Introduction to Materiality of Information, Documents and Work Minitrack

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The debates on materiality and sociomateriality, hailing from science studies and organization studies, allow information systems (IS) researchers to evade received distinctions between the social, natural and technical. The literatures that inform this Minitrack contest a purely information-based perspective that posit abstract meanings and immaterial data divorced from situated contexts. Instead the bodies of work that inspire this Minitrack draw on new materialist, pragmatist, and practice-oriented perspectives (amongst others) hailing primarily from the social sciences that analyze the social activities going into the manufacturing of documents through the manipulations of various material forms.

The notion of the document serves as a lens into the practical and material nature of what organizational members do day in and day out. Documents are sociomaterial in that they are artifacts—and, thus, embody the technical infrastructure—and social—as they embody both the work practices and shared orientations of those involved.

For example, our production and distribution of this mini-track introduction involved the technology of word processors, several different computers, cloud services, hard copies, email messages and PDF files. Your reading of this document likely involves numerous other technologies; you may be reading a paper version of this introduction, part of the conference packet, or you might have stumbled over it among many other mini-track introductions on the HICSS-47 website; each case, again, depends on a set of web clients, computers, and cloud servers amid a web of social practices.

Shared social practices are reflected in the degree to which you, the reader, and we, the authors, understand and share common knowledge about the form and contents of the genre of conference calls in general and HICSS calls in particular. Our shared activities are the basics of work practice. And, the heterogeneous material forms of this call for proposals are some of the infrastructures supporting HICSS and the broader information systems field. In short, the production of this call involves both the work of documenting and document work.

As increasingly complex information systems are adopted and adapted within and across organizational environments, there is pressing need for more careful study of document work and the work of documenting within such contexts. Six innovative papers address this topic in this year’s minitrack.

In the first session, Stephanie Steinhardt & Steven Jackson explore the meeting point between planning, documentary processes, and the material worlds (built, natural, and human) in distributed ocean science collaborations. Carolyn Paris follows with a study of the materiality of contract in relation to ICT as illuminated by a biography of contract management software. João Porto de Albuquerque & Marcel Christ applied an actor-network perspective to study the seemingly incongruous relationship between process modeling and organizational flexibility.

In the second session, Megan Finn, Janaki Srinivasan & Rajesh Veeraraghavan explore how the circulation of everyday bureaucratic documents opens up the possibility for a population to gaze back and “see” the state. They do so by comparing the materiality of welfare documents in India and in the U.S. Marie Campbell likewise looks at bureaucratic documents but in a healthcare setting. She draws on institutional ethnography to map the role of text in ruling social relations in a hospital. Sari Yli-Kauhaluoma studies how paper-based documents help back-office knowledge workers overcome technology-related interruptions.

The papers represent an emerging literature converging old and new approaches to sociomateriality and documenting practices. Such work follows up work presented in prior HICSS tracks on the genre of digital documents; these have found a home in the digital media track since the mid-90s.