Image building in the information governance discourse: Steps to economies of meaning

Beijer, P.

Citation for published version (APA):
8

DISCUSSION
Introduction

This final chapter provides an overview of the research results taking into account the research questions developed in chapter 1 and the hypotheses asserted in chapter 5. It is not the intention of this overview to go into details about the outcomes in particular, but to provide a higher level of abstraction on the research results. For the detailed outcomes, I refer to the relevant individual chapters developing the concepts, with chapter 7 in particular because it contains the results and analysis of the evaluative case studies. After the overview of the research results, the chapter continues with a discussion on the validity of this research, with suggestions for further research, and practical applications of the instrument – the framework – developed. The chapter concludes with some final thoughts on this thesis and the research.

Overview of research results

The introduction to this thesis formulated three research questions. This section will revisit these research questions and discuss to what extent the exploration of the concepts concerning governance and meaning, as well as the development of the meaning-making framework have answered the research questions.  

Key characteristics of the global information order

The first research question concerned the key characteristics of the global information order in the light of the concept of governance. The exposition in chapter 3 on the re-conceptualization of governance and the role of meaning provided the answer to this question.

First, the global information order introduces a fundamental change in the economic value-system due to the emergence of sign-value. The mediated society of today exhibits a semiotic order in which abstracted value relocates from commodities to sign-value. Because sign-value violates the means-ends distinctions from the traditional order and industrial order, the traditional management concepts are not suitable; they treat the products from the contemporary information society as mere objectified resources. The first major conclusion on the key characteristics of the global information order is that the focus of managing scarce resources shifts toward dealing with the abundance of information, with sign-value.

Second, through a cybernetic perspective, the research showed that traditional management concepts dominantly follow first and second order cybernetic rules. They focus on maintaining the purpose of organizations and getting the job done, in contrast to organizational evolution. This is a result of reacting to perturbations

---

129 For the formulation of the research questions, see page 15.
from the environment instead of well-thought decisions on innovation. Rather than treating abundance as an ‘enemy,’ third order cybernetic concepts inherently take in account the world out-there, which enables organizations to deal with the products of the contemporary information society. Third-order cybernetic concepts surpass traditional management and act conform governance theories; management concerns the continuity of day-to-day business while governance aims at strategic choices in innovating enterprises. In order to govern sign-value, governing actors must be able to write, speak, or think about the informational experiences from the products of the contemporary information society. Information governance is the preferred concept for this, but it lacks the ‘language’ for discourses containing sign-value. The second major conclusion on the key characteristics of the global information order is that it indeed requires governance concepts in order to fill in the deficiencies of traditional management concepts; however, these governance concepts lack the inclusion of sign-value.

Third, to exploit the opportunities from the semiotic order effectively, governing actors face innovation processes loaded with sign-value. It requires them to ascribe meaning to things, situations, or opportunities involved in innovation processes. This so-called process of image building has a significant influence in information governance practices and is anything but a simple, straightforward or predictable process. Governing actors are subject to a self-referential information society in which they reflexively build up their knowledge, mediated through technologies that dictate meaning making in the image-building process of information governance. The third major conclusion on the key characteristics of the global information order is that meaning making is a key concept for governing actors in information governance in the semiotic order, which urges for a meaning-driven governance.

To summarize, the key characteristics of the global information order concern 1) the shift from managing scarce resources toward handling abundance, 2) the need for governance concepts to complement traditional management concepts in order to deal with abundance, and 3) the presence of sign-value, which requires governance concepts to include the concept of meaning making.

Enhancements of image-building processes

The second research question aimed at finding a foundation for enhancements of the image-building processes in information governance. The answer to that unfolds in three directions. There is the exploration of the concept of meaning, motivated by the notion developed in the light of the first research question that meaning making should be a key concept in information governance. The critique of meaning developed in chapter 4 and the section that develops the meaning dimension of the framework in chapter 5 provide the answer to the first direction. The second direction is the notion developed on treating objects in image building. The sections on objects in developing requirements for the framework, as well as
the framework development itself, in chapter 5 provide the answer to this direction. The third direction is the notion developed in chapter 5 on innovation as a necessary aspect in order to address the reconceptualization of information governance. The following will highlight these three directions.

First, the critique of meaning in chapter 4 concluded that ramification of the concept of meaning is difficult because a systemic orientation seems impossible. 1) There is no reasonable classification of concepts; 2) concepts of meaning are fundamentally very different; 3) meaning is subjective and heavily depends on the philosophical position one takes – transcendent or immanent; 4) being an ambiguous concept by itself, meaning also interconnects with other ambiguous concepts such as communication, information, and language. Nevertheless, the study resulted in four distinctively different orientations of meaning because of their different philosophical foundation. 1) Communicative meaning has semiological acts of reference to objects as its philosophical foundation because every form of communication is an act of reference. 2) Inherent meaning, founded on the way people act, biased by prior experiences and life-worlds. 3) Symbolic meaning, which has affection as its philosophical foundation, because affection toward objects varies with people’s likes and dislikes. 4) Contextual meaning has incarnation as the philosophical foundation because people become one with objects, events, or life-worlds. This resulted in the notion that marrying these four orientations of meaning into a single concept is not possible due to the lack of a common foundation or any other commonality in these orientations. The research developed the notion that meaning exhibits as habits of actions. The first major conclusion is that in order to enhance the process of image building, it must include the notion that meaning exhibits in what individuals or organizations are changing in their habits when they encounter something meaningful.

Second, in developing requirements for the framework it became clear that the technological life-world forces to consider objects for appropriate image building. Contextual meaning, the dominant orientation of meaning in the technological life-world, follows the technological phenomenology where object and subject become one. Having an object – a concept or product of the information society – is the first and foremost necessity for governing actors to be able to assign meaning; one must have something to assign meaning to, in order make the framework useable. The research explored various philosophical underpinnings of the concept of object in order to consider objects in the technological life-world, a one-world paradigm. It concluded that the conventional wisdom to describe objects is one of formal descriptions of properties of objects, tightly connected to the operated discipline. A solution for this problem is to use the device paradigm, which enables users to describe what objects – devices – give them without going into formal details on object properties. The second major conclusion in enhancing the process of image building is that the device paradigm is a solution for governing actors to abstain from formal descriptions in describing the object they encounter.
Third, innovation is part and parcel of the concept of governance. For a meaning-driven concept of governance, the enhancement of image building concerns the creative phase in the innovation lifecycle, because it is the phase where meaning making prevails. In this phase, governing actors develop the first notions on the products or concepts from the information society they encounter. Do we understand this? Can we use this? The core principle of the contemporary information society is that abundance rules; it elevates the importance of the creative phase in the innovation lifecycle. In designing the framework, the notion developed that innovation processes dominantly focus on problem solving and thereby inherently follow the paradigm of managing scarce resources. Abundance invites governing actors to look beyond problem-driven innovation and requires them to augment context creation of the technological life-worlds onto the daily practices of organizations. Put differently, what do these products or concepts mean – meaning making – and how beneficial are they for the organization? The third major conclusion in enhancing image building is that core innovation aspects are a necessity to ‘materialize’ the meanings assigned by governing actors to the products and concepts of the information-abundant society.

In summary, the enhancement of image-building processes involves 1) the notion of habits of action for a measure of meaningfulness, 2) using the device paradigm in order to have governing actors informally describe objects, and 3) applying core innovation aspects in order to materialize meanings assigned to the products and concepts of the information society.

**An instrument to operationalize enhanced image building**

The third and last research question concerned the possibility of developing an instrument that enables governing actors to write, speak, or think about the products or concepts from the contemporary information society. Put differently, an instrument that operationalizes the enhancements of image building in information governance developed in the light of the second research question. The development of the meaning-making framework and the evaluative case studies, the treatise in chapter 5, 6, and 7, provide the answer to this.

The first step in finding a solution for such an instrument was eliciting requirements for a meaning-making framework. The whole tenet in developing the framework was that in governance subjects are one with their life-world; a one-world philosophy where subject and object become one resulting from the contextual – phenomenological – orientation of meaning, which implies the inseparability of content and method. This puts constraints on the design of the framework but also as we will see later, on the evaluation of the framework. Revisiting the concepts of meaning and innovation concluded that the concept of life-world objects was a necessary concept to include in the framework in order to make it useable; a serious constraint. Because the framework aims at senior managers and directors, non-functional requirements included concepts such as language and mental models in order to secure ease of use by non-technical
individuals. The first major result in operationalizing enhanced image building is that the framework must enable organized settings in which the user can incarnate a technological life-world – experience an object; without considering its usage, one cannot design this meaning-making framework. An object must be part of the framework and can range from tangible objects to anything that represents these objects such as information and constructs – intangible objects.

The second step was the development of five falsifiable hypothesis-indicator pairs that justified the final structure of the framework. The central theme in developing a hypothesis on meaning was to weave the whole fabric of the four orientations of meaning into one unifying comprehensive concept. Because the research revealed no common ground for this, the framework design ended up with a pragmatist approach: if something is meaningful, it introduces new habits. For governing actors to write, speak or think about life-world objects, the device paradigm provided a solution: explicate what objects make available to the actor while abstaining from formal details. The design of the framework reveals three core innovation principles that support assessing the object-habits pair on its benefits for the organization: 1) time convergence, 2) disruptive construction, and 3) radical connections. The second major result in operationalizing enhanced image building is the conceptual framework.

In the third step, the execution and analysis of a number of workshops evaluated the meaning-making framework. First, the setup for the workshops necessarily followed the rules of phenomenological research. They must provide an organized setting in which participants share similar jobs, functions, or roles in the same contextual domain such as managing an enterprise, medical treatment, and insurance selling. This contrasts many workshop approaches in which consensus among a variety of stakeholders is the objective. For this research context, however, the evaluative case study aims at the experience of participants with the framework and not broad stakeholder consensus; vastly different experiences interfere with one and other and would lead to an improper setup. Second, the analysis of the results included the verification of the average results against the five hypothesis-indicator pairs as well as the interpretation of small interviews, suggestions, and observations. The analysis returned a positive result of the five hypotheses and the interpretative data. The third major conclusion is that it is indeed possible to develop an instrument that enhances image building in information governance in order to enable governing actors to write, speak, and think about the concept and products of the contemporary information society.

Summarizing the foregoing shows that operationalizing an instrument of enhanced image building concludes 1) an organized setting that enables governing actors to experience the product or concept from the information society – the object. 2) The conceptualization of a meaning-making framework that converges objects, meaning making and innovation aspects. 3) The positive analysis of the ability to write, speak, and think about the concepts of the information society by using the meaning-making framework.
Validity of the research

Constructing an artifact in a research setting is only the first step, but a necessary step; the success of the artifact depends on the further possible deployment of the artifact. From a design perspective, an artifact is complete when it satisfies all the requirements and constraints that reflect the problem one tries to solve (Hevner et al., 2004). In order to evaluate the meaning-making framework, this research facilitated a number of evaluative case studies.

The data analysis from the case studies, in the previous chapter, indicated a positive result. However, many variables can influence the validity of case-study results. Gibbert, Ruigrok, and Wicki (2008) report on an extensive study on the validity of case studies and distinguish four criteria that can assess the validity of case study research. 1) Internal validity concerns the causal and logical reasoning on the data to conclude the research results. 2) Construct validity of a study is a measure of how well the researcher conceptualizes and operationalizes the final case-study concept. 3) External validity relates to the extent of generalizability of the results outside the settings used. Would other cases show similar results? 4) Reliability is the extent to the repeatability of the study. Would the study produce the same results if repeated along the same steps?

Even though, this research only is the first step toward an artifact with possibly broad deployment, the aforementioned criteria can give useful insight on the validity of the research and provide ground for follow-on research. The following discusses the research along these four criteria.

Internal validity

Causal and logical reasoning on the data in order to conclude the research results determine the internal validity of a study. The research framework used for this inquiry was design-oriented research that used theories of governance and meaning in order to reason toward a development of a meaning-making framework. In the context of those theories, the development process elicited requirements and developed five falsifiable hypotheses that unified into a model with the full mapping between requirements and hypotheses to test.\(^\text{130}\) This formed the basis for designing as well as evaluating the meaning-making framework.

The setup for the evaluative case studies took care to systematically collected data through anonymous questionnaires in order to test the hypotheses. Suggestions from case-study participants, sponsor interviews, and workshop observations complemented this data in order to provide triangulation in arguing toward the result.

\(^{130}\) Table 27 on page 133 summarizes how the design requirements map against the hypotheses.
Construct validity

The way the evaluative case studies are setup determines the construct validity of the case-study process. It concerns how well the case-study setup supports the required inquiry (Gibbert et al., 2008). In developing the framework, the notion raised that the concept of object needed to be included in the framework because I have argued earlier that one cannot simply design a framework without considering its operation. This was a direct consequence of the empiricist phenomenological stance, which dictates the inseparability of content and method. Apart from affecting the framework design, this also affects the evaluation of the framework.

The setup for the evaluative case studies discusses how phenomenological research in general creates knowledge and developed arguments that the evaluative case studies require bracketing and reduction, as well as an appropriate attitude toward the object. This provided the context and constraints for the organized settings for the evaluative case studies.

The choice for the setup was a number of workshops in which the participants could experience the meaning-making framework in discussing a concept or product from the contemporary information society of their choice. Although the workshop preparation explained how the participant must take their position, attitude, toward the object, hindsight gives me the notion that a (serious) gaming environment probably would provide participants to better experience the object.

External validity

The extent how much one can generalize the results of the research outside the settings used determines the external validity of the research. There is a difference between statistical and analytical generalization. Case studies do not lend themselves to generalization based on statistical evidence, whereas analytical generalization based on cross-case analysis seems a good basis for theory development (Gibbert et al., 2008; Eisenhardt, 1989). Furthermore, social sciences widely criticized the idea of solely relying on the testing of hypotheses (Kaplan & Duchon, 1988).

The evaluative use cases provide a variety of cases – verified product or concept – that I assumed to be sufficient for evaluating the first step of constructing an artifact, the meaning-making framework. According to Eisenhardt (1989) building theories from case-study research requires a careful selection of cases. This contrasts the approach taken in this research because the objectives were different. In hindsight, however, I believe that the difficulty of the product or concept participants verify might influence them in scoring the questions in the questionnaire.
Reliability

Transparency and replication determine the reliability of a study such that other researchers can replicate the inquiry. The researcher aimed at describing the steps involved in setting up the evaluative case studies; moreover, the phenomenological stance of the research urged to pay attention on the case-study setup. Therefore, chapter 6 develops case-study requirements and uses them for creating a clear case-study protocol, which is pivotal for reliable results. In order to capture and analyze the data created through the questionnaires the researcher maintained a spreadsheet, which secures replication of the analysis process.

Suggestions for further research

From the discussion on the validity of the research, as well as the analysis of the evaluative cases studies, one can think of a number of research suggestions. First, there is the notion that a case-study setup using a serious gaming environment probably would provide a better setup to experience a product or concept from the contemporary information society. This resembles much more the one-world paradigm visited in the critique of meaning in chapter 4, hence the technological life-world that governing actors face. This would require more effort and, above all, a different research setup. It would need a scenario or process in which governing actors, in fact, use the object in ‘playing’ the game. One can use existing products from the contemporary information society, but in the case of a concept, it requires the research to upfront building prototypes or mockups from the product of the concept suggested. Those are serious research efforts.

The second research suggestion concerns increasing the quality in results of the user experience with the meaning-making framework. The earlier discussion on generalization of the research results mentioned how the difficulty of the product or concept – the object – under evaluation can potentially influence how the user experiences the framework. Further research can provide insight in this. This would require a careful selection of objects, or case-study setups verifying the same object among a large variety of users.

The third research suggestion is in the domain of theory building. Meta-theories do not deal with phenomena or processes in the real world. They focus on the conceptualization of phenomena and processes. The meaning-making framework contains a number of concepts, such as the habits-of-action hypothesis on meaning making and the core innovation principles. They both reflect phenomena and processes. Follow-on research can verify whether these concepts represent meta-theories.

The fourth research suggestion is whether one can use the framework to analyze failed innovation projects. The feasibility of innovation projects is not only a matter

---

131 See chapter 6 pages 142 through 149 and Table 28 on page 146 in particular.
of technical feasibility. Factors such as political climate and stakeholder interest can make or break the success of innovation projects. Participants in the evaluative case studies suggested in using the meaning-making framework as a communications device. Research can verify whether the framework is capable of analyzing the communication part on feasibility assessments of innovation projects.

The fifth and final research suggestion concerns the causality built up in executing the framework. The sequential steps involved in using the framework – from the object through habits of actions to the core innovation principles – raised a question with one of the participants whether the framework can be used as a rearview mirror. To be more precisely, does one need a particular object in order to create the same innovation result? Follow-on research can study whether one can start with the core innovation principle and traverse the way ‘up’ in the framework – the causal relations in the framework.

Suggestions for practical use of the framework

The first and foremost application of the framework is to make it part of the set of tools that governing actors use in their image-building processes. From the perspective of this research a logical application, because it was a primary objective to enhance image-building processes; moreover, it was one of the research questions: providing an instrument for governing in the contemporary information society. The reactions from workshop participants, as well as many other discussions provided insight in other applications.

In general, for discussing propositions of new concepts with stakeholders, or all those involved, the framework seems a good communication instrument. The framework dimensions – object, habits of actions, and innovation – provide a coherent structure that allow people to reason and argue aspects of their idea or concept with stakeholders. For example, creating support for large transformation projects.

Earlier I briefly touched upon the idea of consensus building. Brainstorming is an instrument that one frequently uses in workshops for consensus building. There is empirical evidence and academic research that brainstorming not always provides the best solution for creating new ideas (e.g. Furnham, 2000; Jablin, Sorenson, & Seibold, 1978), it tends to result in propositions reflecting the wishes or needs of all participants. The framework can provide a way to validate the outcomes of brainstorming in order to make them more relevant, efficient and effective.

Building further on the notion of consensus building, in general, workshops by design have large varieties of participants in order to create broad consensus. In order to follow the rules for phenomenological research, the workshop setup for the evaluative case studies minimized the variety of participants. With the framework, one can inquire different views on the innovation idea among similar focused participants that have a common background.
One participant in the evaluative case studies mentioned the idea of using the framework to evaluate project proposals. In establishing innovation agendas, one often qualifies projects according to their contribution to the enterprise objectives, the costs involved, and the level of complexity in realizing it. In fact, organizations maintain stage gate mechanisms to move project proposals through the innovation funnel. With the framework, ranking the potential of innovative ideas is possible in order to obtain efficiency and effectiveness in the innovation funnel.

**Final thoughts**

Until now, science has not provided an integral framework that addresses the comprehensive notion of meaning in the information governance context. The meaning-making framework, developed in this research, is the proposition to provide an instrument for governing actors to practice, what I have denoted as meaning-driven governance. This form of governance is essential in a society that is abundant of information and loaded with sign-value.

The thesis I developed on meaning making against the background of the contemporary information society uses the realm of governance distinctively. Clearly, the question can rise if the concepts of meaning making also apply to regular management theories. The cybernetic study on the concept of management and governance reveals that the two distinctively differ, and that governance in general has a better proposition for leaders to engage with the decisions required in organizations, when facing the opportunities of the information society. Of course, management disciplines can benefit from a notion on meaning making. The daily practices of managers, leaders, do not treat these concepts as different as day and night; there is always a grey area. However, in finishing this research it has become my firm belief that information governance is the preferred discipline to cope with the ambiguous and non-rational concepts that manifest in the contemporary information society. When organizations enhance their image-building processes, they have an opportunity to understand and act upon these ambiguous and non-rational concepts such as sign-value.

The conventional wisdom, mechanistic view, on the concept of information — from data to information to knowledge — made us separate meaning from information. Bringing back the concept of meaning in the information governance discourse enables us to create economies of meaning and to develop new paradigms. Paradigms are important because they make us raising new questions (Janos, 1997). New questions will help governing actors in making responsible choices in the information governance discourse. However, the paradoxical situation arises that the discourse is a necessary condition for governing actors in order to assign meaning to the products and concepts from the contemporary information society. At the same time, meaning making has a level of implicitness. With the meaning-making framework, one can support meaning making, but the actual
assignment of meaning remains on the personal level. As the saying goes, ‘you can lead a horse to water, but you cannot make it drink.’

My drive for starting this research originates from the notion that technology can play a fantastic role in organizations to innovate business. Against the background of the daily pressure in getting-the-job-done, it became clear that it is not the ordinary for organizations to explore the possibilities of technology for finding new business opportunities. At the end of this dissertation, I quote Robert Dijkgraaf, who noted that in general we do not experiment enough.

‘It reveals itself in our time a huge space, in terms of knowledge and technological capabilities. Unfortunately, that does not lead to an urge to explore and experiment, but a kind of collective agoraphobia [original in Dutch] (Dijkgraaf, 2011).’

The first step in innovation is seeing the possibilities. In the contemporary information society, however, this is loaded with meaning. Therefore, it is important to organize innovation, make organizations get a ‘taste’ of what is possible. I hope that with the instrument developed in this inquiry, governing actors will find it easier to make that first step, organize innovation processes, and find room to explore the possibilities.

This is the end of my dissertation. For me a meaningful journey that I will remember for life, but also the first steps in the further exploration of economies of meaning – and yes, it did changed my habits of action.

---

132 This is conform learning theories (e.g. Seeger, 2010).