleby, 2007a, p. 5).’

![Figure 2: Unifying epistemologies according to Umpleby (2007a)](image)

Umpleby proposed with the model, as shown in Figure 2, that the underlying epistemologies are part of a bigger whole (Umpleby, 2007a). Taking a stance on one of them depends on one’s purpose; the others can support as secondary perspectives. Although the triangle is simply a graphical representation of ideas, it

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20 Umpleby has referred to the philosophical positions from Popper, von Foerster, and Kuhn, to indicate the epistemological views for the first, second, and third-order cybernetics successively: ‘realist view – knowledge is a “picture” of reality, a biological view – how the brain functions, and a pragmatic view – knowledge is constructed to achieve human purpose; [it tries to explain] how the world works, how an individual constructs a “reality,” [and] how people create, maintain, and change social systems through language and ideas (from the table that lists the three versions of cybernetics in Umpleby, 2007a).’ Umpleby’s model resembles the semiotic triangle according to Peirce; I will elaborate on semiotic concepts in chapter 4.
shows that the three cybernetics-orders are related. It is not a matter of choosing one order above the other, but using all three. It is important here to note that the cybernetic concepts are inclusive in a sense that the second order includes the first order, and the third order includes the second-order (Umpleby, 2005).

Third-order cybernetics arose from the need to study the subjectivity of the observer involved in the second-order cybernetics. It is about the use of language and the cause of ideas in the interaction among people in social systems (Umpleby, 2007a). It tries to go beyond the dilemmas introduced by the second-order cybernetics – internal consistence versus adapting to the environment. The premises of the third-order perspective is the intended dialogue with the environment in which it weighs the evolutionary progress from the system – organization – with the paradigms that develop in and through the environment.

A third-order cybernetic management concept – I question whether we can still call this management – considers the changing world, the changing environment where new Kuhnian paradigms develop (Kuhn, 1970). It addresses how we can find the need to follow strategies of preempting structural drift, which Introna has referred to, when a structured coupling with the environment is insufficient (Introna, 1997, p. 110). A third-order perspective allows us to deal with social systems through language and concepts, taking in account the identities, the humans, which are part of the observing processes (Umpleby, 2007a; Boxer & Kenny, 1990). It allows us to write, speak, or think about the informational experience that the contemporary information society gives us, and its effects on the basic premises of organizational practices. A third-order cybernetic concept carries with it the ingredients to consider the someone, the something, the other-one, and the environment, which we need in making responsible choices. To be more specific, it allows us to deal with sign-value.

**Governing sign-value**

I started this paragraph with the idea that management of superfluous always-available information is from a different order than the management of resources. The premise that sign-value in the semiotic order is a different concept than the value concepts of exchange-value and use-value in the industrial order, together with the consumptionist perspective, was the motivation to look at the concept of management through a cybernetic lens (Baudrillard, 1998; Lash, 2002, Introna 1997, Umpleby 2007a). I reasoned that more than simple mechanistic management, as in first-order cybernetic management concept, or *getting the job done*, as in the second-order cybernetic management concept, is necessary for organizations to sustain in the contemporary information society. I argued that sign-value is not manageable as in the traditional sense of management, as resources, as in

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21 First-order cybernetics assumed objectivity, the observer and the observed are not connected; the second-order cybernetics assumed an identity – subjectivity – as part of the observing process (Boxer & Kenny, 1990).
productionism, as in the way we did in the previous orders – traditional and industrial.

The concept of governance, as discussed in chapter 1, can fill in the deficiencies for management practices in organizations to deal with contemporary information developments. It has the necessary perspectives that are complementary to traditional management activities – making responsible choices in a world where information is superfluous and abundantly available. As I have shown earlier, to make responsible choices, we must able to write, speak, or think about the informational experience that the contemporary information society gives us; put differently, we need a discourse that includes sign-value. This is specific to the (emerging) discipline of information governance. The latter lacks, however, the ‘language’ to have this necessary discourse, a discourse that needs to center on the concept of meaning in order to address sign-value. In the next paragraph, I will explore the role of meaning in governance in order to conceptualize meaning-driven governance, which is able to include sign-value in the information governance discourse.

Meaning–driven governance

In line with Hamel (2009), I conclude that the traditional management practices for organizations do not correspond to an era where information is abundantly available, the information era. In the previous paragraph, I argued that traditional management practices focus on resource management and getting the job done. These practices cannot consider the concept of sign-value, because they restrict themselves to first-order and second-order cybernetic concepts. The concept of governance goes beyond the perspectives of first-order and second-order cybernetics because it includes the social dimension (Kooiman, 2003). A dimension, that corresponds with the third-order cybernetic concept, which uses language and ideas to develop and adapt social systems (Umpleby, 2007a). As such, governance, and in particular information governance, seems more appropriate to consider the phenomena with sign-value that develop in the contemporary information society.

Innovation

The third-order cybernetic concept considers the environment – adapting social systems. In management terms, this is about innovation, adapting strategies to change the course of an enterprise – the system. Innovation activities in organizations concern the effectiveness of their products and its efficiency in its production process, but they also concern strategic business questions such as competitive positioning and market share. Innovation requires organizations to

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22 I assume here innovation not limited to business. Innovation is a broad term derived from Latin innovatus, the noun form of innovare, which means to renew or change. It stems from in (into) + novus (new). In business contexts, innovation is concerned about new products and services to gain market
observe the world ‘out-there’ to find their competency gaps and, when necessary, restructure ‘the cognitive and organizational contexts that endow the practices, routines, and skills at hand with meaning (Ciborra, 2002, p. 46).’ Against the background of the contemporary information society, this could mean radical innovation, in which organizations face the need to develop new competencies that can effectively apply the aspects of the semiotic order, such as technological information and sign-value, to increase their market – create new meaning to their market instead of pushing new products (Verganti, 2009).

Innovation processes are not easy because preexisting cognitive frames and institutional contexts prevent organizations from recognizing and exploiting the potentials. The prologue to any innovation in organizations is a process that involves creativity, the production of novel and useful ideas in any domain by individuals and teams. However, successfully introducing creative ideas with local knowledge is not a sufficient condition for innovation. Successful innovation also comes from ideas that originate elsewhere – as in technology transfer (Amabile et al., 1996). 23 In our context, exponential growth of information, computational rendition of reality, as well as sign-value, are aspects of the contemporary information society that influence innovation activities in organizations. The processes that are involved in innovation, from a governance perspective, rely on how governing actors ascribe meaning to things, situations, or opportunities, which involve sign-value (Lash, 2002; Kallinikos, 2005, 2006; Ciborra, 2000, 2002).

**Governing images**

Following the third-order cybernetic perspective, governance and innovation require a dialogue with the environment. The concept of governing images is a key concept to understand this dialogue (Kooiman, 2003), because it enables governing actors to consider sign-value and ascribe meaning to it.

As discussed earlier, the formation of images – governing images – is an unavoidable concept in governance; it does not matter what role or authority we have when we are governing, we will always form images about what we are governing. 24 ‘Such images can be extensive in scope and based on thorough analysis, but they can also be limited, and informed by personal experiences. Images can be clear and made explicit, or they hover implicitly in the background [Emphasis added] (ibid., p. 29).’

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23 Technology transfer is the process where one gains access to scientific and technological developments and turn them into practical and commercially relevant applications and products.

24 See the introduction of the concept of governing images in Chapter 1 on page 12.
Besides that experience and knowledge processes contribute to the formation of governing images, they also build up through ‘implicit ideas of man and society (ibid., p. 29).’ Governing actors have (un)conscious, explicit, and implicit assumptions about what they need to govern and about the environment in which they govern. The formation of governing images is a socially, culturally, and institutionally conditioned process that is rich of communication. Communication here is, on the one hand, interpretative, as a combination of language, meaning, interpretation, sharing, and ambiguity. On the other hand it is deterministic, any combination of channels, networks, flows, measurement, or cognition (Kooiman, 2003, p. 38). Organizations, communities, institutes, they all have their own ‘language’ and interpret information in their own unique way (Fish, 1980; Ward & Peppard, 1996). They are the context and place, where we form, discuss, and test governing images on governance issues at hand.

Image formation in the semiotic order

The previous paragraph evidently shows that knowledge processes, the ‘language’ of organizations, and implicit assumptions constitute the process of image building. In the context of the semiotic order, image formation exhibits complex and multidimensional processes.

First, the processes involved in forming governing images take place in large ecosystems of practices and information infrastructures, supported by the new media technologies that make up the ‘media-ted’ society (Lash, 2002; Kallinikos, 2005, 2006). Second, following Kallinikos (2005, 2006), information in these ecosystems is as a fabric, an immanent plane that deeply penetrates organizations and institutions – we do not realize it is there, always entangled in people’s thinking and doing; as Kooiman stated ‘images […] implicitly hover in the background (2003, p. 29).’ Third, following Lash’s idea of a mediated information society fed by self-propelling information processes that are out of control (Lash 2002; Kallinikos, 2005, 2006), the knowledge processes involved in forming images are anything but simple linear, straight-forward, or predictable.

According to Lash (2003), knowledge processes obey the non-linear notion of reflexivity theory in social sciences. The major assumption in non-linear reflexivity is the concept of non-linear social systems. Linear systems have a single point of equilibrium and ‘only external forces can disturb this equilibrium and lead to system

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25 Reflexivity theory in social sciences concerns the case where cause and effect affect one another. The individual agent becomes aware of the forces that influence socialization and adjust his/her position in the social structure accordingly. Lash’s interpretation of reflexivity theory radically differs from Beck, who has enquired politics, and Giddens, who has theorized the social processes in a post-traditional society (Beck et al., 1994). In his theory, Lash replaced social structures by information and communication structures, and included both the aesthetic dimension and the phenomenon of communities with it. This resulted in a new idea of reflexive structure, aesthetics, and community (Han, 2010).
change (Lash, 2003, p. 50).’ Non-linear reflexivity presumes non-linear systems, which behave differently; Lash (2003) has described this as follows:

‘Here system dis-equilibrium and change are produced internally to the system through feedback loops. These are open systems. Reflexivity now is at the same time system de-stabilization. Complex systems do not simply reproduce. They change. It is the “chaos” or noise of the unintended consequences that leads to system dis-equilibrium [emphasis in original] (Lash, 2003, p. 50).’

Reflexivity-based knowledge contrasts reflection-based knowledge. The latter ‘presumes apodictic knowledge and certainty. It presumes a dualism, a scientific attitude in which the subject is in one realm, the object of knowledge in another (Lash, 2003, p. 51).’ We need reflexive knowledge to make the choices that Beck, Giddens, and Lash (1994) argued about: we presently face the type of choices that previous generations did not need to make.26 Lash (2003) has stated, that in the semiotic order these choices must also be made fast, as in a reflex. Reflexes are indeterminate and immediate; they allow us to make quick decisions, sometimes based on intuition. The way we handle and integrate in our lives, the flows of signs, the abundance of information, media, and technology implies that we build up knowledge in a non-linear reflexive manner. In the semiotic order, we do not have ‘sufficient reflective distance on ourselves to construct linear and narrative biographies (Lash, 2003, p. 51).’ In contrast, of what we might wish for, in the semiotic order we have neither the time nor the space available to be reflective and build up knowledge in that way. Instead, we quickly make use of the flow of opportunities that rise through the various information sources we have instantly available. They allow us to network, to construct alliances, and making deals fast. Reflexivity-based knowledge is typical for the semiotic order (Lash, 2002; 2003).

In the semiotic order, the flows of signs, information, media, and technology are more determining the social order than the hard nature of structure. Organizations and institutes involved in the processes of image building, increasingly see these processes mediated through technologies, making them transcendental to structures in the traditional sense. Technologies have become an integral part of our life, and we experience the world by using technological systems (Lash, 2002, p.15). Lash (2002) submitted the idea of a technological form of life, not as a cyborg-like life form,27 but as a way of living in which we interface with all sorts of technology – a coupling, a joining of organic and technological systems. It is a life dominated by connectedness that, for example, uses the Internet in fulfilling our profession, socialize, and relaxing. ‘We do not merge with these systems, but we face our environment in our interface with technological systems (Lash, 2002, p. 15).’ In our

26 Questions of the previous generations that Beck et al. (1994) refers to are reflective questions; they belong to the philosophy of consciousness. ‘To reflect is to somehow subsume the object under the subject of knowledge (Lash, 2003, p. 51).’

27 A cyborg is an organism that has a physical fusion between man and machine. Theoretically, we can call a person with a pacemaker a cyborg.
daily practice, it means that we cannot function properly without technology such as our smartphone, our laptop, and Google.com.

Lash (2002) has treated us with a form of life that is intrinsically phenomenological. This contrasts the organic model, which asserts the positivist tradition. In the organic model, we neutrally build up knowledge as an objective observer; we build up our images through abstraction, through judgment and reasoning, transcedental from the world we live in. In the phenomenological philosophy of the life form, that Lash portrayed (ibid.), we experience the world directly with our senses, without the mediation of objective observers. The process of image building in the semiotic order is, therefore, more of a phenomenological nature; we build up images through experience, not from abstraction and judgment – reflexively, not reflectively. According to Lash (2002), the continuous flow of consciousness or unconsciousness affects the knowing individual who is already ‘in-the-world’ with his objects of knowledge.

If the process of forming governing images becomes phenomenological, and no longer takes place through abstractive judgment and reasoning, the governance of information becomes intrinsically self-referential; the images we face in the governance process, is information in itself that we try to govern; information mediated through the technological form of life. Kooiman (2003) has studied the concepts of governance from a structure perspective as well an actor perspective. While Kooiman (2003) did not set out to create an information governance theory, his analysis of governing images is valuable. According to Kooiman the continuously growing knowledge systems hinders the formation of governing images because they reinforce their structures and characteristics through circular patterns of knowledge reproduction. Kooiman (ibid.) refers to Boulding (1956) to explain that we can only break this resistance by interrupting the circularity; repeatedly imposing new images onto the observing system is the only way to do this.

Kooiman (2003) concludes that ‘the image formation process itself must be governed (ibid., p. 37),’ because of the inherent danger of complexity reduction in

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28 I refer here to the idea of a technological phenomenology submitted by Lash (2002). Lash has advanced on an empiricist phenomenology of communications submitted by Garfinkel who has radically broken with the traditional humanistic and ontological assumptions in phenomenology. Instead of a transcendental phenomenology such as from Heidegger and Husserl, and a deconstructed phenomenology such as from Derrida and Levinas, Garfinkel presented an immanentist phenomenology in which an intuition of appearance replaces Husserl’s intuition of essence. ‘There is no essence in Garfinkel: there is no thing-in-itself to know or not to know. There are only things, as they appear to interested actors. The result of such intuition is no longer universal statements of apodictic knowledge, but communications [emphasis in original] (Lash, 2002, p. 174).’

29 The organic model is a metaphor for life in which we see things such as life, society, and organizations as living organisms.

30 With ‘in-the-world,’ I refer to Heidegger’s concept of ‘dasein.’ He has referred to a being-in-the-world, where the hyphens emphasize that we cannot see a being separately from the world (Heidegger, 1962).
the image formation process. People’s latent mechanisms and pre-occupations tend to simplify things. When building images, governing actors bring presumptions, hidden values, and false knowledge; firmly rooted principles of fact and value systems deeply affect their thinking and acting. The technological forms of life we face in the semiotic order will even amplify this because the devices in the man-machine interface are laden with affect (Lash, 2002). With the permeability of technological information, image building becomes a process where the ‘routines, habits and established structural mechanisms or interaction patterns frame the practical concerns of social agents and ultimately provide the horizon of meaning against which the combinatorial possibilities of information as a means of disclosing novel conditions are explored (Kallinikos, 2006, p. 64).’

Altogether, the complexity-reduction issue, the implicit images of governing actors, the technological form of life, and the computational rendition of reality – technological information – result in very complex processes of image building (Kooiman, 2003; Lash, 2002; Kallinikos, 2006). These issues decidedly raise the need to govern the image-building process itself in the semiotic order. Especially with the concept of information governance, one must pay attention on how to govern this process, a process that is phenomenological and where meaning through direct experiences dominates. The question then rises, what is the role of meaning in information governance, to be more specific, in the process of image building?

**The role of meaning**

One of the core concepts in Kooiman’s study on governance was interaction (Kooiman, 2003). Governing actors – the governor and the governed – must interact in order to test the implicit qualities of governing images and ‘liberate’ themselves from inherit frames of reference. Governing actors interact through communities, places where implicit images become explicit and where they can test for relevancy against the governance issues at hand. These are the places among where actors ascribe meaning to things, situations and ideas. From the perspective of meaning, forming governing images is a multidimensional problem constituted by the structure in which governing actors operate and the way they consume information.

First, the communities, institutions, places, where governing actors operate, all have their effect on image-building processes. Structures and scenes have unspoken rules that affect how governing actors ascribe meanings to things such as products or situations. Kooiman (2003) has summarized this as a combination of societal diversity, complexity, and dynamics. Structure, here, also involves the technological interfaces, the tools, through which governing actors experience their world, through which they conduct their technological life. These tools, artifacts, used and produced in the contemporary information society are packed with affect;

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31 Images by definition are a simplistic presentation of reality.

32 Place in the contemporary information society, can very well be a virtual place such as a forum, electronic collaboration tools, electronic meeting equipment, blogs and Twitter.
sometimes with almost religious fascination. In the logic of their production, existential meaning rules over rational usage (Lash, 2002). Governing actors experience structures in their own unique way and apply meaning to it. For example, team collaboration and devices used, color the way they interpret information in forming their images. Following the foregoing, the interaction of governing actors with structures is a complex of many variables abounded with meaning that affects, if not dictates, understanding in the image-building processes.

Second, information is the commodity for governing actors in forming their images. With its self-propelling growth processes and computational rendition of reality, the contemporary information society is superfluous in that respect (Kallinikos, 2006). Governing actors face tough choices to make on what the information means to them. Aside from the sheer volume of information available, following the notion of technological information (ibid.), having the right information then becomes increasingly problematic considering the large amount of info-glut around. In an informational world, where platforms such as blogs, forums, and news sites overwhelm us with information, it is increasingly difficult to find the information that really matters. To what extent is the information relevant for the governing issues at hand? It is up to the governing actors own subjectivity and capability how they (can) interpret the pool of information and ascribe meaning to it in forming their images. The implicit images that governing actors have affect information they encounter. Therefore, it is necessary to consider what it is, that influences governing actors in working with information, in order to form governing images.

Looking at the interactions that governing actors have, the multidimensional problem of forming images then unfolds as follows (see also Figure 3). Governing actors face governing issues, which can be problems as well as opportunities [a]. In the semiotic order, proper engagement with communities and institutions is through the technology that is part of the technological life forms of governing actors [b]. Governing actors consume (technological) information through that same technology [c], both superfluously available and laden with affect. The communities and institutions they engage with operate by means of similar technologies and access the same pool of (technological) information [d]. The governing issues at hand present themselves using similar sources of (technological) information and technology [e], and can concern communities and institutions as well [f]. The foregoing process reveals that in forming their images, governing actors face continuously aspects where meaning making is abound such as the governing issues, the communities and institutions, and the abundance of information. Figure 3 illustrates the foregoing process.

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33 Research in social psychology showed that individuals could respond differently in simple or complex information environments; Streufert (1973) introduced a new concept of ‘information relevance’ to eliminate the theoretical shortcoming in information load.
Chapter 3 - Re-conceptualizing Governance and the Role of Meaning

Figure 3: Governing actors and meaning-making interactions

Governing actors base their entire life-world on the habits, beliefs, and experiences they have through technology in the semiotic order. The aspects that represent the semiotic order such as sign-value, technological information, and technological forms of life, significantly influence the sense-making processes that involve forming of governing images. Sensemaking as a concept is a process that is full of ambiguity (Weick, 1995). Forming governing images in the semiotic order makes it even worse because, as I explained earlier, the image-building process is intrinsically phenomenological. The question then arises, how governing actors make sense of all those aspects that play a role in forming governing images.

With my interpretation of governing images in the semiotic order, the concept of meaning is implicitly present in its formation processes. Because we engage in the semiotic order in a phenomenological manner, ascribing meaning appropriately is by engaging with the products of the contemporary information society; only then, we can fully understand them, comprehend them. According to Lash (2002), ascribing meaning in the semiotic order is less through epistemology than through ontology. Lash explained this as follows:

‘We experience or interrogate things and people less in regard to their logical meaning than their existential meaning. We are looking for ontological meaning. The neutral and detached space of the scientific observer can yield epistemological knowledge, as Kant noted, of the appearances of things – that is, cause and effect, explanation. But experiencing things, through being in the life-world with them, can open up knowledge of things-in-them-selves. To know things-in-themselves is to know them not epistemologically, but in their ontological structures [emphasis in original] (Lash, 2002, p. 15).’

The tools, the artifacts characteristic for the semiotic order are part of the life-world of governing actors; they experience them as things-in-them-selves, as Lash (ibid.) noted. This shows that, in the semiotic order, governance and particularly information governance deserves an increased focuses on how governing actors form their images; how image formation involves meaning making.
From the perspective of meaning, the process of forming governing images reveals a complexity in which it is difficult to discern the things that are logical – as in classification – from those that are laden with affect. For example, the choice between two applications; one application has a long-standing history of being rigid, secure, and good support, but is difficult to use while the other is popular and available on many devices, but maintained by an unknown programmer. How do governing actors differentiate in their meaning-making process between the likes or dislikes of technological interfaces and the information that concerns the governing issues at hand? A better understanding of the meaning-making processes and how to facilitate them, also reveals what the pool of information from the contemporary information society brings to governing actors, as well as how to apply the concepts of the semiotic order in, for example, processes of innovation.

In general, the role of meaning in information governance is to help organizations to make better choices, responsible choices – the essence of governance. To be more specific, meaning has a role in information governance that is twofold. First, with meaning, governing actors are able to consider their biases, their experiences, in image-building processes, which are ambiguous and full of sign-value. Second, meaning allows governing actors carefully making their choices in governing sign-value.

Conclusion

I have started this chapter to conceptualize a perspective on governance to correspond with the contemporary information society. Present management disciplines focus on optimizing scarce resources and are unable to address the fundamental changes in the economic value-system this society exhibits. This fully mediated society shows a semiotic order in which abstracted value relocates from commodities to a value concept called sign-value; it violates the means-ends distinction of the traditional order and industrial order.

Once operating from a productionist paradigm, in the semiotic order organizations are facing new operating models that ask for responsible choices, which associate with abundance, collaboration, and durability. Information has its own self-referential logic of growth, making it abundantly available. I conclude that managing information is distinctively different from managing resources. From the idea of sign-value, we cannot use traditional management concepts that treat information as mere objectified resources.

I claim that the concept of governance better corresponds to deal with sign-value. Through theories of cybernetic management concepts, I have substantiated this claim. First-order management concepts underpin the idea of mechanistic resource management, simply to fulfill supply to demand for contracted transactions. In so doing, they discard the notion of sign-value in the processes that constitute the semiotic order. Second-order management concepts exhibit sign-
value, but only focused on internal ‘languages,’ in order to get the job done. They lack the intentional dialog with the environment that considers the processes constituting the semiotic order. Organizational evolution is more a result of perturbations from the environment than well-thought decisions. Therefore, organizations cannot make responsible choices in the semiotic order; they are stuck in deterministic resource management.

The changing environment is a recurring theme in cybernetic management concepts. Second-order management concepts confront organizations with the paradoxical choice of operational efficiency versus adapting to the changing environment. It seems that organizations introduce way too complex structures, relying on too many elements, in order to find their way in this dilemma. Effective strategies develop a range of skills and networks of relationships, a capability, that makes responsible choices possible and operates in a domain of communication and sense making. A domain, were people deal with new social systems and institutes that violate the means-end distinction, through language and concepts.

Third-order management concepts, or better governance concepts, include the required social dimension. It allows organizations to consider the changing environment – an environment that, in the semiotic order, is full of sign-value. The concept of governance, a third-order concept par excellence, can fill-in the deficiencies for management practices to consider sign-value.

In order to govern sign-value governing actors must be able to write, speak, or think about the informational experiences, which are typical for the contemporary information society. Information governance is the preferred concept for this, but it lacks the ‘language’ to have the necessary discourse. Because it is a discourse centered on the concept of meaning in order to address sign-value, I have proposed a concept of meaning-driven governance, which I have conceptualized in the second part of this chapter.

The theoretical approach to the idea of the changing environment is about strategies that change the course of an enterprise, in short, innovation. From my interpretation of information governance, its concern is how the semiotic order affects the cognitive and organizational contexts in terms of sign-value, of meaning. To exploit the opportunities of the semiotic order effectively, this could involve radical innovations. It requires understanding how governing actors ascribe meaning to things, situations, or opportunities, which involve sign-value in innovation processes. This governance process of image building is in the semiotic order anything but simple linear, straightforward, or predictable. It makes information governance complex because governing actors bring implicit images, reduce the complexity of the self-referential information society, and live in a technological life-world that overwhelms them with sign-value.

The form of life of governing actors is intrinsically phenomenological, because governing actors reflexively build up their knowledge, mediated through technologies. Forming governing images phenomenologically makes the governance
of information self-referential, requiring to govern the image-building process itself. To understand image formation, which is full of sign-value, we must leave the positivist tradition and find ways to engage with governing actors on how they experience their semiotic life-world.

If the image-building process in information governance is phenomenological, how can governing actors understand the semiotic order in order to make responsible choices? A perspective of meaning is promising in this; it raises an important multidimensional question regarding the process of image building. If the tools, the devices, which make up the technological life-world, dictate the meaning-making processes, how do governing actors find their way in ascribing meaning? If the concept of information governance is self-referential, with the intention to govern information in a self-referential information society, how can governing actors ascribe meaning to abundantly available information?

For organizations to make their way in the contemporary information society, information governance is a necessary concept to practice. However, in order to make responsible choices in a semiotic order, it is mandatory to include a concept of meaning in information governance. This makes the case for meaning-driven governance, for which I will develop a framework later in this dissertation.