



ISM/IKON SEMINAR

Summer 2010

Speaker: Dr Gianluca Miscione (University of Twente, The Netherlands)

Title: Where to Ground Information Infrastructures?

Date: Friday 11th June 2010

Venue: B3.19, Warwick Business School, Scarman Road

Time: 14.00

Abstract: While information systems are increasingly designed and implemented on large scale within and across a variety of organizations around the world, information system research tends to remain focused on North American and Western European environments. We cannot take for granted that findings which originated in those contexts are relevant for other settings, nor on the global scale. For this reason, this seminar is intended to provide material, ideas and questions to discuss some assumptions about large IT systems (information infrastructures), and the tacit "labor work division" between information systems and organization research on one side, and development studies on the other. Paraphrasing Bowker (2000), information infrastructures (II) operate simultaneously at the concrete level of design and implementation (fields in a database, capacity building, integration of datasets and organizational practices...) and at an abstract level (dealing with the relationships between information science, organization, service providers, and global software development, among others). "It is vital to dissolve the current disjunction between database (as technical storage medium) and policy (as way of acting in the world). The production of the database is productive of the new world we are creating." (ibid).

The development and adoption of II is expected to change processes and management in organizations, also where a variety of contexts with multiple rationalities may mismatch with IT designers' rationality (Avgerou: 2002). It is widely acknowledged that it is not easy to gain an overall understanding of II in real life settings. Often, conference presentations and publications refer to nascent, yet future, success stories. At least as frequently -mostly when interacting with people involved at any level of II actual implementation- you can hear that there are major 'practical' problems (organizational, political, technological): a clear paradox.

Context sensitivity is growing in information system research; this is particularly relevant in 'developing contexts', because of the remarkable differences between contexts of design and target contexts of implementation and actual use. In spite of that, it is not unusual to find II conceived (designed, implemented, evaluated) as a self contained, closed effort, aiming at a pre-set number of defined targets through employing a pre-set amount of human and other resources along a pre-defined timeframe. This conceptualization is prominent in infrastructure design and research, as they assume an external, neutral/universal viewpoint. Rather, II are presented in this seminar as pervasive enabling resources. Their wide scope, outreach and openness facilitate embedding and disembedding, across a huge variety of settings, in contrast to an II conceptualization as one big 'thing'.

Then, it is worth to note the consonance with the conceptualization of 'global' by Czarniawska-Joerges and Sevón (1996) who conceptualize the global spread of changes as a continuous transformation of ideas into objects, into actions, into institutions, into other ideas, and so on: ideas spread by never ending processes of embedment and disembedment. From this perspective, the global is "nothing 'above' or 'beyond' local: it is a hugely extended net work of localities" (ibid). Such 'horizontal' and 'embedded in actions' concept of global gives centrality to the actual practices that constitute II. If the global is a hugely extended network of localities, there is a need for focusing on the doings, the actual processes that make II. The problem is how to go about them. Metaphorically, we can say that Kodak created popular photography, not just an accessible photographic process. Similarly, in understanding what II are changing and creating, we have to consider the wider dispersed contexts of use. Focusing only on technology would be like trying to explain popular photography with chemical process of producing pictures.

Vignettes from several cases studies are introduced for discussing unplanned and unexpected II evolutions. The aim is to identify the 'missing mass' in II by:

- emphasizing the actual 'doings' of actors involved directly and indirectly
- posing attention on the temporal dimension and the continuous redefinition of these socio-technical arrangements,
- keeping in mind the "why question".

Key concepts as context, legitimacy, agency, innovation, scalability are used as cornerstones to classify the empirical material from Europe, India, Africa.

References

Avgerou C., *Information Systems and Global Diversity*, 2002, Oxford University Press, Oxford, New York

Bowker G., *Biodiversity Datadiversity*, *Social Studies of Science*, Vol. 30(5), 2000, pp.643-683

Czarniawska-Joerges B., and Sevón G., *Translating Organizational Change*, 1996, DeGruyter, Berlin

Biography: Gianluca Miscione is Assistant Professor at the faculty of Geo-information Science and Earth Observation (ITC), University of Twente. His research activity is focused on the interplay between information infrastructures and organizing processes. Particular attention is paid to understanding what happens at the intersection of the global and the local. His main research interests are organization, development-innovation, and information and communication technologies; ethnography and qualitative methods; trust and social capital.

Contact: Alison Solman, ISM Group
Alison.solman@wbs.ac.uk
024 7652 4101

This seminar has been organised by the ISM Group and is jointly sponsored by the IKON Research Centre.