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Our Antenna in the South is Gone

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http://is.lse.ac.uk/InMemoryOfClaudio

Claudio Ciborra died from cancer on the 13th February in Milan. Claudio was an original and brilliant IS researcher. He had a huge impact on the international IS community, in particular through concepts he made familiar to us like bricolage, improvisation, drifting, care, hospitality, etc. His latest book, *The Labyrinths of Information*, is a brilliant exposé of these concepts.

Claudio was a very colorful person, a powerful and sometimes vicious debater, an elegant and charming lecturer. In his research he stressed the importance of improvisation, opportunistic solutions, local initiatives and deviations from plans and strategies, in successful use of information technology. He was a very rational person himself, who used cutting arguments and a

lot of irony to attack the superficial rationalism thriving in American management literature.

Claudio was a close friend of Scandinavia and the Scandinavian IS community and as such he had substantial impact on us at the same time as he did an important job in bringing Scandinavian research to the larger international community. His relationship to Scandinavia lasted for almost 30 years, before it was ended so sadly by his premature death at the age of 53. The relationship was first established when he met Kristen Nygaard at an EEC (now known as EU) summer course in Stratford, UK, in 1977. At this event they discovered their shared interest in the social impact of informatics.

Kristen gave Claudio an introduction to the early trade union projects and the "data agreements" between trade unions and the employers' association in Norway. Claudio became interested in these activities and came to Oslo for a longer stay in 1980 to do research on the impacts of the "data agreements" in Norwegian organizations. During this visit he shared office with Lars Mathiassen who was Kristen's Ph.D. student in Oslo at the time. This led to a broader collaboration between Scandinavian researchers and Claudio and his research community in Italy, in particular Giovan Francesco Lanzara.

This collaboration faded out in the late 1980s, but contact was maintained through conferences and other events in the international IS community. The second phase of Claudio's collaboration with Scandinavians started in the early 1990s, when Lars Mathiassen, like Claudio, became an annual, visiting professor at Theseus Institute in Sophia Antipolis at Côte d'Azur. Lars spent a sabbatical year at Theseus in the mid-1990s. At that time Lars and Bo Dahlbom were collaborating closely (having co-authored *Computers in Context*) and Bo visited Lars at Theseus. He met Claudio and told about how he was trying to build an IS department at Gothenburg.

Bo invited Claudio to Gothenburg to give a talk at the School of Economics, and participate in a seminar, together with Carsten Sørensen, Ole Hanseth, and Bo's first graduate students. When Gothenburg organized the IRIS seminar in 1996, Claudio, together with Ina Wagner and Rob Kling were key note speakers. (We danced through the night to Claudio's techno tapes on a portable tape recorder.) He was then invited to the School of Economics at Gothenburg as visiting professor and spent the autumn term of 1996 there. During this period he got in touch with and eventually joined the collaboration that had then started between Gothenburg and Oslo, in the so-called "Internet project," with Kristin Braa as project leader. Claudio became interested in Ole Hanseth's research on infrastructures and took the initiative to an additional sub-project: "The development of complex infrastructures in global organizations," which was dubbed InfraGlobe in line with the internal project jargon.

This developed into a close collaboration, in particular with Oslo where Claudio was appointed as Adjunct Professor in 1998, a position he was holding until his death. When he moved to London and LSE he also involved more of his colleagues there in this project collaboration. Issues related to infrastructures were central in this activity. The focus moved towards complexity and risks. The last project, which is still going on, was about the "dual risk of integration."

During this period Claudio became quite active in the larger Scandinavian IS community. He found IRIS to be an academic institution of his taste and was a frequent participant. He was very happy every time he was invited to the annual PhD seminars in Kilpisjärvi.

The Scandinavian IS community seemed to be the one where Claudio felt most at home. He appreciated the mix of creativity and order he found here. He argued that we should let IRIS grow into a European conference and that we should participate more actively in the wider international IS community. Claudio's idea was to unite the Scandinavians and the south, to bring the Scandinavian tradition (thinking) out into Europe. He recommended his Mediterranean friends to participate at IRIS and other Scandinavian IS research institutions like the Ph.D. consortium at Magelås and the so-called Ph.D. days in Oslo. In the last year he was active in setting up similar institutions in the Mediterranean area.

Claudio's relationship with Scandinavia went far beyond pure research. He appreciated Scandinavia broadly: IS research, of course, but just as much nature, life style, politics, working life conditions, etc. His enormous joy of skiing and diving through a hole in the ice in Kilpisjärvi illustrated this perfectly. And this meant that working with Claudio, we were not just fellow researchers, we became family. Oslo and the Kristin Braa household became a second home to him. And in the same way as Claudio enjoyed and "consumed" Scandinavia broadly, he also wanted to give the whole of Italy to us: food, wine, nature, from Stromboli to the Dolomites, night life in Naples, concerts in Ferrara, etc.

He preferred the more authentic and original research he found here. He was clear and outspoken about what he appreciated. He was also clear and outspoken about what he didn't like—when we became too American to his taste. And, being very much a hard working, serious professional himself, he often thought that we were lazy, that we did not do our homework, read up on the sources, like he himself always did.

Claudio's ideas were grounded in a strong appreciation of the rich varieties of human thinking and acting. He was an artist in the sense of abhoring unthinking use of methods, simplified models, mechanistic solutions. He was

a complex person himself and he appreciated the complexity of the social world and of personalities. He was more interested in the exceptions than in the rules. He was a romantic in this sense and his approach to information systems always stressed the way those simple mechanisms were transformed by the complexity of human use.

The discipline of information systems is dominated by US theories using technology as a blueprint for thinking about organizations and people. Claudio would rather do the opposite: begin with people, their everyday habits and ways of doing things, in order to understand the role of technology in modern organizations. To the extent that technology goes against the grain of those everyday life forms, it will be a straightjacket, opposed, neglected and worked around. The choice between these two positions—between technology as a form of life and technology as socially constructed—is more a matter of culture or personal taste than it is a matter of empirical facts. Claudio made his choice early in life and he was an unusually eloquent advocate of that choice, of human values against bureaucratic regulations and blind machines.

Claudio was a rebel. His way of doing research was that of criticizing and attacking the establishment. But he did not do it from a dogmatic alternative to the ruling dogma. He was not a critical theorist in the way of Klein, Hirscheim, Lyytinen. On the contrary, he was a rebel more in the vein of the rebel of Albert Camus, too rational to be stuck with schematic answers to complex questions, too rational to be happy with positions drawn and quartered like natural categories.

We were having breakfast at an Internet project meeting with the Aalborg group in October 1996, when Claudio explained to us the importance of north-south collaboration: "You know, he said, up here in the North you will never go anywhere if you just meet among yourselves. To really move forward, you need an antenna in the South." Claudio remained our antenna in the South even when he moved to London and he played an important role as we were moving forward. Up here in the North, we are sad and sorry now, and the world is suddenly much bleaker. How will we be able to make it now that our Antenna in the South is gone?