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The notion of lifeworld applied to information systems research

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MICRO-EMANCIPATORY PRACTICES IN

INFORMATION SYSTEM DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

The paper revisits the notion of emancipation in Information System Development (ISD) that seems to have lost a battle against functionalist and managerialist approaches dominant in information system (IS) research and practice. Unlike functionalist and managerialist views, the emancipatory view of ISD, informed by Critical Theory, considers ISD as a site of organizational innovation, self-reflection and a struggle for humanization of work and liberation from different forms of domination. Critics of emancipatory project in IS and management literature question the very possibility of the emancipation and deplore its intellectualism, naivety and negativism. The purpose of this paper is to re-consider the notion of emancipatory ISD in the face of these criticisms and develop a more refined and nuanced view of micro-emancipation in ISD that is meaningful in practice. Informed by Alvesson and Willmott (1992, 1996) we explore, question, redefine and ground the micro-emancipatory ISD processes based on a longitudinal (15 year) study of a retail company. Our analysis and critical reflection demonstrate that micro-emancipatory ISD processes have real substance for the people involved, and that their meanings are neither fixed nor universal, but rather local, emergent, uncertain, and sometimes contradictory. This paper contributes an empirically grounded and practically relevant reconceptualization of micro-emancipatory ISD projects which reveals both its benefits and risks for all involved.

Keywords: Micro-emancipation, Information Systems Development (ISD), Emancipatory Practices in ISD, Emancipatory ISD

1   INTRODUCTION

An emancipatory approach to information systems development (ISD) was proposed to counteract an increasingly narrow and functionalist focus on organizational productivity and efficiency dominant in both the main stream information systems (IS) research and IS practice. Informed and inspired by Critical Theory several prominent researchers exposed new forms of control and domination emerging through implementation of IS disguised under the 'objective', 'impartial' and 'scientific' ISD methodologies (Weizenbaum, 1976; Klein and Lyytinen, 1985; Lyytinen and Hirschheim, 1985, 1988; Lyytinen and Klein, 1985; Lyytinen, 1992; Myers and Young, 1997). An alternative view of IS as social communication systems that have a potential to freeing employees from 'repressive social and ideological conditions and thereby contributing to the realization of human need', was proposed by Hirschheim and Klein (1994, p. 87). They argued for an emancipatory ISD methodology that assumes a systematic and meaningful user involvement, open and non-distorted communication, and reasoned argumentation based on cooperation and mutual understanding among IS developers, managers and employees affected by the system.

However, emancipatory ISD ideas and approaches have been dismissed as unrealistic and naïve, incapable of addressing real-life power struggles or preventing colonizing effects of IS (Wilson, 1997). More broadly the emancipatory project of Critical Theory as such and its application in management (including IS) have been criticised by poststructuralists for implying a rationalist bias, for harbouring essentialist assumptions about unified, autonomous subjects and for imposing all-embracing frameworks or 'metanarratives' that reduce the complexity and heterogeneity of phenomena (Lyotard, 1984; Calas and Smircich, 1987).

While much of these criticisms, primarily from poststructuralist quarters, arise from a considerable misunderstanding of Critical Theory and its concept of emancipation – as demonstrated by Alvesson and Willmott (1996) – some are justified and worth heeding. Acknowledging the disillusionment with grand programme of emancipation, they propose a more modest concept of *micro-emancipation* that describes partial, temporary and precarious forms of liberation and resistance to oppressive organizational practices. Their proposal, however, has not been explored further in the literature. In the IS literature in particular, the emancipatory ideas and ideals seem to be forgotten and the whole debate about their meaning, reality, and relevance relegated to history.

In this paper we aim to revive the debate around the notion of emancipatory ISD. More specifically we aim to revise the concept of emancipatory ISD as proposed by Hirschheim and Klein (1994) and explore its relevance in the face of major criticisms in the literature. Inspired by the Alvesson and Willmott 's (1992, 1996) proposal for examining micro-emancipation projects we aim to develop a more refined and nuanced view of micro-emancipation in ISD that is meaningful in practice. While ISD projects are typically firmly driven by desired performance improvements (efficiency, effectiveness) we suggest they can also be seen as sites of organizational transformation where status quo is questioned and existing forms of control problematized and resisted, and where workplace conditions are challenged.

We achieve our aims by first presenting a short literature review and then a longitudinal study (15 years) of an IS development in a Belgian retail company. In the following section we trace and critically investigate the development practices of their most important IS (a corporate information dissemination and groupware system they call ISID. Based on this analysis we develop a framework that defines a refined and empirically grounded conception of micro-emancipatory ISD processes and practices. In the Conclusion we discussed its contribution and implications for the theory and practice of ISD.

2   EMANCIPATORY *IS* DEVELOPMENT IN THE LITERATURE

Emancipatory ideas in ISD have their origins in the Scandinavian *participatory design approach* and the *socio-technical design* movement in the UK in the 1960s. In response to the increasing use of information technologies (IT) serving an economic rationalist agenda at the expense of further bureaucratization and dehumanization of work, participatory design and socio-technical principles were based on humanist ideals, workers autonomy and workplace democracy. They argued for the use of technology to achieve both efficiency objectives and improved 'quality of working life' (Mumford and Weir, 1979; Bjerkins et al. 1987; Bodker et al., 1987; Bjerknes and Bratteteig, 1995; Mumford, 1983, 2000, 2006). Both these approaches assumed an underlying belief in technological progress and human knowledge and enthusiasm for computer applications that would replace boring, repetitive and dehumanizing jobs, increase job satisfaction and thereby eliminate workers' alienation. Proliferation of projects that adopted and advanced participatory design in Norway, Sweden, Denmark – referred to as the *collective resources approach* – together with projects that adopted the socio-technical design in the UK, followed by other European countries, Canada and the USA, in the 1970s and early 1980s, raised hopes in the democratizing potential of IT.

However, their promises of humanization of work, workplace democracy and workers empowerment to make design and work-related choices were not long lived. The economic pressures in the late 1980s and 1990s and the raise in unemployed labour changed market and employment conditions leading to the revival of computer-aided neo-Taylorism (Moldaschl and Weber, 1998). The deployment of IS to cut costs, downsize workforce, increase managerial control, and achieve lean and efficient production based on standardized work processes, went counter to socio-technical and participatory design principles and practices. Socio-technical design, as Mumford (2006) conceded, 'moved from success to failure' as '[t]he attraction and validity of bureaucracy was seen as stronger and safer and the new humanistic approaches as over-risky' (p. 321). Researchers are raising their critical voices against the narrow view of IS as a means of furthering economic rationalist agendas, the view that obscures repressive social conditions and 'the continued destruction of the human potential' (Asaro, 2000; Saravanamuthu, 2002; Howcroft and Wilson, 2003).

A distinctly critical approach to IS development was influenced by Critical Social Theory (e.g. Lyytinen and Hirschheim, 1985; Lyytinen and Klein, 1985; Cecez-Kecmanovic et al., 2002; Alvarez, 2008). Hirschheim and Klein formulated four conditions for an emancipatory IS development methodology (1994, pp. 87-88): 1) Providing support for an active process of individual and collective self-determination; 2) Providing support for critical self-reflection and associated self-transformation; 3) Inclusion of a broader set of institutional issues relating particularly to social justice, due processes and human freedom or more concretely in ISD to employees' ethical needs, quality of work life, personal autonomy, and the linkage between participation and democracy; and 4) Inclusion of the principle for critical evaluation of claims or rational discourse during the systems development processes.

The emancipatory ideas in ISD and more broadly in management, however, have been criticised for neglecting the reality of business conditions, the pre-eminence of shareholders' interests and robustness of organizational power structures. The alleged utopian nature of emancipatory projects was a reason for claiming their disconnection from reality and the mundane practices of management (Alvesson and Willmott, 1992). Furthermore, critical management studies and critical approaches to IS have been accused for being one-sided (anti-performative and anti-management), negativistic and unconstructive (Alvesson and Willmott, 1992). Moreover, Wilson (1997, p. 196) in response to Hirschheim and Klein (1994) questions their "arbitrary ideological position" and criticises the conditions for emancipatory ISD processes. Being suspicious of the real meaning and agenda of the humanistic approach he contends that an ISD process conceived of as a rational discourse that counteracts distorted communication, can be seen as a formula for totalizing discourses, that view organizations as homogeneous entities.

Empirical studies are called for to examine and respond to these claims and criticisms. In this paper we draw from a longitudinal case study of ISD with the aim to 1) revise the concept of emancipatory ISD as originally proposed by Hirschheim and Klein (1994) , and 2) to develop a more refined and practice-based view of micro-emancipation in ISD (informed by Alvesson and Willmott, 1992, 1996) and discuss its relevance in the face of major criticisms in the literature.

3   RESEARCH SITE AND METHODOLOGY

Our motivation to study participatory and emancipatory IS developments initially came from practice. While conducting a longitudinal case study of informatization processes and organisational development in the Colruyt company (from 1993 to 2008) we observed unique practices of user participation in the development of IS with explicit democratic and emancipatory intent. Intrigued by these observations we decided to study more in-depth the meaning and nature of user participation as it emerged and continued throughout the company's history. We focused on the Information System for Information Dissemination (ISID), which is a groupware and document management system that was developed by the company's IT department. ISID's development commenced in the early 1970s and it has been under continuous development ever since. ISID proved to be an essential component of participatory decision making and the cooperative culture that the company has been developing since its inception until today. It was therefore particularly intriguing to investigate how the Colruyt company actually developed ISID, how it attracted and engaged users and how users felt about their participation in the systems development and use. Given the criticisms and controversies found in the literature we were particularly interested in examining participatory and emancipatory ISD processes and theoretically explaining the controversies around non-emancipatory and emancipatory discources and practices.

The Colruyt company was founded in Brussels, Belgium, in 1965 as a single food discount store - a revolutionary concept in Europe at that time. Selling its products 10% below prices charged by competitors, paying employees 10% above industry average wages, and realizing a 1% profit margin on sales remains the company's business strategy (IS Manager, Interview 1993, 2000). Today, the Colruyt company is the third largest food retail chain that operates 205 food discount stores in Belgium and 45 stores in France with annual sales revenue of US $8 Billion (company Annual Report, 2007-2008).

Mr. Jo Colruyt's (CEO until 1993) relied on Information Technology (IT) to support and innovate all business processes. IT was adopted not only to automate tasks and improve efficiency, but also, and more importantly, to support workers in their operations and work simplifications as well as participation in decision-making. Jo Colruyt recognized that IT affects people and influences social conditions of work. He stated: 'Existing conditions, social structures, relations between individuals, and relations between social classes in a company change when new technologies are introduced' (interview 1993). To enable workers to embrace IT and meaningfully contribute to company's continuous innovation it invested heavily in staff training and education (e.g. in 2007/8 training and education budget was Euro 9.5 mil or 3.2% of after tax profit). Seminars were available on communication, self-actualization, self-empowerment, self-expression, decision-making and assertiveness.

Our longitudinal study of the Colruyt company started in 1993 when a co-author first visited company headquarters in Brussels to interview founder and then CEO, the late Jo Colruyt. Since then regular visits to company Headquarters involved informal discussions and formal interviews with employees and managers, and attending and observing official meetings in stores, warehouses and headquarters and observing the use of ISID. On-site audio taped interviews were conducted with Jo Colruyt, the former CEO of the company and his son Jef Colruyt who became CEO in 1994, the chief information officer, the marketing manager, middle level managers, IS personnel, workers in stores and wherehouses, and union representatives. In total twenty five interviews were completed over the period 1993 until 2008 and ten company meetings attended. Semi-structured interviews were

conducted and later transcribed for further analysis. Data collection also included researcher's observation notes, company documents, policy statements, work procedures and rules, meeting documents, most available via ISID, as well as company annual reports (1975, 1985, 1988, and 1990-2008), union reports, and newspaper articles.

Our interpretation of the nature, meaning and challenges of ISID development and use drew on the narratives of actors, employees, managers and IS specialists and the ways these individuals made sense of and reflected on events and on-going changes. The narratives and meaning making processes were an integral part of their social construction of reality, their social actions as well as social and cultural (re)production (Czarniawska, 1998). The narratives reflected what was important to these actors and what was problematic and challenging in ISID development. Furthermore, we analysed the documents created as part of ISID development, relevant for the company as a whole and communicated via ISID. We adopted thematic analysis that was informed by theoretical concerns and interrelated with the analysis of interviews.

For the analysis of empirical material collected during ISID development we adapted Alvesson and Willmott's (1992, 1996) two-dimensional framework. This framework was applied as a guide and at the same time used for critical reflection that refined it. The framework proposes a distinction between the **type of emancipatory project** and the **focus of its intent** in order to enable a more refined analysis and understanding of emancipatory projects in practice. The type of emancipatory project may range from <u>questioning</u>, to <u>incremental transformation</u> or reformist, to <u>utopian</u> type. While questioning involves critiquing, challenging and at times resisting dominant forms of thinking and social arrangements, without proposing the desired (or the ideal), the utopian type advocates alternatives to existing conditions. The utopian element is important, as Alvesson and Willmott (1992, p. 450) explain, when participants envision alternative arrangements, social relations or ends. Between these two opposites, an incremental or reformist type of emancipation involves gradual change towards the desired forms or systems.

Concerning emancipatory intent a distinction is made between <u>means</u>, <u>social relations</u> and <u>ends</u>. The emancipation of means concerns distorted discourses and oppressive organizational practices that are assumed to be necessary to achieve organizational and managerial ends. The emancipation of ends, on the other hand, 'is concerned with unfreezing institutionalized priorities and, thereby, opening up debate about the practical value of economic growth, consumption, the quality of life and so on' (Alvesson and Willmott, 1992, p. 450). Finally, the focus on social relations draws attention to social and power structures, relations of domination and control, and the ways these limit autonomy, creativity, self-determination and self-realization.

The Alvesson and Willmott (1992, p.450) framework introduces analytical distinctions that are relevant for examining and clarifying the nature and scope of emancipatory ISD. Inspired by their work we adopted this framework in the analysis of practices during ISID development in the Colruyt company, which we present next.

4 EXPLORING EMANCIPATORY PRACTICES OF *ISID* DEVELOPMENT

To explore practices during ISID development and examine specific dimensions of the macroemancipatory framework as proposed by Alvesson and Willmott (1992, 1996) we shall follow the project of ISID development from its beginning in 1970 till 2008. We present our findings along these dimensions.

Questioning, challenging, and critiquing

ISID was initiated based on the criticism of existing processes, working conditions, and inefficiencies, made by both managers and employees. Employees were especially dissatisfied with poor access to information. In the 1960s and early 1970s company relied on face-to-face communication and workgroups (written records from group meetings were widely distributed) in an attempt to build a culture of open communication and free expression. However as the company grew it faced increasing problems with communication and information sharing among hundreds of its distributed employees. The first phase of ISID development in the 1970 started in response to criticism of poor information and lack of support for distributed groups of employees and various forms of participative decision making (meetings, workgoups) that could not rely any more on paper-based dissemination of information and reports. Although Colruyt was known as the first company in the 1970s to set up a computer system that store documents and disseminate them in printed form to its employees, employees did not considered it good enough for the cooperative work and decision making processes already established when the company was smaller and working face-to-face. Employees requested faster information channels, they criticised the lack of timely and relevant information they needed to competently and efficiently perform their jobs (in stores, warehouses, sales), coordinate their actions and take part in decision making.

In the second and third phase of ISID development narratives changed with the focus shifting toward more subtle issues such as equity in terms of rights to access to information. From the first ideas ISID provided unrestricted access to information to all employees. However, an incident of information misuse of (documents from ISID leaked by Union Stewart and misinterpreted in a TV program in 1984 with a significant damaged to Colruyt reputation) sparked a wide-ranging debate about the conflicting demands between completely open access to ISID and preserving confidentiality of sensitive information in the interest of all. If ISID was going to realize Colruyt principle of 'access to information as a right' for all employees, the question was on what bases this right could or should be curtailed? An anti-emancipatory step was taken – considered necessary but regrettable by the majority of employees – to restrict access to confidential information. Mr. Jo Colruyt was among those who preferred to train the community in responsible ISID use but he also realized that protecting confidential information was inevitable at a time:

> It will always remain a delicate balance between confidential ISID documents and a broad access to information. I prefer to keep the number of confidential documents small in relation to non-confidential documents. It appears useful to teach employees to use information judiciously and to instruct them in normative behaviour with respect to information. Employees have the right to a very broad range of information [stored in ISID]. (Jo Colruyt, 1984)

It was widely accepted by managers and workers that democratic rights and open access to information in ISID needed to be balanced against the risks of misuse and the harmful disclosure of confidential information outside the company. However, the views how to achieve this differed.

Questioning the means, namely, ISID development discourse and practices in addition to the ends to be achieved with ISID implied user-developer and worker-manager social and power relations. Open access by anyone to ISID led to equalization of power that some managers felt threatening and pockets of resistance surfaced more or less overtly. This 'relational friction' can be seen to arise from an inherent labour-capital conflict that lies in the foundation of any capitalist company. By supporting and enabling more effective management and control of processes and employees, IS often exacerbate this conflict. However, the Colruyt company's distinct feature is its continuous effort to reveal and openly confront labour-capital conflict manifested in various relations and processes. By way of questioning, challenging, arguing, critiquing and requesting changes ISID development and implementation led to incremental transformation of discourses and practices (means), power relations and ends to which we turn next.

Incremental changes and transformation

Starting during the early 1970s ISID development impacted on and was impacted by changing relationships between users and developers as well as workers and managers. There was an awareness

among the workers that 'having information means having power to act in an informed manner'. With IT training and with experience in ISID development and use, workers became increasingly aware of their role in the ISID development as part of their participative rights.

Furthermore, incremental changes were experienced in worker-manager relations. Due to access to ISID and workers' informed participation in decision making, power relations became less hierarchical and more cooperative. However some managers resisted information sharing and devolution of power. Transformation occurred as part of culture change and personal development through training:

> We have a culture off [personal] growth within the company. I myself have experienced these [culture and personal growth] at all managerial levels, it is evident, and you know this. I think that only individuals who can accept sharing information with subordinates and with others are promoted to managers. (Walter de Hertog, interview 2003)

Transformations towards sharing of information – primarily through ISID – and devolution of power were not without conflicts, but ultimately, the few managers who obstructed these processes retired.

An important question concerns the emancipatory transformation of ends, that is to say, the extent to which IS development and implementation contributed to the articulation/transformation of ends and their achievement. Transformation of ends was directed toward a more balanced articulation of economic versus social or humanist aims. The former CIO Marcel Lengeler and other employees mention 'increasing individual performance', 'job improvement', 'commitment to hard work', while at the same time emphasising 'enhancement of job satisfaction' and 'enjoyment of work'. Similarly ISID is seen as a major contributor to both better company performance and community building. In fact the economic and social/humanist ends are often seen as conditioning and supporting each other. One employee, for instance, pointed out that ISID enabled him to enjoy 'freedom to make decisions and to share responsibility within [his] company'. Furthermore, the value of workplace democracy and power decentralization enabled by ISID also is understood as contributing to organizational flexibility as well as its capacity to adjust to new situations as stated by Mr. Jo Colruyt:

> Power decentralization has the enormous advantage of organizational flexibility to instantly adjust the organization to new situations. … To communicate [via ISID] means that as a group we are capable of greater achievements. Moreover, in this way we experience greater satisfaction from our work and experience the joy of an increased work engagement. (ISID document, April 1984)

The evidence shows that transformation of ends achieved through ISID involved a continuous struggle to balance personal and organisational achievements, personal performance and enjoyment of work, and to harmonize the Colruyt company's economic prosperity with community building.

Utopian vision of ISID development

The ideal of open access to information was an important utopian element in the vision of the ISID development. When confronted with existing conditions and risks of leaking confidential information this ideal could not be sustained. Having such an ideal as a guiding vision for ISID however was and still is beneficial as it indicates a desired state of affairs and reminds company members how far or close they are from achieving it. It also counteracts tendencies to make further restrictions.

Furthermore, ISID development can be seen as a 'rational discourse' as defined by Habermas' (1984) Theory of communicative action. Being very pragmatic Colruyt company members do not talk about the ideal of rational discourse but engage in it in practice. This was demonstrated during ISID development team meetings that one of the authors attended where participants showed excellent questioning skills, providing arguments and counter arguments, and conducting an open and well argued debate. The outcomes of ISID meetings were made public via ISID thus increasing company-wide awareness of its results and seeking responses and involvement by others.

The development of ISID can thus be seen as embracing a utopian vision of the company and its communication. Although in the early years (1970s) this vision seemed indeed quite utopian it was

nevertheless powerful and inspirational: it gave company members a sense of direction and purposefulness. Confronted with existing conditions, the vision stimulated thinking and debates thus enhancing emancipatory project. Importantly, employees maintained a critical attitude:

> Of course not everything in the company comes up rosy, anyway this is the case everywhere else, how else would it be possible to maintain a critical spirit. (Claude Pardonche, 1984)

Similarly we can see a utopian element in the vision of the ISID development process as a rational discourse. Being very pragmatic Colruyt members do not talk about the ideal of rational discourse, which reminds us of the debate about Habermas' (1984) ideal speech situation. Since early 1970s they have talked about and applied norms and rules regarding employee participation rights, fairness in social interaction and reasoned argumentation in all key problem solving activities and meetings. ISID development practices and discourses reflected these more general norms of broad participation, rational debate and argumentation.

Another powerful utopian vision in the course of the ISID development has been the vision of equality and symmetrical power relations, among managers and employees as well as among the users and developers. The vision of decentralisation of power that required decentralization of information was and remains to be a guiding principle in ISID development. For instance in the first stage of ISID development employees requested to be informed about company performance and current operational issues in order to be able to participate in decision making. Similarly the vision of ISID as social infrastructure and social arrangements to achieve individual and collective self-determination, power decentralization, and reduction of alienation and domination featured for instance early on in debates about the ways information is captured and distributed to all members, and later in discussions about the open access and necessary protective measures (sparked after Unions' misuse of ISID documents).

An important utopian view of ISID focused on company ends. Ideally the development and use of ISID is seen as enrichment of professional and personal life of all members, contributing to democratic work environment, work enjoyment, individual and collective self-realization, and thereby freeing creative capacities of employees, opening up company opportunities and improving performance. The vision of ISID was essential to realize the company's philosophy and to implement in practice its ideals, principles, and strategies.

The utopian vision of ISID and its role in determining and achieving company ends can be criticized, especially from a poststructuralist perspective, as totalizing, possibly excluding other voices. There is the risk, a poststructuralist would claim, that the utopian vision of participatory culture, open communication and the ideal of ISID development as rational discourse degenerates into ideology with anti-emancipatory implications. While such a risk cannot be excluded, our in depth analysis of micro-emancipatory events and situations (grounded in the narratives by actors, documents, ISID transcripts) suggests that the utopian element in ISID development stimulated critical thinking and opened up novel alternatives as envisaged by Alvesson and Willmott's (1992):

> The utopian element emerges when the current conditions are confronted with a new form of ideal, which aims at opening up consciousness for engagement with a broader repertoire of alternatives. Utopianism then represents alternative thinking rather then the suggestion of a ready-made, better alternative or the providing of courses of action. (p. 450)

The utopian vision of open communication inspired and opened up desirable models of ISID that drove its technological development. Rather then imposing a solution, the utopian vision released creative capacities of employees, motivating them to search, and continue searching, for innovative ways of communicating, working and decision making.

5   MICRO-EMANCIPATORY ISD FRAMEWORK

The above analysis reveals a large range of foci and approaches in ISD practices that potentially have emancipatory implications. These emancipatory implications do not necessarily correspond to grand views of liberation. Instead we identify numerous micro-emancipatory processes and practices that are situated, local and meaningful for the people involved. Macro-emanciptory processes are defined within the framework in Table 1, adapted from Alvesson and Willmott (1992).

Type of emancipatory project / Foci of emancipatory intent	Questioning, challenging, critiquing, requesting	Incremental changes and transformation	Utopian views and vision
Focus on means: *Discourses and practices of ISD as a means to achieve individual, group and organizational ends*	*Has ISD questioned, critiqued and challenged current practices and unspoken assumptions, and identified employee needs?*	*Have discourses and processes of ISD, implementation and use transformed and in what ways?*	*Have any utopian views of discourses and practices of ISD been proposed?*
Focus on social relations: *Developers-users* *Workers-managers*	*Has ISD questioned or problematized user-developer and worker-manager social and power relations?*	*Has ISD impacted on transformation of worker-manager and user-developer social and power relations?*	*Have utopian views or vision of social relations influenced or inspired ISD?*
Focus on ISD ends: *Individual performance and job satisfaction* *Democratic workplace and participative decision-making* *Organizational performance and community building*	*Have participants or users in ISD debated and criticized the purpose of the system?*	*To what extend has ISD and implementation contributed to articulation and/or transformation of ends and their achievement?*	*Have utopian views or vision of ends been proposed to be achieved by ISD?*

Table 1.   The ISD micro-emancipatory framework (adapted from Alvesson and Willmott, 1992)

First the object or focus of emancipatory change may range from the means to the ends:

- *Means* refer to discourses and practices of IS development and use that enable achievement of individual, group and organizational ends
- *Social relations* affected by IS development including those between developers and users, and workers and managers
- *Ends* supported and enabled by IS development include*:*
  - *Individual performance and job satisfaction*
  - *Democratic workplace and participative decision-making*
  - *Organizational performance and community building*

Each of these foci of emancipatory practices in the observed ISID development in Colruyt is examined in terms of the nature or type of emancipatory change, that is, whether or to what extent it involved:

- **Questioning, challenging and critiquing** current work and information practices as well as **arguing** and **requesting** new and higher quality of information, better access to information, user-developer and worker-manager power relations, articulation of ends, etc.
- **Incremental changes and transformation** of discourses and processes of ISD; worker-manager and user-developer social and power relations; and individual or organisational ends;
- **Utopian views and vision** of discourses and practices of ISD (means), social and power relations and the ends to be achieved with ISD.

These dimensions determine the ISD framework (Table 1) that analytically distinguishes 9 classes of micro-emancipatory changes. Based on our analysis we formulated a generic question to explore micro-emancipatory processes for each class. For instance, the question (second row, first column): *Has ISD questioned or problematized user-developer and worker-manager social and power relations?* is intended to focus attention on social and power relations in an organisation and how ISD questioned or challenged them. These questions may assist researchers to examine specific, local micro-emancipatory practices and investigate the meaning of emancipatory ISD.

6   THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTION AND LESSONS LEARNED

The paper contributes to the debate about the emancipator ISD practices. It revisits the concept of emancipatory ISD as originally proposed by Hirschheim and Klein (1994) and develops a more refined and practice-based view of micro-emancipation in ISD informed by Alvesson and Willmott (1992, 1996). Grounded in empirical data from the longitudinal case study of ISID development in the Colryut company (1993-2008) the paper discusses and provides arguments for the micro-emancipatory ISD framework. The framework identifies classes of micro-emancipatory practices illustrated by examples from ISID development and use. The case analysis shows that micro-emancipatory practices are local, situated and meaningful for the people studied.

The proposed framework to study micro-emancipatory ISD practices grounded in empirical data in many ways responds to criticisms of emancipatory ideas in the literature. Chief among them is the charge that emancipator ISD neglect the reality of business conditions, the pre-eminence of shareholders' interests and robustness of organizational power structures (Wilson, 1997). The alleged utopian nature of emancipatory projects was a reason for claiming their disconnection from reality and the mundane practices of management. The paper demonstrates the reality of emancipatory ISD practices and their meaning in context, however local or contentious they might appear. The company is both an industry leader in efficiency and in democratic social relations. The emancipatory ISID development in Colruyt reflects its participatory culture, devolved decision making, autonomy and responsibility of workgroups, as well as individual and collective strive for excellence and superior performance. There ISID development processes were equally driven by concerns for work improvement, efficiency, effectiveness, and sound technical solutions, as they were by improvement of working conditions, employees' work satisfaction, individual and collective self-realization and community well-being.

Furthermore, increasing efficiency and effectiveness of business processes and overall company performance – seen as economic objectives – are not necessarily opposed to workers' participation, their greater autonomy, responsibility and emancipation – perceived as social and humanist objectives in ISD. Achieving social and humanist objectives does not need to be at the expense of economic ones, as is widely assumed. Similarly, increasing levels of economic performance do not necessarily require increasing control, diminishing autonomy and stringent subordination. In fact in Colruyt by acquiring greater autonomy and responsibility and by increasing their participation in decision-making enabled and supported by ISID, employees became more innovative in simplifying work processes and more successful in increasing their efficiency and effectiveness. Participatory rights, access to information and empowerment of employees have been practiced as values of their own, which in turn became the drivers of the company economic prosperity. While facing tough economic conditions and

ever harsher competition, the Colruyt company has invested in ISID prospered and was continually expanding: it is the third largest food retail chain in Belgium with stores expending in France and Germany. The longitudinal study of ISID at Colruyt demonstrates not only the realism of the emancipatory ISD in practice but also confirms the reality of Hirschheim and Klein's proposals:

> It can be seen that emancipation produces positive consequences for effectiveness and efficiency concerns: stable, self-confident personalities are the pillars of a stress-resistant work force; individuals confidently expressing ideas is the bedrock of creativity to meet competitive demands; and only people accustomed to autonomous, responsible action can be expected to make initiative when things go wrong, which increases organization's flexibility and capacity to deal with uncertainty (1994, p. 98)

Another major lesson from the Colruyt company perhaps is that in order to advance the emancipatory ISD, and make it more relevant for IS practice, one can use not only a humanist argument but an economic one as well. By adopting numerous micro-emancipatory practices in ISID development Colruyt continuously transformed its processes and practices leading to equalizing developer-user and manager-employee power relations. ISID development was part of the decentralization of decision making, increasing employees' discretion and autonomy, and enhancement of workplace democracy. Importantly though the company's emancipatory transformation produced commercial success. In almost every aspect of its performance – sales per store, sales per square meter or per employee; profit per employee or square meter, etc. – Colruyt shows superior results compared to other similar retail chains. This is despite additional costs of coordination and reaching agreement inevitable in decentralized management. Linking emancipatory ISID development practices with company business success and more broadly linking the practices of workplace democracy and employees participation in decision making (enabled and supported by ISID) to the company superior performance and commercial success, may be a story that would catch managers' and IS practitioners' attention.

By using an economic argument we may have some chance to draw managers' and companies' attention to the unrealized potential of the emancipatory ISD project and the dangers of neglecting it. We have to make it clear that we are not advocating here yet another form of instrumental use of humanist values. We aim to draw attention and raise consciousness about the micro-emancipatory practices as liberating, unleashing individual and collective creative potential for humane and more democratic forms of work and social relations as well as for company economics success. These results open up new space for further examination and critical assessment of micro-emancipatory ISD in practice.

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