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Facts, myths and thought-styles... and a rallying cry for civic engagement

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ABSTRACT

This polemic concludes with two programmatic recommendations for the Information Systems (IS) field. First, a call for more research in the public services, and for greater civic engagement generally; second, that we shake off our enchantment with Theory, not least in the interests of dissemination and communication, especially with non-academic audiences. Our critique of theory uses Barthes' structuralism to argue that theories are myths which order, interpret and normalise the world. Leading into this, we address the fundamental question "what is a fact", drawing on the epistemology of Ludwik Fleck (his concepts of thought-style and thought-collective in particular) which we believe deserves more recognition in IS. The empirical material for our analyses comes from two case studies, both from the domain of child protection in the UK. The paper is introduced with a brief exposition of the myth that information systems are fact-repositories. We stress that, though based on domestic examples, our messages are universal and strategic for the field. To set the scene, the paper opens with some lines from Aeschylus, describing a mythical event at the outset of Agamemnon's ill-fated Trojan campaign.

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1. Introduction

As our Kings set out, a black bird and a white bird, sailed over
Then those two birds flushed and drove and killed a heavy hare with her twins.
Calchas the Seer cried to the whole army and the two Kings
What does this mean? I will tell you. It means Victory with a twist.
But when you have emptied Troy of her blood and her babies,
Then you can expect the anger of heaven.
Artemis, the moon-faced, the goddess, the mother of the hares
Avenging Artemis, who stands casting the shadow of a great Queen.
Bloody footprints staggering through this palace, generation to generation.
This is how Calchas the Seer unriddled the murder of the hare.
(Ted Hughes' translation of *Agamemnon*, by Aeschylus[1])

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[1] Hughes (1999). Aeschylus' Oresteia. Farrar, Straus and Giroux: New York. The quoted lines are extracted from pages 10–12, re-configured here for compactness.

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The natural (mythical) way of thinking of an information system (IS) is as an organised repository of facts about the world, "reality-mapping" as Lyytinen (1987) put it. But what is a fact? With this blunt question, Ludwik Fleck began his seminal book, *Genesis and Development of a Scientific Fact* (1979). Published in 1935, GDSF foreshadows the better known work of Kuhn and other sociologists of knowledge, which has spawned, *inter alia*, the field of science and technology studies (STS). Facts are so central to our business in IS, but what the devil are they? Fleck can help us here. His work, "a brilliant and unexploited resource" as Kuhn generously acknowledges,[2] deserves to be better known, and we will draw much on Fleck's work in this disquisition. The parenthetical "mythical" will be elucidated along the way; so-called facts are carriers of myths, myths of happy families, the omnipotent State, aligned organisations (Wastell, 2007). Another apt term is Propaganda (Ellul, 1965)! Theory is a central figure in the Myth–Fact relation, and we shall take an irreverent pot-shot or two at this most sacred of cows along the way. But for now, just note the "fact" in our epigraph:

"Then those two birds flushed and drove and killed a heavy hare with her twins."

Plus an un-related second fact to be introduced in due course:

"No problems when Mum left the room, continued playing happily."

"Data, data, data, I can't make bricks without clay" famously exclaimed Sherlock Holmes. Bring it on! Two "factual exhibits" will be considered here, both relating to a single information system, the UK's Child Protection Register (CPR). Until its abolition in April 2008, the CPR provided a simple list of children living within the immediate area of UK local authorities, who were considered at imminent risk from neglect or abuse. In many ways, it functioned rather well, though it had its critics. During the lead-up to its abolition, other more ambitious, national systems were being developed which were expected to replace its functionality, for example the ContactPoint data base of all children in England. This system, purported to help identify and protect vulnerable children (Peckover et al., 2008), has recently been abandoned,[3] being seen as a costly venture, headed for inevitable failure.

Although our case material is necessarily parochial, the chords we strike are intended as universal and strategic for the IS field. Although the particular vicissitudes of ContactPoint are not directly addressed, it is pertinent to ask why it drew so little attention from IS scholars. Such neglect of the public services, the preference for commercial business, is not a phenomenon unique to the UK; there may be local variations, but there is a general bias in our scholarship to be corrected. To this end, the present polemic is a call-to-arms for more IS research in the public services, where we argue our expertise is needed and we have a civic duty to assist. To make our work "really matter", we also need to interrogate our research practice, challenging in particular our fetishization of theory. But more of this later; first, our two stories.

2. Exhibit 1: the strange history of Shannon Matthews' kidnapping

The "kidnapping "of Shannon Matthews caused something of a press furore in the UK in 2008. Paraphrasing Wikipedia:

"Shannon Matthews, a 9 year old British girl, disappeared on the afternoon of 19 February 2008 in Dewsbury, West Yorkshire, England. The search for Shannon became a major missing person police operation before she was found alive nearly 2 months later, only a short distance away in the house of Michael Donovan, the uncle of Shannon's mother's boyfriend. Donovan was charged with the kidnapping and false imprisonment of Shannon, whilst her mother Karen Matthews, was charged with child neglect and perverting the course of justice.

The investigation, carried out by The West Yorkshire Police, questioned 1500 motorists and also searched 3000 houses. By early March, more than 250 officers and 60 detectives were involved in the investigation, about 10% of West Yorkshire Police's operational strength. This became the largest police search for a missing person in the country, since the Yorkshire Ripper investigation around 30 years previously

The joint trial of Donovan and Matthews at Leeds Crown Court concluded on 4 December with both defendants being found guilty, given an eight years sentence. It was revealed that the plan had been for Michael Donovan to release Shannon Matthews at Dewsbury Market, drive around the corner to 'discover her' then take her to a police station and claim the £50,000 reward. This would then be split between Karen Matthews and Donovan."

The child protection register had played an important part in the case, as a "non-human actor" (Latour, 1987). Shannon had been placed on the register in 2003, but had subsequently been removed. Press reports seized on this as further evidence of the dysfunctionality of the UK Government's "performance management" regime, dubbed "Targets and Terror" (Bevan and Hood, 2006). Under increasing general criticism at the time, this top-down regime subjected all UK local authorities (Kirklees Council near Leeds, in this case) to comprehensive external auditing and assessment, with consequential sanctions for poor performance. In the case of social services, the inspectorial body was (and is) Ofsted (Office for Standards in Education). One

[2] In the Preface to the first English translation, published twenty years after the German original.
[3] http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/newstopics/politics/7929651/ContactPoint-child-database-scrapped.html

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