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

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Summary

This dissertation addresses what actors in the emerging discipline of information governance need for a comprehensive interpretation of the products of the contemporary information society. The technological developments from the last decennium that manifest in today’s information society have far-reaching effects on society and enterprises. These effects are sometimes far from being rational and, above all, mostly unpredictable. Governing actors increasingly face aspects from the information society that affects their decision-making processes. A contorted reaction of most organizations is to concentrate on the risks that come with the information society, rather than exploring its opportunities for innovation. A logical reaction, because the traditional notion of information governance discards the subjective wealth of the informational products to its users.

The inquiry re-conceptualizes the notion of information governance in order to include the non-rational aspects of the information society. By including meaning making as a core concept, the re-conceptualized notion of information governance is capable of addressing the non-rational aspects in the realm of innovation. By means of a design-oriented research approach, this inquiry developed an instrument that operationalizes the complemented notion of information governance. Governing actors can now include the non-rational aspects of products from the information society in the information governance discourse; more specifically, in their decision-making processes.

A socio-economic perspective on the information society reveals that principles of abundance complement the principles of scarcity that are typical for the traditional and industrial order. Information has its own self-referential logic of growth, which makes it abundantly available. Consumptionism in the context of information abundance complements labor and production, forming a new order: the semiotic order. An order, where sign-value – meaning – rules, a value that transcends the pure need of scarce resources. Aside from a system of needs and a system of interest, enterprises now face a system of meaning exhibiting activities that violate the means-end differentiation. The present management disciplines are unable to cope with sign-value; they rather focus on optimizing scarce resources than looking at the consumptionist world ‘out-there.’

A cybernetic exploration of management and governance shows that these concepts distinctively differ. Management pursues getting-the-job-done while treating any new developments in the world 'out-there' merely as perturbations. Governance, a third-order cybernetic perspective, includes the interaction with the world out-there; we call this innovation and involves making responsible choices, the essence of governance. In the information society, interactions and image formation from governing actors in the information governance discourse are laden with affect – sign-value. Although meaning-making processes are unavoidable in image formation, they do help organizations to make better choices, responsible
choices – the essence of governance. The role of meaning in information governance is twofold. First, with meaning, governing actors are able to consider their biases, their experiences, in image-building processes, processes that are ambiguous and full of sign-value. Second, meaning allows governing actors carefully making their choices in governing sign-value, the new value of the information society.

A critique of meaning reveals that meaning is an ambiguous concept that may include various notions without any common philosophical ground. The study recognizes four orientations of meaning. Communicative meaning, which follows the syntactic, the semantic, and the pragmatic interpretation of meaning – the semiotic triad. Inherent meaning that includes everything humans have done and experienced in the past and how they construct meaning in the flow of the lived-experience. Symbolic meaning, which makes up human identity with symbols influencing their behavior. Contextual meaning where humans directly – reflexively – experience their environment, without being able to explain its meaning because events and processes in this environment happen at the spur of the moment through the technological interfaces they use; they become ‘one’ with their environment and meaning is about the direct experience of their technological life-world.

Putting the critique of meaning in the context of making responsible choices in a semiotic order it seems essential that information governance needs a comprehensive concept of meaning. However, the ramification of the concept of meaning is difficult because a systemic orientation in the jungle of concepts of meaning seems impossible. There is no reasonable classification of concepts, meaning is highly subjective, it refers to fundamentally different concepts such as communicative intent and symbols, and it tightly interconnects with other ambiguous concepts such as communication, information and language.

The dissertation reconciles the aforementioned notions on information governance and the orientations of meaning into one unifying concept, a meaning-making framework, which is the proposed instrument for governing actors to support their image formation in the contemporary information society. Requirement elicitation, as part of the design process for the meaning-making framework, reveals that the framework needs to include four orientations of meaning, the notion of an innovation perspective and support for one or more objects. In order for governing actors to work easily with the framework, it must be easy to comprehend and adoptable as a mental model.

The design overcomes the lacking commonality of the four orientations of meaning by weaving them together through the pragmatist philosophy; when something is meaningful, it results in new habits of action. Because governing actors apply meaning to products and events from the information society, the framework includes an object perspective. To avoid formal object description languages such that governing actors can work with objects, the design applies a modified device paradigm, a philosophy of technology used to describe technological devices. The
object-habits-of-action pair represents a comprehensive subjective interpretation by governing actors of products and concepts from the contemporary information society. The innovation perspective of the framework enables governing actors to assess the object-habits pair against three core innovation principles. The design resulted in five falsifiable hypotheses that characterize the meaning-making framework.

Evaluation of the meaning-making framework follows the approach of evaluative case studies, a special form of traditional case-study research. Following the phenomenological traditions used in the research, the operationalization of the evaluative case studies pays attention to appropriately creating a setup by applying principles of sociological research. It uses phenomenological reduction – bracketing and attitude – in order to rule-out taken for granted assumptions, as well as, cross-operational interferences among participants in the case-study setups. The evaluative case studies executed as workshops of five to ten participants.

The primary data-collection technique used for the evaluative case studies is a printed questionnaire that verifies the five hypotheses that characterize the meaning-making framework. In order to avoid relying solely on questionnaire responses, data from semi-structured interviews and the researchers own observations complement questionnaire data – methodology triangulation.

The analysis of the evaluative case-study data involves a straightforward calculation – simple statistics – of the respondent score data that represent the five hypotheses, complemented by a hermeneutic mode of analysis of the semi-structured interviews and responses to suggestions from participants in the evaluative case studies.

The dissertation concludes with a discussion that gives an overview of the research results, assesses the validity of the research, discusses further research and closes with final thoughts of the researcher. The research resulted in the notion of key characteristics from the global information order, the enhancement of the image-building process in information governance, and an instrument to operationalize enhanced image building – the meaning-making framework. The validity assessment of the research involves causal and logical reasoning, the setup of the evaluative case studies, the extent of possible generalization from the research results, and reliability of the research in terms of its replication. The discussion includes five suggestions for further research that involve increased quality of users experiencing the framework, (meta) theory building, practical application and further refinement of the framework internal structure. The researcher’s final thoughts reflect on the research, the framework and meaning-making and organizational implications. Making the first step in innovation in the context of the contemporary information society is about seeing the possibilities it offers to organizations. This research provides a framework in order to help organizations enable the necessary discourse for that.