



# Affection not affliction: The role of emotions in information systems and organizational change

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## Abstract

Most IS research in both the technical/rational and socio-technical traditions ignores or marginalizes the emotionally charged behaviours through which individuals engage in, and cope with the consequences of, IS practice and associated organizational change. Even within the small body of work that engages with emotions through particular conceptual efforts, affections are often conceived as a phenomenon to be eradicated – an affliction requiring a cure. In this paper, I argue that emotions are always implicated in our lived experiences, crucially influencing how we come to our beliefs about what is good or bad, right or wrong. I draw from the theoretical work of Michel Foucault to argue for elaborating current notions of IS innovation as a moral and political struggle in which individuals' beliefs and feelings are constantly tested. Finally, I demonstrate these ideas by reference to a case study that had considerable emotional impact, and highlight the implications for future work.

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## 1. Introduction

One of the most striking features of 20th-century research on work in organizations and its associated technologies is the rise to dominance of a rationalized model of human behaviour. People are seen as instrumental actors, obeying particular logics designed to

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promote organizational effectiveness and profit maximization, supported by robust and reliable technical artefacts. In the early part of the century, these artefacts were evident as power-driven machines in factories, which by then had become an integral part of the production process; now they are more prevalent as information and communication technologies (ICTs) – in effect, the *sine qua non* of modern business enterprises.

Yet, even while research has focused on changes in the nature of work and the technologies developed and deployed for its accomplishment, it has done little to advance our understanding of the emotions involved in work situations beyond Weber's notion of the dehumanized bureaucrat. 'Sine ira et studio, without hatred or passion, and hence without affection or enthusiasm' (Weber, 1978, p. 225 cited in Albrow, 1997, p. 93) now seems to describe a wide variety of calculative agents pursuing the reified goal of organizational effectiveness.

One might conclude that recent moves within some disciplines – such as sociology and organization studies – to give attention to emotions (Albrow, 1997; Fineman, 1993, 2000a; Hochschild, 1979, 1983) are an effort to give voice to a phenomenon that has been unacknowledged in writing up to this point. As Albrow (1997) convincingly argues, this would be a narrow reading of history. Rather, such work may be seen as an attempt to recover knowledge, to redress 'a twentieth-century aberration, indeed an expression of its rationalism, but at odds with earlier understanding of organization' (p. 94). In effect, ideas about scientific management (Taylor, 1911) and bureaucratic forms of organizing (Weber, 1947) have been harnessed to provide a passionless paradigm for organizational analysis within the rationalization project of modernity. Eighteenth and nineteenth-century writers' concerns<sup>1</sup> with how organized cooperation among individuals – for work, charitable, religious and other purposes – generated strong and productive passions as well as bitter resentments have been progressively eliminated or mentioned only to show how to bring such powerful emotions under control.

Albrow's concerns about the way that organizational analysis, and much of sociological analysis, have developed seem even more applicable to the field of information systems (IS). With its early roots in a sub-field of computer science, and strongly influenced by concepts from a 'hard' version of general systems theory (von Bertalanffy, 1968) deriving from mathematics and engineering, the objects of study were not only passionless but also inanimate. Although socio-technical systems theory (Trist, Higgins, Murray, & Pollock, 1963) brought human, as well as technical and environmental, issues under consideration, effort was then directed towards achieving consensus among often conflicting concerns, subsuming emotional aspects of human behaviour within the rationalized goal of improving organizational performance.

With the rise of the business schools, information systems was incorporated as a major component of most business studies and business administration courses, and IS research became closely aligned with management studies and influenced specifically by concepts from organization theory and economics. In this way, the rationalism of organizational analysis came to bear upon IS research (Avgerou, 2000). Moreover, influenced by ideas from industrial and transaction economics (Williamson, 1975, 1981, 1985), IS research

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<sup>1</sup> One of the most well known examples – in European social history at least – is Marx and Engels's (1977[1888]) Communist Party Manifesto, exhorting: 'The proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains. They have a world to win. Working men of all countries, unite!' (p. 74).

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