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**The Demise of Meaning-Making and Social Agency as Critical
Concepts in the Rhetoric of an Information Age**

C. Suzanne Iacono

School of Management

Boston University

Boston, MA 02215

Regardless of whether you agree with the appropriateness of such labels as the Information Age or the Information Society, their ubiquitous use signals and frames the collective experience of who we are and what we should do in this particular time and place in history. From information acquisition and anxiety to information warfare and weapons, there are few areas of social life that are left untouched by the mechanistic and instrumental rhetoric of computational information processing and the associated ways we humans traffic and trade in it. Most scholarly debates have centered on ontological and economic questions: Are we really in an Information Age and, if so, what is the extent and meaning of an economic break with our industrial past? But, within the scope of intellectual history, especially in the social sciences, it has meant a break with meaning-making and social agency as core theoretical components in the structuring and maintenance of social organization (Bruner, 1990).

This shift from meaning-making to information processing has had a profound impact on how we model and study the social dynamics of computerized organizations, electronic groups and communities. We develop theory and design new technologies as if organizational groups were closed systems primarily intent on becoming more efficient and effective information processors rather than highlighting their roles as actors engaged in struggle over the production of meaning with other groups within and across their institutions. As Bruner (1990:4) has argued, "Information is indifferent to meaning." A human body hurtling off the top of a building will fall at the same rate as any other material body of the same weight, even though the human act has considerably greater significance to us (Polkinghorne, 1988). By focusing primarily on quantifiable and objective capabilities, we model group behavior as if it were synthetic, ignoring the content of what is being processed and its meaning to organizational participants.

Parceling out the social meaning-making activities from the rest of what groups do is part of the legacy of Bales and others and the (false) dichotomy between social process (or group maintenance) work and task work. Accepting this dichotomy relegates the social aspects of group behavior to those activities that are off-task, e.g., clarifying a point, smoothing over conflicts, joking or gossiping. This belief in what constitutes social behavior has become so deeply entrenched in popular psychology and organizational consultancy that asking a typical information worker about the social aspects of work life will surely result in stories about the company picnic or the sad demise of the Friday lunches (Star, 1990). Similarly, a focus on the social content of electronic group interaction results in counts of the number of jokes, swear words or other off-task comments. This narrow view has dominated our social studies of new

technologies and has excluded the experiences of groups as active interpreters and enactors of their environments.

Most of us would agree that it is dangerous to think of the National Rifle Association as a group of neutral information processors or that their social meaning lies in their off-task comments. We assume that in their meetings and electronic communications they are actively embroiled in the production of meaning, generating collective "we-images" and mobilizing people to act within a specific socio-political, historical context. But it is only because they are known political activists that we recognize a comprehensive social meaning above and beyond the information they process. But, all groups are potential socio-political actors situated within some social context with more or less power, resources and influence. All groups can mobilize and enroll others in attaining their own agendas and projects, whether they are the NRA, the Sierra Club, or an ad-hoc group of Intel chip users hassling over math errors in the latest batch of Pentium chips.

Incorporating the realm of meaning into a social theory of electronic groups and communities requires a turn toward socio-cognitive theories and an increased understanding of the ways that electronic groups use language and narrative to engender identity and social action (Bourdieu, 1994; Polkinghorne, 1988). Unfortunately, in the Information Age, what we say has been deemed of little consequence; saying is only words and stories, doing is what is important. Bruner (1990:16) insists that the distrust of subjectivism in explanatory concepts comes from this alleged discrepancy between saying and doing. In analyses of electronic groups, the content of

messages posted, the rise of social identities and their links to social action have been largely ignored. Forget that manifestos nailed on church doors have changed the face of religion or that in some epochs pens have been mightier than swords. We have chosen to favor doing over saying and have forgotten that they are most often inextricably linked.

The NRA example makes the point that modeling groups first and foremost as information processors misses the central or critical element of how groups come to take on social identities and enact meaning in their environments. It is perhaps a risky example if the initial reaction of readers is to want to close down or regulate electronic communication for fear of the rise of the social. The real danger lies, however, in denigrating, cordoning off, or limiting the study of the social aspects of electronic group and community behavior. How will we come to understand the critical socio-cognitive processes that link electronic communication with the continual structuring of organizations and society if we consider the social as impure and its study as inferior to that of quantifiable information processing capabilities (Star, 1990)? Instead, we need to produce theories of electronic groups and communities that incorporate a comprehensive understanding of their social processes and which attempt to model social agency and contention at the level of reality construction within organizations and society.

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