Chapter VI

Doing Critical IS Research: The Question of Methodology

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INTRODUCTION

Critical information systems (IS) research denotes a critical process of inquiry that seeks to achieve emancipatory social change by going beyond the apparent to reveal hidden agendas, concealed inequalities and tacit manipulation involved in a complex relationship between IS and their social, political and organisational contexts. It has its philosophical and theoretical roots in *critical social theory* (Held, 1980; Fay, 1987; Morrow and Brown, 1994). As a critical social researcher studies the social life of people in order to help them change conditions and improve their lives, so too does a critical IS researcher. By demystifying technological imperatives and managerial rationalism justifying a particular information system design, the critical IS researcher helps both IS practitioners and users understand its social consequences, envisage desirable alternatives and take action.

Like interpretive approaches to IS research, critical theory-informed approaches came along as a reaction to positivism. While interpretive researchers aim to understand and describe "the *context* of the information system, and the *process* whereby the information system influences and is influenced by its context" (Walsham, 1993),

critical IS researchers go further to expose inherent conflicts and contradictions, hidden structures and mechanisms accountable for these influences. Critical IS researchers aim to reveal interests and agendas of privileged groups and the way they are supported or protected by a particular information system design or use. More generally, they aim to discover and expose attempts to design and (mis)use IS to deceive, manipulate, exploit, dominate and disempower people. By doing so they aspire to help them resist these attempts, hinder such misuse of IS and promote liberating and empowering IS design and use.

Such concerns and critical orientations have inspired diverse research programs in IS that have been recognised as a new, critical paradigm in IS research (Hirschheim and Klein, 1989; Hirschheim et al., 1996; Iivari et al., 1998). While they succeeded to (re)open the fundamental questions of the nature of IS and their social reality, and increase awareness of normative knowledge, critical IS researchers faced serious problems. The very assumptions of critical IS research have been questioned and its objectives deemed unachievable. Critical researchers have even been accused of promoting yet another 'totalising discourse' (Wilson, 1997). On the other hand, proponents of the critical paradigm in IS have long been aware of its weak empirical grounding and the lack of appropriate empirical methods (Lyytinen and Klein, 1985; Lyytinen, 1992; Klein, 1999). Most notably, critical researchers themselves identified a problematic relationship between critical theory and empirical research methods as a key problem, though not unique to the IS research (Morrow and Brown, 1994, Klein, 1999; Forester, 1992).

This chapter addresses these issues by focusing on the question of methodology in critical theory-informed IS research. Methodology is understood here in its philosophical sense as an overall strategy of conceptualising and conducting an inquiry, and constructing scientific knowledge. Methodology, therefore, refers not only to research methods or techniques (such as case study or interview), but also to the epistemological assumptions of methods and how they are linked to a particular theory. A critical research program in IS sets an agenda and the types of explanatory substantive problems for which some methods are more appropriate than others. Critical research methodology is explicitly concerned with the choices about linking theories and meth-

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