The Octopus effect of Generic Software – The Case of ERP

Several perspectives within information systems research including sociology of technology approaches such as ANT and SCOT suffer from theoretical imperfections. This position taken derives from studies of Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) “systems” only. Those are taken as template for a global development of ICT networks, which tentatively are labeled the octopus effect. Trends in information system studies do to some extent take into account the increased complexity of contemporary ICT and related sociological effects. However complex and multilocated “systems” such as ERP reveals a legacy in information systems studies, which rests on relatively simple metaphors or core concepts such as machines, texts, actants and “embodied knowledge”. Although these account for complexity and difficulties in handling, they either imply that one can handle technology “one to one”, or you will get translated by this well-defined and well located actant, or the technology is basically abstract, intangible and can be negotiated and handled through changing rhetoric. All very located concepts. ERP-“systems” needs to be understood as heterogeneous assemblages of different kinds of hardware and software, implementation procedures, practices and rhetoric. The technology(-ies) is not solely abstract intangibles such as knowledge which can be altered and changed. Rather they are heterogeneous materiality composed with abstract discourse-elements. One can from several parts of this assemblage talk about a model power exercised upon actors. ERP coexist in many representations, and parts of it transforms over time from one representation to another. This issue is poorly handled in mainstream studies and is here discussed at micro level as permanent implementation in organisations and as continous restructuring of companies and systems. Although some already pointed at the issue of multilocation of ICT, many studies continue to give preference to organisation internal design and change processes. This fits poorly with the global features of the development and implementation of ERP, since this sociotechnical constellation operate on a number of arenas and with various time spans. In this analysis the micro-meso macro distinction will break down. The issue of intentionality is discussed. The ERP-community is an arena for identity building, actants-phenomena and other intended and non-intended action. In other words the community is not understood as a unidirectional steamroller, but as an arena for contradicting identity building and “handlings”. Finally there need to be a more explicit methodological development of analytical categories to clarify what it means to enter the blackbox of information systems. The scope, integrativeness, centralisation degree and other concepts that can help politicise ERP.

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