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From “Effects” to “Entanglements”: A Fishbowl Discussion on Sociomateriality

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Abstract
Multiple research areas within the field of information studies grapple with the notion of technology and its role in social processes and outcomes. Recent theorizations on sociomateriality reflect a renewed interest in studying the mutually constitutive nature of the relationships among technology, materiality and social contexts (e.g., Leonardi, Nardi, & Kallinikos, 2012; Orlikowski, 2007). In specific, the sociomaterial perspective offers a promising path for ‘information’ scholars to move from theorizing about the “effects” of specific technologies on organizational and societal outcomes to considering the constitutive “entanglement” among them.

Keywords: materiality, sociomateriality


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1 Introduction
Sociomaterial approaches are currently being developed in parallel within a diverse set of disciplines associated with the ‘information’ field, ranging from science and technology studies (STS) and information systems to organizational studies and computer supported cooperative work (CSCW). While the interdisciplinary foundations of sociomateriality could definitely be a source of advantage for coming up with a robust theoretical framework, it could also be a source of limitation, especially with regard to how each discipline has reinterpreted and emphasized certain facets of the sociomaterial perspective at the expense of others. As a consequence, the larger objectives of the perspective could be lost, misunderstood, or even remain opaque to the broader information research community (Leonardi, Neeley, Hall, & Gerber, 2011), thereby limiting its practical utility for conducting empirical research despite its extreme relevance to the ‘information’ field.

To address these concerns, we propose an open discussion on the conceptual and practical applications of sociomateriality, with a specific focus on conducting a ‘sociomaterial inquiry’ i.e. designing and executing empirical research informed by the sociomaterial perspective across a range of phenomenon that are relevant to the ‘information’ field. We embrace a multitude of approaches to sociomateriality represented within our community, reflective of the diverse background and interests of the proposing authors. Therefore, the discussion will be held in a “fishbowl” format (described below), bringing forth awareness concerning different empirical approaches that are available for studying sociomateriality in a range of contexts.

In particular, this event will be an opportunity to 1) introduce notions of sociomateriality to new audiences; 2) provide a forum for comparing and contrasting different approaches toward conducting a ‘sociomaterial inquiry’ to understand a range of phenomenon that are relevant to the ‘information’ field,
and 3) share research practices and practical insights regarding the application of these ideas to conduct better empirical research.

2 Intended audience and relevance to the iConference

The Sociomateriality Fishbowl will explore the ways that an emerging sociomaterial worldview can be used to guide empirical research in the information domain. In this way, it will bring together researchers with diverse backgrounds (e.g., human-computer interactions, information systems, CSCW, organizational studies, and library and information science) to discuss theoretical and methodological approaches and associated challenges.

The inspiration for this event came from a mini workshop held at the 2012 Summer Institute held by the Consortium for the Science of Socio-technical Systems (CSST 2012). We would like to bring this conversation to the iConference in order to take advantage of the diversity, openness and wealth of experience of this community. Our goal is to build a stronger collective understanding of sociomateriality to lay groundwork for productive conversations in the future. We believe that the interdisciplinary nature of information field makes it well suited to train scholars and produce knowledge about the “entanglements” of people, data, technology, organizations and institutional arrangements.

Attention to the intersection between people, information and technology defines the core of information research (Dourish & Mazmanian, 2011; Orlikowski & Iacono, 2001). Therefore, we strongly believe the proposed fishbowl session has the potential to engage a broad range of iConference attendees. The fishbowl organizers hold different backgrounds and are pursuing distinct research questions, but our shared interests in sociomateriality will enable us and the audience to explore the topic across different levels of analysis, research domains and theoretical lenses. Additionally, our experience with a fishbowl discussion on the topic of Materiality at the iConference 2011 (Seattle, WA) indicates both senior and junior researchers are interested in this topic and it is seen as an emerging and thriving research endeavor. The proposed fishbowl will create continuity from one conference to another and allow researchers to touch base and keep abreast of recent developments in this space.

3 Proposed activities

The typical fishbowl format involves an open room with chairs that can be arranged in a series of concentric circles. In the center of the room, five chairs are placed facing each other in a close ring. This is the “fishbowl.” Rows of additional seats are arranged around this circle. Four discussion participants sit in the fishbowl, always leaving one seat empty. All members of the audience are welcome to join in the discussion, but you must be seated in the “fishbowl” in order to speak. When someone enters the fishbowl they take the empty seat and one of the previous speakers must step out of the conversation.

The fishbowl format is ideally suited to discussions of emerging topics, as it enables multiple members of the community to contribute questions, insights, and challenges. Junior and senior researchers are given equal opportunity to address the group, and the format ensures a continual mixing of opinions and perspectives. For the this fishbowl discussion, a series of focusing questions will be offered, including:

- What does a sociomaterial approach contribute to our understanding of current research problems? What do sociomaterial approaches make visible that others do not?
- What are the different flavors of sociomateriality (digital materiality, visual materiality, immateriality, etc.) and how do they differ from each other?
- What are the different theoretical lenses related to sociomateriality (e.g. performativity, mangle of practice, imbrications, apparatuses, agencement, actor-networks/sociology of associations etc.) and how do they differ from each other?
- How have researchers applied sociomateriality in different domains?
• What are the methods that are well suited to this approach?
• What are the outlets and publication venues best suited to research that takes a sociomaterial approach?

4 Length and number of participants
We anticipate the fishbowl discussion running for 60-90 minutes, with approximately 15-25 participants.

5 Special requirements
We do not anticipate any other special needs beyond those related to the seating configurations described above, unless the room is very large or the acoustics are very poor. In that case, a microphone would be helpful.

6 References