

Studies in Organisational Semiotics: an introduction

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Abstract

The broad application of semiotic approaches to organisations has been considered by a number of information systems academics to be a necessary advance in information systems theory (see for examples Land 1985, Rzevski 1985, and Tully 1985). Along with ps a foundation discipline for information systems within the IFIP WG 8.1 FRISCO Framework (Falkenberg, et al eds/ 2000). Semiotics examines the processes of production and consumption of meanings in organisations, institutions and society, and their underlying me as a "...systematic analysis of patterns of interpretive behaviour". Although often unacknowledged, meaning is central to any definition of an information system. While the concept of meaning and meaning making is difficult to define, semiotic theory can assist by en 'meaning', 'sense' and 'reference' for example (see Noth 1990, 92-102). Eco (1976, 8), provides a broad definition of semiotics as the study of "...all cultural processes as processes of communication". Cultural processes are interpreted to include organisational cont systems and organisations. Most applied semiotic studies start by identifying or defining one or more models of the sign as the basic unit of analysis. Signs are usually glossed as 'something that stands for something else in some capacity or another'. Depending on entity for whom the 'stands for' relationship applies. For a discipline often defined as the 'study of signs', there are a plethora of distinct sign models from which to choose. The reader is directed to Winfried Noth's Handbook of Semiotics for a detailed description of di history (Noth 1990, 79-91). The period of modern semiotics starts at the beginning of the 20th Century with the emergence of two independent traditions. The work of Ferdinand de Saussure represents one of these traditions. Considered to be the founder of modern distinguishing the former from the later in Cours de linguistique generate (1916) - a volume assembled from lecture notes edited by colleagues and published three years after his death (currently available as Bally, Sechehaye and Riedlinger eds/ 1993). The other tr Peirce, a founder of symbolic logic as well as an expert in philosophy, mathematics, and many other fields. Peirce developed a pansemiotic view so all-inclusive and elaborate that the definitive, chronological collection of his work called the Peirce Edition Project rem volumes of have been published to date (see for example Houser et al eds/ 1999). Other semiotic traditions exist. There are semiotic forms of linguistics - referred to here as semio linguistics - which adopt a semiotic theorisation of text rather than using an explicit s semiotics, systemic functional linguistics (Halliday 1978, 1985; Martin 1992) and systemic semiotics (Fawcett 1986). There is also at least one influential form of semio-linguistics that does uses an explicit sign model (Hjelmslev 1943/1963), while Social Semiotics (Kr of discourse, text and social subjectivity based on the 'social sign' of Bakhtin (see Todorov 1984). Despite the obvious applicability to information systems of a discipline that concerns itself with the study of 'patterns of interpretive behaviour', there have been impedi semiotics and informatics. There are several contributory reasons for this situation. A major contributory reason is that Western semiotics likes to trace its lineage back to the Stoics (approximately 300 BC to 200 BC) and the Epicureans (300 BC to 0) through to the Faced with this daunting history, and a diversity of researchers, theories, and terminology to rival the most entrenched of modern disciplines, it is not surprising that a casual 'dip' into the literature might prove unproductive. Moreover, as semiotics is centrally involve obvious that many commonsense notions of what constitutes communication would need to be reconsidered. As a consequence, semiotics unusually needs to employ meta-theory of one form or another, which leave it open to charges of obscurantism and elitism (Si that the constructs used to explain and examine such complex and taken-for granted cultural phenomena must necessarily be simple. Another major contributory reason is the difficulty of locating semiotics within any single discipline- semiotics is inherently trans-dis but are not limited to, the cultural constitution of subjectivity, criticism and knowledge, communication and perception. A sample of subjects using semiotic theory of one form or another would include cultural and literary studies, film criticism, feminism, political scien anthropology, biology and genetics. Moreover, there is considerable debate about what constitutes the core criteria that defines semiotics (Pap 1991).

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