

Editorial

Sixth Conference on The Difference that Makes a Difference (DTMD), on Information, Narrative and Rhetoric: Exploring Meaning in a Digitalised Society [†]

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1. Introduction and Previous Events

Many academic disciplines and applied fields use the concepts and language of information, yet different areas talk in different ways and make different implicit or explicit assumptions about the nature of information. The Difference That Makes a Difference (DTMD) series of conferences and workshops aims, therefore, at interdisciplinary sharing of insights on information by bringing academics and practitioners into conversation and dialogue.

DTMD 2017 is the sixth in the series of events organized to facilitate these interdisciplinary conversations. The first three were in Milton Keynes, UK:

- October 2007, with sessions on historical and systems perspectives, information handling, and ‘hard’ information;
- September 2011, with sessions on ‘what is information?’, understanding with information, engaging with information, and the impact of information;
- April 2013, with sessions on information and space, information and time, information and identity, ‘what is information?’, and information and art.

These workshops resulted in an edited book [1] and two journal special issues [2,3].

The other three have been co-located with larger events: a workshop on information at the 14th conference of the International Society for the Study of European Ideas (ISSEI) held August 2014 in Porto (for which proceedings are available [4]), a workshop on ‘information and values: ethics, spirituality and religion’ at the IS4SI summit held June 2015 in Vienna, and the workshop reported here in Gothenburg.

Presentations and further details of each workshop are available at www.dtmd.org.uk.

2. Themes of the 2017 Workshop

The sixth workshop took as its premise that meaning is embedded within, and defined by, stories. It sought to explore the use of the language of information in the stories of the digitalised society in order to enhance understanding, both of society and of information.

In our increasingly digitalised society, certain narratives have emerged depicting possible futures of an information society. ‘Smart cities’, ‘big data’ and ‘the internet of things’ constitute perhaps the most obvious examples of such stories, offering somewhat utopian views of a society

enhanced through their application. On the other hand digital technologies such as websites and social media are implicated in the spread of fake news and the rise of post-truth politics.

Discussions of these developments engage with information and a shared, tacit understanding of its nature in order to generate meaning, rhetoric and the narratives themselves; reflexively, there is also a need to consider the role of rhetoric and narrative in the shift to a digitalised or informational conception of society. The exploration of information and its use, and their intersection with rhetorical considerations gives rise to alternative viewpoints and prompts a range of questions, thereby providing the basis for a valuable critique of emerging ideas and narratives.

The workshop set out to address the following questions (among others):

- How is information represented/embodied through stories and narratives?
- In what way do the structures (e.g., shape and grammars) of stories create information in themselves?
- Is it necessary to have both rhetoric and narrative to create stories? Can narrative-free or rhetoric-free stories exist?
- What are the processes by which narratives are formed? How are meta-narratives formed, and what is their reflexive relationship with the information that the narrative shapes and is shaped by?
- Are there circumstances when the forming of a narrative leads to the destruction or ignoring of information? Likewise, are there circumstances when the destruction of a narrative leads to the creation of information?
- How do narratives become hegemonic on particular topics, for example, in political discourse? Who has the power to create and shape these hegemonic narratives?
- What does the relationship between information and narrative say about the rise of post-truth politics?
- What is the relationship between levels of abstraction (in Floridi's sense) or levels of communication (in the sense of the ISO 7-layer model) and narratives?
- Which narratives, particularly in public discourse, are generated in ways that (deliberately or tacitly) exclude information from discussion rather than adding to it?
- How can we identify and investigate the narratives around digitalised societies, and critique the assumptions behind those narratives?

3. Overview of Papers

There were six papers presented at the workshop, for which extended abstracts are provided in these proceedings:

- David Chapman asked 'What can we say about information? Agreeing a narrative'. He argued that it is unreasonable to ask the question 'what is information' but instead sought to present a set of principles towards a narrative of information. Seven principles were proposed in the paper, and they were applied to rhetorics around the information society.
- Rodolfo Fiorini looked at 'Predicative Competence in a Digitalised Society'. Looking at the role of human perception and computation in understanding information, he argued that semantics need to be introduced into information theory, and presented an 'Evolutive Elementary Pragmatic Model' of human reasoning and narrative.
- Derek Jones also looked at human consciousness, suggesting in his paper 'Narrative realities and optimal entropy' that we do not live in a Cartesian, objective universe. He argued that the world of stories (narrative) is more important than 'reality'—that we conceive as much as we perceive.
- Mustafa Ali in 'Decolonizing Information Narratives', argued that information narratives are inherently ideological, and are deeply rooted in colonial and racist thinking. He suggested that digitalization can be a form of epistemicide, destroying indigenous forms of knowledge that cannot be digitized; that algorithmics are reiterating and extended colonial phenomena; and questioned the rise of 'nerd eschatology'.

- Paolo Sordi introduced the concept of ‘The Algorithmic Narrator’, with a focus on the way that Facebook (and by extension other social media platforms) creates narratives around our lives. Facebook, he argued, is the final editor-in-chief, with its algorithms being the deciding points around how personal narratives are shaped and described; and simultaneously sits at the heart of a surveillance society, to which huge numbers of people freely contribute.
- Magnus Ramage discussed ‘Meaning, selection & narrative’, returning to the question of mechanisms around which narratives are constructed. Looking at concepts of multiple narratives and contested information, he argued that selection is key, and that frequently we fail to be aware of information in the world because it fails to fit our narrative. He drew on examples from politics, the surveillance society and the gig economy, arguing that narratives can be toxic.

4. Lessons Learnt

The workshop gave a rich overview of aspects of narrative in understanding information within the context of a digitalized society. Speakers argued in different ways for the centrality of narrative in information discourses. We saw that narrative is constructed in a variety of ways: through forms of human consciousness, through rhetoric, through ideology, through selection (both unconscious and conscious), through the mediation of technology, and through algorithms.

Discussion at the workshop, drawing on the speakers’ contributions, was wide-ranging, and, at times, passionate. There was debate around Chapman’s fourth principle, that information ‘cannot be stored or transmitted’; around the nature and centrality of selection in information processes; the relevance of social media and whether it applies beyond Facebook; and the political implications of the phenomena discussed, especially colonialism and social media.

Much more could have been said, and it was clear that we only began to address between us the nature of information narratives; but the workshop began a conversation around this important concept which will hopefully grow.

References

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