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PREFACE

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The aim of this special issue is to raise the profile of (two-way) dialogue (discursive action, argument) in the design of organisational systems. The editor's concern is that advice on how to design technology-assisted human systems is becoming overly 'objective.' The people that participate within these systems are being treated as 'molecules' rather than as sources of knowledge, power and self-purpose. System design advice needs to explicitly address the importance of language, the social construction of knowledge and the alternative perspectives of powerful stakeholders. The papers in this special issue of JITTA provide a range of perspectives. They represent evidence in support of the argument that the design of effective organisational systems requires a full appreciation of dialogue as the protocol that allows the socio-networked nature of human knowledge to operate.

I.I. MITROFF'S PAPER

Professor Mitroff's eminence in the field of Information Systems needs no elaboration here. However, I would like to take advantage of my editor's role to briefly summarise my interpretation of his 30 year message. In this article his message comes out as reminding 'IT engineers' that people are not stand alone bio-processors, but are socio-networked, so most of what we *know* comes from other people; we have a networked and constantly changing knowledge.

However, this article is part of a bigger thesis that is reflected in Professor Mitroff's extensive work on dialectic argument and multiple perspectives as inquiry methods. This I interpret as reminding those involved in designing technology that they should not assume knowledge to be an object, which can exist independently of a human mind. Rather, that knowledge is best treated as being in a constant state of social construction. Seeing it like this shifts knowledge 'sharing' from being about building efficient data repositories to being about group support systems. Environmentalist call for the preservation of species-diversity, the multiple perspectives approach calls for IS analysts to preserve 'knowledge diversity'.

I would like to thank Professor Mitroff for his contribution to our Journal, and his forbearance with the review process.

W. ULRICH PAPER

Professor Ulrich's two-part paper provides a long needed advance on the philosophical foundation to information system design (ISD) and one that is based on dialogue (discursive action, argument). First, he uses semiotics, Kant and Habermas to provide a 'staircase' definition of information and knowledge. Hopefully this will at terminate those embarrassing 'information is process data' attempts at defining our core concepts. Professor Ulrich then goes on to provide a frame for using discursive action to critique systems design by exploring the boundaries of the designer's underlying

assumptions. While a long, two part paper, I do think Professor Ulrich is one of the few IS academics effectively providing a philosophical foundation to our discipline. His language skills, interest in European philosophers when couple with his systems design interests put him in a unique position to undertake this important and difficult work. Go Socrates.

N. RAMILLER' PAPER

Dr Ramiller has very usefully brought his love of literature to the systems design task. Picking up on Mitroff's call for socio-technical system designers to be educated beyond the hard sciences, he recommends three books as a starting place. Reading, as listening, is a good start to learning. The books he chooses are about the long debated issue of the symbiotic relationship between the invention of new technology and humans needs, fears and desires. Our technology is us, it makes little sense to overly objectify it and then act as if there was competition between it and us.

Dr Ramiller has also to be thanked for the writing style used in his paper. Systems designers, in their desire to be accepted by the science community have rather turned their back on the humanities side of design. Dr Ramilller's style reminds us of that fault. Unlike architects and automobile engineers we are designing the 'unseen.' A socio-technical system cannot be seen, some of the components can be, like PCs and system participants, but the whole system needs to be imagined. It is in the heads of powerful stakeholders. Dialogue, often through literature, is how images get into our head.

D. WATTS PAPER

Dianne has to be congratulated for her determination to go straight to the horse's mouth to seek a unique perspective on systems design. She located and interviewed CEO's of the largest organisations in her adopted country of Australia which were going through large technology driven changes. She asked them what they saw as their role in the technology related changes that were presently impacting their organisations. They answered by saying their role was to provide an effective environment for the socio-networked activities of their employees. They were under no illusion that human knowledge was anything but socio-networked, and operated in a socially constructed (political) environment that needed to be constantly managed.

S. HORROCKS ET AL. PAPER

Heath, Sam and Jeff worked together to yet again show how it is that mangers actually inform themselves. Despite all the claims and cost of new information technology they simply want to talk to each other. At best, technology produced reports were used as means of starting conversations. The telephone and other communication technologies were the assistance most used to help them inform themselves. This will be no surprise to most managers. However, this is still not reflected in the massive effort that IS design educators have put into human dialogue replacement. Perhaps this reveals an underlying assumption that replacing humans, rather than augmenting them, with human replacement technologies such as databases and expert systems is a good thing. This ill-considered misdirection may be due to these designers not fully appreciating the role of dialogue in allowing the socio-networked knowledge of humans to operate.

P. MARRIOTT'S PAPER.

Phil explores the issue of whether dialogue should be in the written form or the oral form. He uses Ong's work to identify the advantages of each approach. Given the obvious preference for talk with synchronous communication he focuses on the preference for asynchronous communication. He finds his participants are somewhat inexperienced and therefore uncomfortable with voice based asynchronous communication. This appears to be partly because the science trained designers of Internet do not appreciate the importance of two-way dialogue as opposed to one way 'telling.' This is especially true in terms of synchronous oral communication, which is the preferred mode of informing by the vast majority of humans in the world.