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ILLiad TN: 263599



Journal Title: Information systems journal.

Volume: 15 Issue: 2
Month/Year: April 2005 Pages: 103-110

ILL Number: 20648772



Article Author:
Article Title: Chrisanthi Avgerou; Doing critical research in information systems; some further thoughts



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Doing critical research in information systems: some further thoughts

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Abstract. *In her paper in this volume, McGrath argues for more explicit methodological accounts of critical research in information systems. In this short paper, I voice my concern that emphasis on methodological accountability may well inhibit criticality, and I argue for the need to recognize that researchers bring into their investigation tacit knowledge, emotions, and moral and political convictions that cannot be rationalized in methodological descriptions. Moreover, I suggest that critical research should maintain suspicion to instrumental reasoning and that it should place its effort to producing knowledge on an alternative agenda of substantive social issues by the interplay of theory and empirical evidence.*

Keywords: Information Systems research, critical research, research method

INTRODUCTION

My spontaneous response to McGrath's question 'how do we achieve criticality' is 'surely not by method'. Her appeal for methodological accounts finds me suspicious of calls to work out rationalizations that discipline the research activity and normalize the work of junior researchers in compliance with the selection procedures of journals. Isn't this the kind of instruments used in the power/knowledge regime of modern academia that most critical theories question?

However, it would be a mistake to dismiss McGrath's methodological concerns. Her paper raises important issues on the nature of critical research and does not just ask for prescription of method. No doubt, her appeal for clear description of how to conduct critical research resonates with the worries of many researchers who are inclined to do critical research but are uneasy about its precarious status within the contemporary institutions of information systems (IS) research. There is a widespread view that the legitimacy and value of academic work should be visible and accountable in terms of clear principles that provide a secure basis for supervisors, students, authors and reviewers to do their jobs. In this short paper I will argue that, instead of making critical research fit in our established norms of legitimacy and pedagogy through working out principles of method for researchers to adhere to, we should aim to build its acceptance within academia on the merit of its contribution of substantive knowledge on critical social issues.

In the following two sections of this paper, I elaborate on two main risks I see associated with spelling out methodical principles for the conduct and the judgement of good critical research. I then shift attention from the discussion of method to the discussion of features that make critical research distinct.

THE RISK OF PRODUCING MISLEADING RESEARCH ACCOUNTS

McGrath rightly takes a broad understanding of critical research as engaging with issues and modes of theorizing that are historically and culturally contingent and suggests that 'we might strive for a combination of issues and theories that accepts several models for conducting and evaluating critical work, rather than trying to derive a uniform set of guidelines that risks being too general to be helpful or too riven with contradiction to be useful'. Yet, she searches for distinguishing methodological traits, for 'additional or different research practices' that produce a critique and suggests that such methodological practices should be communicated through detailed documentation of the dynamics of the research process. I will argue here that it is not realistic to expect researchers to provide adequate accounts of the way they develop critical insights and arguments and, if such an expectation becomes a requirement for publications, research experience will be misrepresented in partial accounts of cognitive processes.

According to contemporary critical epistemology, research is not a purely cognitive process of associating empirically discovered facts to theory. It also involves value-laden preconceptions, and emotionally loaded political and moral stances (Latour, 1993). With this in mind, I question the validity of McGrath's suggestion that a good research account should document how the research process responded to the unfolding pattern of research findings and how researchers and research subjects were changed in the process.

How promptly do researchers change the beliefs that drive their investigation, their critical working assumptions and espoused theories in response to the unfolding empirical evidence? Is it appropriate to expect that the subjects of empirical studies of critical research change their perceptions and behaviour in response to the empirical evidence produced by the research? Such a view unduly privileges the significance of the empirical 'evidence' over the critical predispositions created through life experience. I do not dispute the interaction between empirical findings and research direction that happens in a long period of a researcher's endeavour: theoretical conceptions, beliefs, political stances and moral values change by reflection on empirical evidence; but such changes are not necessarily noticeable, let alone documentable, within the span of the empirical research reported in a doctoral thesis, research paper or even research monograph.

Moreover, the reflection of the researcher on evidence and theory is a much more complex process than a cognitive adjustment to empirical findings. No doubt, a good researcher in IS makes plans for empirical studies, uses techniques more or less systematically and with various degrees of skill, notes or records what interviewees say and reflects upon the perspectives that data reveal, and puts the empirical research in context for the reader by providing details on how she collected her data. Yet, it is misleading to suggest – particularly to doctoral

students – that this is how let alone how we develop engagement with the investigation. In addition to the researcher's tacit knowledge, moral values, and empathy, research has to be recognized rather than a competent execution of critical research lies: it restricts research to the knowledge that stems from lives.

THE POTENTIALLY RISKY

McGrath's methodological method for critical research in temporary social studies of information she notices, the interpretive, to a lesser extent, producing of being valid objectives of critical that in the socio-political context with transformative redefinition of form of critical thought and utopian visions and – to the social engineering of empirical credited in Western societies.

Critical research conducted in such stances may well be a valuable for researchers, particularly in the developing world. I contextualized and developing practices in society. I am therefore concerned the epistemology that has been taken for granted – may further marginalize and separate their critical cry.

An example of my own research I am mainly concerned with the universal social value of IT innovation, and I practice technology and development

students – that this is how we gain understanding of a research issue and form claims of truth, let alone how we develop a critical thesis. Instead, I see the work of critical researchers as an engagement with the investigation process in all their human capacity of making sense of a situation. In addition to the formal cognitive investigation tools, critical research involves the researcher's tacit knowledge, emotionally charged preconceptions, political convictions and moral values, and empathy with particular categories of empirical research subjects. Critical research has to be recognized as the result of a researcher's embodied, situated experience rather than a competent exercise of appropriate method, and this is where the radical nature of critical research lies: it breaks out of the instrumental reasoning and the conventions that restrict research to the channel vision of methodological discipline, accepts as legitimate knowledge that stems from the way people – researchers and research subjects – live their lives.

THE POTENTIALLY RESTRICTIVE EFFECTS OF METHOD ON CRITICALITY

McGrath's methodological discussion centres on the adoption of interpretive epistemology and method for critical research. This reflects a more general epistemological choice in contemporary social studies of information and communications technology (ICT). Nevertheless, as she notices, the interpretive epistemology is suitable for hermeneutic understanding and, to a lesser extent, producing critique, but less appropriate for transformative redefinition – all three being valid objectives of critical research. Her brief historical account of critical research shows that in the socio-political conditions of earlier periods critical IS research was more concerned with transformative redefinition, which was seen as better served by positivist methods. This form of critical thought and practice may now be seen in Western academia as fostering utopian visions and – to the extent that it was associated with Marxist thought that aspired to the social engineering of emancipation and was usurped by totalitarian regimes – has been discredited in Western society at large.

Critical research concerned with transformative redefinition of socio-economic circumstances may well be a valid concern, indeed a perceived necessity or priority, for some critical researchers, particularly those addressing the socio-economic circumstances of many parts of the developing world. I consider the unequal power afforded in the discourse between industrialized and developing parts of the world to be one of the most critical issues of contemporary society. I am therefore concerned that the elaboration of a canon of legitimacy that privileges the epistemology that has historically prevailed in the Western post-modernity – or late modernity – may further marginalize voices seen as inappropriately expressed, no matter how desperate their critical cry.

An example of my own research may illustrate this point. As McGrath notes, in my critical research I am mainly concerned with the deconstruction of dominant preconceptions of the universal social value of information technology (IT) and with situated meaning and valuing of IT innovation, and I practice exclusively interpretive methods. Because I study issues of technology and development from the position of the outsider grounded in Western academia, the

hermeneutic and deconstruction endeavour is a feasible and, I like to think, valid contribution to the formation of critical theoretical propositions regarding 'development'. Yet, fellow researchers in developing countries may find different scope and perceive different pressures for critical research. They may feel the need to work out and enact visions of an IT-mediated society that they see appropriate for their conditions; they may have reasons to believe in progress through scientific method; they may need to talk about 'reality' rather than 'interpretations'. In whatever way they form their critical voices I consider it vital to allow them to be heard – indeed to find ways to include them in academic institutions as perfectly legitimate – and to engage in the debate on IT and development. My fear is that the more we are preoccupied with perfecting particular principles of research legitimacy, the more we stifle the possibilities for critical debate across diverse socio-cultural settings.

ON ACHIEVING CRITICALITY

If, as I argue above, we should not rely on methodical norms of conduct and presentation of empirical inquiry to secure the legitimacy and to develop demonstrable competencies of critical IS research, how can we improve its status within the IS field? In this section I discuss briefly three features of critical research that I believe should be further developed in order to form an effective stream of critical IS research: a research agenda addressing substantive, rather than ontological or epistemological, issues regarding the ICT and social change in contemporary society; relevant critical theory; and epistemological debate that opens scope for non-instrumental reasoning.

Research on substantive issues of a political and moral nature

The most important feature that distinguishes critical research is that it engages with questions of an overtly political or moral nature. At the aftermath of the atrocities of World War II, critical research was concerned primarily with the authoritarian nature of modern society and the role that science and technology plays in it. The way power is implicated in the development of claims of truth has held a central position in critical theory.

More recently, different types of concerns have emerged in the critical research agenda of the social sciences. Indicative examples include: the isolation of the individual in the weakening fabric of Western societies (Bauman, 2000); the beyond scientific control techno-scientific interventions on the planet and the risks entailed by contemporary social institutions, such as the global financial system (Beck, 1992); and the new forms of marginalization relating to technology-mediated knowledge manifested in the 'digital divide' discourse either at a local or global scale (Sassen, 2004).

The contribution of IS research to substantive critical social issues has been limited. For example, critical IS research has not achieved a visible agenda that challenges the predominant preoccupation of IS studies with the pursuit of corporate effectiveness. The distinctiveness of critical research within the IS field can only be achieved by producing new knowledge

on the role that IT plays in development. Sustained research and debate, as McGrath suggests, it has opened up an alternative view of the world.

Interplay of theory and practice

Theory is a fundamental part of critical research and other forms of epistemology. There are several ways in which an IS researcher may follow a critical path (2000).

But IS research cannot ignore the norms of theory, such as the substantive social issue it addresses, to contribute to – several disciplines have not adequately the nature of the problem, network theory or structuralist processes, such as IS development. Probably, it will also need to engage with. For example, a critical study of the emergence in developing countries of development, such as the role of the state, it will need to draw from the experiences of the administrative sciences.

The critical research path is a starting choice of theory. A critical researcher is sensitized to the empirical data acquire value and translated convincingly into a theory or suggest ways of moving forward.

Suspicion of instrumentalism

Critical epistemology rejects the instrumental advancement. Its position is defined as technical/rationalist. The role of techno-scientific knowledge in the formation of a critical theory adequate to build critical theory. The moral concerns prevents the development of critical theory does not reject

on the role that IT plays in contemporary society. To that end, it has to form streams of sustained research and debate on ICT and social change. If suspicious of 'managerialism', as McGrath suggests, it has to form a clear non-managerialist research agenda that will contribute an alternative view of the role that ICT plays in contemporary institutions.

Interplay of theory and empirical study

Theory is a fundamental component of critical research. It distinguishes it from political activism and other forms of engagement with issues of contemporary social concern, such as journalism. There are several well-known strands of critical theory in the social sciences that the IS researcher may follow; see for example the overview written by Kincheloe & McLaren (2000).

But IS research cannot produce effective critical perspectives by just adopting one of the –isms of theory, such as social constructivism, post-modernism and Marxism. The study of a substantive social issue in which ICT is implicated will most probably need to draw from – and contribute to – several different layers of theory. It will need theoretical concepts that capture adequately the nature of the relationship between ICT and society, such as those of actor-network theory or structuration theory. It may need a theoretical perspective on specific IS processes, such as IS development, IS and organizational change and IS evaluation. Most probably, it will also need domain theories for the substantive issue and the context under study. For example, a critical study of e-government interventions that promise to improve the governance in developing countries will need to draw from theories relevant to government and development, such as theories of the state, of public administration and of governance. Also, it will need to draw from the literature on the historical development, and strengths and weaknesses of the administration of the particular country or region under empirical investigation.

The critical research process is an interplay between theories and empirical evidence. The starting choice of theory is important because, as Walsham explained, it determines what the researcher is sensitized to pay attention to. Moreover, the findings and arguments derived from empirical data acquire validity beyond the specific cases of the research study only if they are translated convincingly in the conceptual terms of the guiding theory, that is, confirm it, negate it or suggest ways of modifying it.

Suspicion of instrumental reasoning

Critical epistemology rejects the notion of progress through objective science and technological advancement. Its point of departure is the position that science and engineering, if practised as technical/rational activities, prevent us from addressing questions on the moral nature of techno-scientific knowledge and make us blind to the socio-political forces that are implicated in the formation of all knowledge claims. Facts, calculations and formal logic are not adequate to build critical theory, and sticking to them without acknowledgement of political and moral concerns prevents the formation of critical arguments. In other words, the reason why critical theory does not rely on research methods for its distinct quality of criticality is not that

they are not appropriate for advancing knowledge on ICT in organizations, but that they advance too well knowledge that serves unquestioned social ends that may be of dubious political and moral status. Critical research is weary of serving a status quo that may be undesirable to particular sections of society or may bear risks for impoverishing the human condition more generally.

Instead, the epistemology of critical theory – its way of developing knowledge – needs approaches that question the ends that IS innovation serves, sense objectors' concerns, juxtapose the interests of different social groups and seek to foresee long-term consequences on the social fabric.

CONCLUSIONS

In this paper, I voiced scepticism towards the establishment of what McGrath calls 'critical research methods', which I understand to be norms of conducting research on the basis of which the trustworthiness of the research can be judged and the derivation of critical arguments from empirical evidence can be communicated. I discussed two potential risks (1) of misrepresenting how research is carried out by pointing out only the more formal cognitive aspects and hiding the tacit aspects of the research process, and (2) of narrowing what is considered legitimate research results and thus excluding from the debate valuable critical research.

Instead of putting emphasis on method to acquire legitimacy and recognition within the IS field, I suggested that critical research should aim at strengthening its substantive contribution towards an alternative research agenda. I realize that my suggestion does not provide a path for learning and carrying out critical research in a way that will securely demonstrate its merits to examiners and journal editors. I see research as the art of putting together research questions with a critical content, multiple theories and epistemological awareness to develop claims of truth. This art cannot place confidence for producing valid knowledge on adhering to a testable theory of research practice.

In short, my view is that the current weakness of critical research does not stem from its methodological unaccountability but from the limited contributions it has achieved in relation to substantive social issues regarding the spread of ICT. The social study of ICT has elaborated extensively on conceptions of the relationship of ICT construction and social change, but such conceptions have yet to lead to substantial new insights on what is happening in an increasingly ICT-mediated society. I do not undervalue the significance of epistemological and ontological theory in IS research. Our field developed valuable intellectual resources by engaging with general socio-theoretical perspectives. It should now bring them to bear to a substantive critical research agenda.

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Biography

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