Minitrack Introduction: The Socio-Materiality of Information – Documents and Work

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Adopting the perspective of sociomateriality allows IS researchers to evade the traditional separation of the social and the technical and investigate IS development, adoption and adaptation as a set of inextricably entangled practices.

The notion of document serves as a lens into the sociomaterial nature of what organizational members do day in and day out. We define documents as typified and material communication, whether electronic, paper-based, wall mounted or set in stone, invoked in response to recurrent situations. Documents are sociomaterial in that they are both material—and, thus, embody the technical infrastructure—and social—as they embody both the work practices and shared understanding of those involved.

For example, our production and distribution of the document in front of you involved the technology of word processors, several different computers, hard copies, email messages and PDF files. Your reading of this mini-track introduction 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-46 website or in the IEEE paper repository. 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 conferences in general and HICSS mini-track introductions in particular and reflect this knowledge in our creation and use of this document.

The work we have done and that you are doing represents the basics of the work practices. And, the various material forms of the proposal represent some of the infrastructure supporting these HICSS and the broader information systems field. In short, the production of this introduction involves both the work of documenting and document work.

The work of documenting falls close to the definition of the verb, to “document,” describing the act of providing factual or substantive support for statements made or hypotheses proposed; or to equip with exact references to authoritative supporting information (Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary). At the same time we engaged in document work involving the production, use, collection, classification, storage, retrieving and dissemination of documents within and across organizational settings.

The five papers included in this mini-track explore different aspects of the sociomateriality of document work and working documents.

Petra Auvinen and Ilkka Arminen examine the use of an airline checklist as a sociomaterial document that allows flight crews to address routine problems. They also examine the problems emerging through checklist use.

Carsten Østerlund and Kevin Crowston study boundary-spanning documents in online open source software development communities and develop a framework articulating the characteristics of documents supporting collaborators with asymmetric access to knowledge versus those with symmetric knowledge.

Gunhild Tøndel and Ann R. Saetnan follow the documents of a statistics program intended to coordinate, control and standardize a municipal care services in Norway and create knowledge about the clients. The authors discuss the interactions between the documents produced by the system and healthcare governance.

Seyed Soroush Ghorashi and Carlos Jensen explore the design of Leyline, a provenance-based desktop search and file management system, both on a conceptual and user interface level. Based on a comparative analysis of previous provenance-based search system they describe a new system based on a flexible visual sketchpad interface.

Finally, Sonya Zhang and Neal Cabage describe the benefits to students of making classroom blogs available beyond the classroom and propose and test an approach to modifying the blogs to do so.

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