

Context, power, bodies and information: exploring the ‘entangled’ contexts of information

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INTRODUCTION

Most researchers, except maybe some extreme functionalists, would agree that meaning is in some way contextual. Furthermore, most would agree that information and meaning is in some sense related. Thus, the relationship between context and information via the notion of meaning seems to be part of the canonical knowledge of most fields that have information at its core such as Information Science and Information Systems. The particular way in which this relationship is conceived differs from perspective to perspective. The relationship between the text and context, whole and part, which is the tacit source of meaning is often characterised as an either/or relationship. Most texts that use hermeneutics to describe the interpretation process, for example, describe the emergence of meaning through the hermeneutic circle as this iterative movement between the part and the whole. This is also true for my own work (Introna 1993). I have however become convinced that this view does not adequately describe the emergence and dissipation of meaning in practice. It seems to me that the Cartesian ghost still pervades much of my thinking and likewise the thinking of the information oriented community. When reading papers from this community I tend to find a view in which text and context is neatly separated and where the interpreter can consciously move from text to context, or context to context, in a ways that seems to suggest that the decision and control of these distinctions and boundaries are available as object to the interpreter in search of meaning or sense. I would contend that although this view is obviously not ‘wrong’ it does not portray the richness and subtlety of meaning and information in everyday life.

With this in mind I want to explore a view that sees text and context as distinctions that interpenetrate each other, also as distinctions that are unstable and diffused. I want to see context not as 'out there' or 'in here' but as that which we are always already 'in'. Not contexts as wholes but contexts as entanglements. Contexts that we do not choose but which in a way choose us. Of course there may be a variety of ways in which we may exorcise the Cartesian ghost. I want to take two themes and explore them as 'entangled contexts'. First, I want to explore power as context. In this exploration, I want to use the work of Foucault to show that power permeates the text/context relationship. Second, I want to explore the body as context using the work of Polanyi, Merleau-Ponty, and others. I hope to argue that the text/context relationship is a very diffused and nebulous thing that is difficult to 'locate' in the sort of ways we often characterise in our work.

CONTEXT AND POWER

As pragmatic organisational actors we are always already in networks of power. When we find ourselves we find ourselves as always already entangled in a web of influence. This power, the relation of force or influence, may emanate from routines of discipline such as implicitly accepted traditions. It may emanate from membership of a particular group, or the particular material conditions brought to bare in the situation at hand. Nevertheless, whether we accept it or not, power is simultaneously the very condition and limit of all social being. Power is 'a relation between forces, or rather every relation between forces is a power relation' (Deleuze, 1986: 70). Power does not have an independent objective being. It is in the network, or grid, of forces that power emerges. Its 'condition of possibility ... is the moving substrate of force relations which, by virtue of their inequality, constantly engender states of power' (Foucault, 1980: 93).

Thus, every relation is always already a power relation. In acting, an organisational actor acts (by deed, decision, speech act, or even inaction) to bring about change. However, as roles, and the contexts of roles change, this capacity to act changes and shifts. Power is never one-dimensional; it is the one-dimensional analysis of power that neglects the network notion of power. My capacity to act is always *mediated* by the multiplicity of other relations (connections) which I am already immersed in. Thus the question, 'to act or not to act?' is never a simple one. Since every act will *always* also restructure or reconstitute the whole grid of power relations. Every move, or possible move, is always already tied to a pre-existing set of commitments and interests that I cannot escape or ignore. The idea of an interest-free, commitment-free, rational position or action is a chimera.

The power relationship is an *agonistic*¹ relationship between centres of force. In this agonistic relationship, there are acts and counter-acts (resistance). These engender relationships of power and resistance that are dynamic and local. These acts and counter-acts draw upon local discourses and micro-practices that are contingent, even arbitrary, and do not possess any essential *telos*, any inherent purpose. Although the individual acts are intentional, power, as such, is non-subjective and ateleological. Locally actors may direct their actions towards explicit outcomes, but these actions may combine into other actions in ways that may never have foreseen, or may never have been agreed to. There is always a local and *emerging* logic that may make what seemed rational previously now look irrational and vice versa. It is also clear that there is no one person able to 'put their arms around it all'. There is no one person who 'knows it all'.

Power networks are 'simultaneously local, unstable and diffuse, do not emanate from a central point or unique locus of sovereignty, but at each moment move from one point to another, in a field of forces, making inflections, resistances, twists and turns, when one changes direction, or retraces one's steps, this is why they are not 'localized' at any given moment' (Deleuze, 1986: 73). At every moment the individual looks at what forces are at her disposal to get the obvious next step to be one that will serve the interests she is concerned with. She cannot predict them since they are mobile and continually changing. She will draw on them as they arise.

Power never flows from grand strategies *per se*; power is too mobile and unstable for this. Power relations get shaped in the moment and may disappear in a moment. For example, power may suddenly and unexpectedly emerge in a normal day-to-day discussion. In a conversation with a colleague over some matter a person may make some trivial comment. The colleague, not listening properly, may make an interpretation that favours the manager's interest. Later at a meeting the colleague supports her – based on his interpretation of what he thought she said – to the point that her proposal is accepted. He may later discover that he had misunderstood her but at *that* moment in *that* meeting his support created a power relation that enabled her to act. These dynamic or mobile loci of power that emerge are not some sort of transcendent identity, *they are both medium and outcome* of force relations. There is no primordial identity, only practices and operating mechanisms. Thus, 'there is no State, only state control, and the same holds for all other cases' (Foucault, 1977b).

The dynamics of power must be understood and be analysed as a chain that transverses and circulates in such a manner that it cannot be localised. Power 'is employed and exercised through a net-like organisation. And not only do

¹. As this term is used by Foucault, there is no direct English equivalent. It has the sense of persistent struggle, contingent, always changing, always dynamic, fleeting.

individuals circulate between its threads; they are always in the position of simultaneously undergoing and exercising power... In other words, individuals are the vehicles of power, not its points of application' (Foucault, 1977a: 97). Every time the individual acts, he acts in response to power (resistance) and in accordance with force. There is no place outside of power where any individual can stand to 'hold all the strings'. Every act, every communication by every person in the organisation is *already in* power and simultaneously *reconfigures* power—sometimes in a minute way and sometimes in a big way.

This discussion on power can be summarised in the following propositions or theses on power (Deluze 1986; Dreyfus and Rabinow 1983; Foucault 1980):

Power is not something that is 'acquired, seized, or share It is not a commodity, a position, a prize, or a plot'; it is the operation of non-egalitarian and mobile relations of force. It manifests in the materiality of everyday at the level of the micro-practices, 'the political technologies in which our practices are formed' (Foucault 1980). It cannot be localised as it is simultaneously local, unstable and diffuse and does not emanate from a central point or identity.

Power relations are not superstructural, in a position of exteriority with respect to other relationships (economic, knowledge, sexual or communicative), but are immanent in these relationships. It is through them that power becomes material. It is bundles of these relationships that constitute individuals, institutions and societies. Thus, these communicative, knowledge, sexual and economic relationships are simultaneously conditions for, and outcomes of, power.

Power is not essentially repressive. It plays a directly productive role; it comes from below; it is multidirectional, operating from the top down and also from the bottom up. 'It passes through the hands of the mastered no less than through the hands of the masters' (Foucault 1977b). At every level of society, every individual and institution is both medium for, and outcome of, the force relations. 'What makes power hold good, what makes it accepted, is simply the fact that it doesn't only weigh on us as a force that says no, but that it traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms of knowledge, produces discourse' (Foucault 1977a, p.119).

Power relations are intentional, but the intentionality is not that of any individual or subject. Every force is exercised with a series of aims and objectives. The 'logic is clear, the aims decipherable, and yet it is often the case that no one is there to have invented them' (Foucault 1977b). The local tactics may link together and combine into overall strategies that create the illusion of 'grand design' but are in fact outcomes of very local contingent actions.

Resistance is integral to power. Action implies actions of the *other*, acts imply counter acts. The 'existence of power relationships depends on a multiplicity of points of resistance which are present everywhere in the power network. Resistances are the odd term in relations of power; they are inscribed in the latter and irreducible opposite' (Philp, 1983: p.35). As with power, resistance does not

have a single source or identity from which it emanates, or a set of unified principles that drive it; it is local, dispersed and diffused. Only occasionally will it flow together in some, seemingly unified, spontaneous revolt.

Foucault's notion of power attempts to break away from the traditional notion of power as located (in the king, manager, position, etc.). In the world of located power distinctions between the 'haves' and the 'have nots' lead to all sorts of unreal descriptions of society. We should rather realise that any location is temporal and subject to revision. His analysis also desires to show that power is not only negative or bad. It is the very possibility (and limit) of social action. How can we connect this notion of power to our understanding as context, and information, as entanglement? Foucault's discussion on power and truth is instructive here.

We should, Foucault argues, 'admit rather ... that there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations' (Foucault 1977b). The linking of power and knowledge is through discourse as instrument and effect of power. Discourse here is understood as a particular way of talking, of making statements about the world. Power by means of discourse gives rise to *regimes of truth*. Truth, being statements about the state of affairs held to be true, is produced in discontinuous, unstable and mobile political discourses that function as the 'general politics of truth.' Each institution or society has its 'regime of truth, its 'general politics' of truth: that is,

- the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true;
- the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements,
- the means by which each is sanctioned;
- the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth;
- the states of those who are charged with saying what counts as true' (Foucault, 1977b: 131)

'Truth is linked in a circular relation with systems of power which it induces and which extend it' (p.133). Power, thus, structures discourse, a way of talking about the world, in a discontinuous and diffused manner. Owing to the non-egalitarian and diffused nature of the relationship, such discourse gives rise to a particular regime of truth. A specific regime of truth shapes a particular domain of knowledge, which in turn, may produce a new configuration of power relations.

This means that in organisational setting certain topics or perspectives just do not come up as contextual possibilities. It is important to see that this politics of truth is not a grand strategy located somewhere (in the mind of someone). It is rather in the micro-physics. It is in the particular way words or phrases are used, the particular ways meetings are run, the particular ways proposals are put forward, and so forth. In power distinctions about text and context shifts and

moves in unexpected and diffused ways. With these shifts meaning becomes diffused and ambiguous. It is not simply out there or in here. It is mostly fragmented and shifting. As such information is not a coherent entity. It is diffused and shifting. In this view opportunism is as important as strategy.

CONTEXT AND BODIES

As socialised animals we are always already immersed in values, interests and beliefs. There is no point or place where we could stand where all will be of equal, or of no value. When we find ourselves we find ourselves as valuing some things and not others, as believing some things and not others. When making judgements we are always already enmeshed, or situated, *in* our values, interests and beliefs. We can not un-entangle our self's from this already there web of values and beliefs (Introna 1997). They are the very horizon from which we speak and judge *when* we speak and judge (Gadamer 1989). There is no neutral ground, no absolute horizon, from which we can make rational and informed judgements—where reason and facts can set aside who we already are. Rather our values, interests and beliefs become sedimented as tacit knowledge that function as extensions of our body (Merleau-Ponty 1962; Polanyi 1973). To try and 'suspend', or direct, our values and interests, *in making* our judgements, is like trying to grab hold of something without engaging one's hands—it is unthinkable. Furthermore, in a similar way that we are completely and utterly unaware which particular muscles participate in any action, when engaged in that action, so we are unaware which values, interests and beliefs participate in a judgement *when making* that judgement, and to what degree.

To make the discussion a bit more specific let us consider the following example. Let us imagine a committee considering various proposals for a new information system application. Let's imagine that on the morning before the meeting it was reported in the papers that a major, extremely successful, and highly regarded corporation has decided to adopt one of the alternatives they have to choose from. Let's imagine that the chairperson of the committee reminds the members, after reviewing all the material before them, that the judgement they have to make is about the relative merits of the proposals before them. Also, that although they may think it significant that the particular company has chosen to adopt the software they ought not allow this to 'cloud' their judgement of the system *as appropriate for them*. Now it is my argument, briefly outlined above, that it is impossible, when *actually* raising their hands in approval or disapproval for the members to say whether their judgement was or was not, and to what degree, affected by the fact that they already knew of the corporate giant's decision to go with the particular system. They may, of course, argue at length about how they did not allow their judgement to be 'clouded'. However,

in doing this they can only discuss their judgements analytically as observers of themselves in a way an athlete may analytically describe which muscles are used in jumping over the hurdle. Similarly, as the athlete can not run *and* simultaneously attend to the particular muscles she uses, so they cannot judge *and* simultaneously attend to the particular causal relationships being brought into play in applying their interests, values and beliefs *in* the act of judging. This is the point: we are always already entangled in our interests, values and belief when making judgements in ways that are obscure and inaccessible to us *in making those judgements*. Furthermore, since values are implicit part of our 'bodies' it is impossible to explicitly take up, or consider, *in actual* judgements, the values, and beliefs—and to some degree the interests—of others. The important point in this discussion is that we are always already immersed in our values, beliefs and interests. They are the tacit possibility and limit of every social engagement. We can not select or deselect them by a conscious act of will. We can therefore not select a context for our interpretation. We are already in a context in a way that we are already in our bodies. Although we can attempt to project beyond this already there horizon, we will always to a lesser or greater degree be already thrown into a context that is the very condition for us to work out our understanding. Thus information is not of our choosing but of our thrownness.

INFORMATION, POWER AND THE BODY

Information has at least something to do with the state of affairs. We see, we observe, we measure, and the like. In the organisation it may be through information systems reports, meetings, conversations, and so forth. Now, where do we stand when we see, observe, measure? The answer is quite simple: we stand in-the-world. As involved actors in the world we cannot seek out a neutral vacuum from where we can observe. Our very being is that of being always already projected. To observe is to already select; to select is to already value. Our values, beliefs and interests enable *and* filter. This is the conceptual innovation of Gadamer's hermeneutics (Gadamer 1989). In seeking to understand we cannot bypass our biases, beliefs and values. They are the very conditions for understanding. Without them understanding cannot even begin since the 'facts' do not speak for themselves; they are mutes. It is our always already interested gaze that makes them speak. This does not mean that we are trapped in our gaze (values, beliefs, etc). If we stay open there is always the possibility for transformation or revision. This revision, however, can never be a 'wiping clean of the slate.' It will always be mediated by the 'already there'; in other words it is not a cause but rather a perturbation, a disturbance. Similarly our 'already being there' means that we can not merely select our meaning as we pick a piece of fruit from a basket. Gadamer (1989) argues that we cannot

continually misunderstand the *use* of a word 'without its affecting the meaning of the whole, so we cannot hold blindly to our own fore-meanings [and pre-judgements] of the thing if we would understand the meaning of another.' Context is therefore a closed-openness. It is closed because I can only project from where I already am, from my already situated gaze. It is open because it can reach beyond it, but only from within the already in—likewise with information.

CONCLUSIONS

There are many conclusions and implication about entangled contexts that can be made from the discussion above. I will only highlight a few. In the discussion above two themes seem to reoccur, the idea of *always already* and the idea of *both medium and outcome*. Both of these notions stem from a more fundamental idea namely that of viewing phenomena as dynamic networks rather than as stable causal chains. Let us explore these notions.

First, the aspect of *always already*. We have seen that we are always already situated in a network of power. This means that every social relation is first a relation of power then whatever it is. There is therefore no place we could 'back into' where power will be suspended. Furthermore every attempt to neutralise power through innovations such representation, constitutions, rules, methodologies, and so forth, will itself become a resource in the materialisation of power. There is no 'outside' of power. This leaves one with a moral question: what then ought we to do? Power becomes dark (systematically asymmetrical) if it succeeds to hide itself. It is our task to make power as context visible, to articulate it at all levels and in as many ways as possible. This will not be easy since power is most effective if it succeeds to hide itself. Nevertheless, what should be clear is that there is no 'once and for all' in power, every move is merely temporary, and there is no final move in the game of societal change.

We are always already situated in our values, interests and beliefs. There is no neutral and objective view. Our judgement is always already 'clouded.' This means that we are wittingly or unwittingly building our values, interests and beliefs into our judgements, choices, and information systems. In the data we select to represent, the way we represent them, and so forth. Furthermore, in making sense of data we as situated organisational actors always start where we are. We can not think like someone else, such as the user, or guy on the other side. We can, however, stay open for the possibility of encountering the 'other'. This is our moral duty.

Second the idea of a process as being both *medium and outcome*. As organisational actors we are both medium and outcome of power. We are who we are because of relations of power. However as such we are also the medium of power. It is this dynamic that sustains power. Like power we need our

prejudices to make sense of the world. In drawing on them we transform them. In being both medium and outcome we can never determine them we can only disturb them. Every act, every judgement is to a greater or lesser extend a perturbation never a cause or an effect.

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