Why Are Organizational Theories So Rarely Used in Scandinavian IS Research?

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In the last issue of the *SJIS*, we tried to present our view of organizational informatics, and how it may be understood as a specific body of research (Henfridsson, Holmström and Söderholm 1997). In reviewing *SJIS* articles, we found that of a total of 53 articles published, 18 adressed the organization as their context. But often the organization was discussed without sufficient distinction from other research contexts. To encourage needed distinctions, therefore, we advocate the use of more theoretically grounded organizational concepts in Scandinavian IS research. By using organizational theories in IS studies, one can avoid the risk of vagueness and lack of clarity when discussing organizational concepts.

In his response to this review, Kautz (1997) claims that our argument has a weak foundation: IS researchers are already aware of the theories that we advocate. Despite the relevance of Kautz' claim, the central issue is not whether IS scholars are informed by organizational theory. Rather, it is whether these theories are used for conceptual, empirical or analytical purposes to develop intriguing, insightful or interesting knowledge about the relationship between information technology and organizations. Being "informed by a theory" is by no means the same as using it for one of the purposes just mentioned. In our view, the word "informed" implies a less conscious approach to the use and development of theory. Thus, there is a serious problem for the IS field if the situation is as Kautz suggests—that is, scholars are satisfied with being informed.

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Kautz clearly disagrees with the stated need for more organizational theory in IS research. In his view, such theory is already common sense among IS researchers. According to our review of *SJIS* articles, however, there are few articles that consider the organization with the theoretical backing that we suggested. Our original question thus remains: Why are organizational theories so rarely used in Scandinavian IS research?

Kautz underlines the importance of choosing "the right battlefield" for this debate. He implicitly suggests that our arguments are on the wrong battlefield. As a result, he corrects our supposed mistake by not dealing with our argument, which claims that organizational theories can make valuable contributions to IS research. Instead, he asks whether we really need "more seemingly scientific and complex theories which do not appeal to practitioners because they do not reflect their reality." Furthermore, he does not believe that organizational informatics "is such a framework that supports a position which postulates that proper science is only based in philosophy and mathematics separated from practice."

Perhaps surprisingly, we do not agree that organizational informatics is by definition "seemingly scientific" and irrelevant to practitioners. We are unsure whether Kautz' argument is that all theories are only apparently scientific and moreover without utility for practitioners, or only that organizational theories and organizational informatics have these qualities. This having been said, we agree with Bardram's (1997) observation that the organizational "variables" of structure and behavior don't do justice to an organizational informatics approach.

In this regard, it may be worth emphasizing that our purpose in using structure and behavior was primarily to categorize articles. When these properties are used as analytical tools, however, there are several research questions that could be asked. For example, organizational structures can be defined as expressions of power and authority. It would then be interesting to investigate whether and how information systems function as structuring mechanisms for certain authority relationships; if not, it would be interesting to see how IS can facilitate changes to established structures, and thereby restructure power relationships (see, e.g., Roberts and Grabowski 1996; Orlikowski 1992). Investigations of this type might include different organizational contexts and information systems to increase the analytical strength of the research. Of course, behavior is to some extent triggered by information systems, but also by other routines and professional codes (see, e.g., Weick 1990, on changes in professional roles caused by new technology). With regard to behavioral aspects, one potential line of inquiry is the analysis of the relationship between IS and other mechanisms that govern behavior in organizations. Taking technology as a starting point, it is unclear how different types of technology affect behaviour (for an early contribution, see Thompson 1967). In some cases, technology is more or less ignored by the members of an organization. In other cases, members demand continuous interaction, while still others are more random in their interactions with the technology.

There are thus a number of open possibilities for using the structural and behavioral properties of the organization as

analytical tools. In our view, it is clear that these tools—or any other theory-based understanding of the organization—should be of interest to IS researchers. This observation is particularly true since the organization is so often addressed as an object of study. Since our review of *SJIS* articles clearly noted that organizational theories are rarely used, our original question remains: Why are organizational theories so rarely used in Scandinavian IS research? Do the authors lack knowledge? Or perhaps they believe that the theories have no practical value?

Kautz' interpretation of our observation is that organizational theories are common-sense in Scandinavian IS research. As noted, he claims that Scandinavian IS research is "informed" by organizational theory; in our opinion, this claim suggests that the exclusion of organizational theory is a deliberate choice. Again, why do authors think that they have no use for these theories? We are still seeking an answer.

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