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## Data and Reality: A Plea for Management Realism and Data Modesty

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### Abstract

Recently, an old yet wonderful book came to my notice: Data and Reality. After all, too many systems developers and other standardizing do-gooders gladly forget the wise words of its author, Bill Kent: "The questions aren't so much about how we process data as about how we perceive reality, about the constructs and tactics we use to cope with complexity, ambiguity, incomplete information, mismatched viewpoints, and conflicting objectives." A reflective account on Kent's (1978) "Data and Reality."

**Keywords:** Data, Realism, Knowledge

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## Data and reality: a plea for management realism and data modesty

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Recently, an old yet wonderful book came to my notice: *Data and Reality*<sup>1</sup>. After all, too many systems developers and other standardizing do-gooders gladly forget the wise words of its author, Bill Kent: “*The questions aren't so much about how we process data as about how we perceive reality, about the constructs and tactics we use to cope with complexity, ambiguity, incomplete information, mismatched viewpoints, and conflicting objectives*”.

The world view of these IS people is quite often straightforward and one-dimensional: *data* are supposed to be interpretation-free representations of reality, we get *information* if we add interpretation to these data, information in the head of people means *knowledge* and knowledge is the first step towards *wisdom*. Hundreds, if not thousands of textbooks on information systems have been filled with this type of repeated claptrap: data as the source of wisdom!

In this world view, information is reduced to so-called objective facts, thereby forgetting that these data are merely representations of reality conceived by other people, primarily the systems developers, than by the people who are supposed to re-interpret these data, regularly the managers. One easily overlooks that imagination is the go-between linking reality and representation: any representation is biased and abstracted from reality; managers above all relying on computer data are hardcore devotees of abstract art!

The same detached vision and belief are often encountered in the world of knowledge management. Knowledge, in this conception, is nothing but a marketable asset supported by myriads of systems, knowledge bases, business intelligence software and other IT-based artefacts. Typically, management is reduced to decision making based on representations of representations: the “spreadsheet manager”, no more balanced than his score card, considers his model *of* reality as reality itself, instead of considering it as a model *for* reality.

One would believe that, almost three decades after Kent’s original publication, one is aware of this pitfall. Quite the contrary is true: the recent recession of western economy has given birth to a whole breed of calculating managers eagerly engaging in a tacit conspiracy with pigheaded IS missionaries. Management control is their belief, outsourcing of IT their sedative, standardization via megalomaniac ERP implementations their preferred tool and continuous improvement their wildest dream. In these organizations, IT has become an instrument of control instead of a permanent motor of innovation.

Is there an alternative? Reality itself is. In real life, information is not something we receive from outside, but meaning we assign ourselves to our observations of the world-as-it-is. Maturana and Varela<sup>ii</sup> have proven that the ability to assign meaning is an inherent attribute of any non-trivial system; evil-minded people pretend that this is simultaneously the very proof of the triviality of detached “spreadsheet managers”. Information is about interpretation, not about representation; it is intrinsically contextual and interpretative and so are data as solidified information. Ultimately, information is not in the transformation of data, but in our continuously adapted understanding of the real world: “*We do not need more data; we need a more primordial understanding, more thinking*” (Introna<sup>iii</sup>, p. 179). This understanding is, by definition, dealing with the full complexity, ambiguity, incompleteness and other “annoying” features of reality Bill Kent was referring to as the true issues of information processing.

Knowledge based on this reading of information, has nothing to do with the mechanistic world view as expressed in the technical knowledge management literature. Knowledge is not an asset, yet insight. Adjusting this insight is not a purely intellectual exercise, but equally implicates emotional involvement. Confusion and astonishment, curses in the church of the detached manager, are in fact useful mechanisms for enriching our insight. Insight is the result of our full being-in-the-world.

Involved management, amplifying the variability of the organisation, is the only success strategy in a world becoming more and more convoluted. Paradoxically, organisations facing increasing external and internal complexity tend to fall back to more complex management information systems instead of to more managerial involvement. These systems add to the further separation of thinking and doing: their complexity is a measure for the distance a manager has to reality. After all, “*the ultimate success of management information systems is not in the sophistication of the representational system, the computerized information system, but in the manager’s involvement in the world. There is no way to substitute representation for involvement*” (Introna, p. 169).

Organisations are impatiently in search of a new identity in an accelerating world. They are operating in an environment where their customers know more about them than they do themselves, no matter how sophisticated their information systems are. They desperately need involved managers really understanding the world instead of blaming their failing information systems. Paraphrasing Karl Weick in Boland and Collopy<sup>iv</sup>, these managers tend to remember the things seen and the things felt, rather than the name of these things. In the end, managing is sense making. Aren’t we all managers?

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<sup>i</sup> W. Kent, *Data and Reality*, North Holland, 1978 (reprinted by 1<sup>st</sup> Books, 1998).

<sup>ii</sup> H. Maturana & F. Varela, *The Tree of Knowledge*, Shambala, 1992.

<sup>iii</sup> L. Introna, *Management, Information and Power*, MacMillan, 1997.

<sup>iv</sup> R.J. Boland Jr & F. Collopy (eds.), *Managing as designing*, Stanford Business Books, 2004.

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