Association for Information Systems
AIS Electronic Library (AISeL)

AMCIS 1997 Proceedings

Americas Conference on Information Systems (AMCIS)

8-15-1997

Significance and Meaning: Textual Meaning and Information Systems

John D. Haynes

Bond University, jhaynes@bond.edu.au

Follow this and additional works at: http://aisel.aisnet.org/amcis1997

Significance and Meaning: Textual Meaning and Information Systems

John D. Haynes
School of Information Technology, Bond University 4229, Australia
Email: jhaynes@bond.edu.au

Introduction

It is distinctly insightful and phenomenological that Boland conceives of information as "inward-forming" contra to data which are the raw facts that provide part of the stimulus for that "in-forming". At [Boland, 1985, p 363], Boland goes on to equate meaning directly with information. At first glance one would think that there are really three categories, namely, data, information and meaning. Where in the last category meaning may not necessarily arise directly from information, but could be deduced out of an indirect process. We certainly see data in graphs, etc., but we also have available information that explains those graphs which may or may not be attached to those graphs. The question is, is the information that explains, like our example, meaningful? In Boland's terms, is it distinctly in-forming? Or do we need to seek other examples of information that articulate, explain, argue, and so on? Perhaps we could take Boland's paper itself as an example of that category? Is Boland's paper, in itself as information, meaningful? Boland's paper is meaningful, but the former example of information connected to graphs is not meaningful in the same perspectival way and I shall label the "graphical" kind of information as significant. So I suggest - and present that suggestion as an argument in this paper - that information can be broken down into two distinct categories: significant information and meaningful information. I would further suggest two distinct ways of relating in relation to those two categories: (1) in significant information, we relate to by understanding (or possibly not understanding at the very least initially) in terms of our perception of that kind of information; (2) in meaningful information we relate with, in coming to know, (either immediately, slowly or otherwise) in terms of our conception of what it is that is potentially "in-forming" us.

Significant Information

In Significant Information we perceive that there are logical elements that comprise the information as a collection of parts and no more. Raw facts (data) are converted and arranged into a content that exemplifies their logical or possibly mathematical composition. Significant information can be extremely important and in this sense the choice of "significant" in relation to "meaningful" as a term is independent of its value, but significant information as distinct from meaningful information has no transcendent qualities. Significant information is content-based and has no conceivable viewing as "form". Hence, significant information comprises objects that we relate to and insofar as the relation is "to", we are in the mode of perception.

Meaningful Information

Meaningful Information requires reflection on what it is that we are perceiving that - if it turns out to be meaningful or at the very least potentially meaningful - leads us to conceive "what is the information pointing to?" When we are in the mode of conception we are moving with the information in seeking a solution to our conceptions that we relate with. If we are successful, we move with the information until our conception leads us to a coming to terms with what the information is pointing to. The example I could give here is precisely an elaboration of the one I initially took as my point of departure from significant information: Boland's "Inward-forming" paper itself. We initially perceive the term "inward-forming" and in perceiving these kind of terms ask ourselves what does Boland mean here, or what could (we conceive that) he means here? No amount of logical analysis of the paper itself will help us, we cannot examine the paper like a graph as if the terms "inward-forming" were attempting to explain that graph, the reverse is the case, the paper explicates what inward-forming could mean. But the paper is not of itself sufficient, we need to have some idea of what inward and forming and form, and more importantly experiencing such a forming of all the previous terms (i.e. independently of their dictionary definitions), from outside the paper itself, which, certainly, part of the project of the paper asks us to do (and hence this is an explicit reason why the paper itself satisfies the criterion of being meaningful). That is, we need to bring something else that has already been inwardly formed in ourselves - whether we are consciously aware of that as an inward

forming - via our experiences along with us when we read and attempt to come to a meaningful interpretation of Boland's paper. In short, we need to conceive what Boland means by inward-forming by relating that which Boland is pointing to with our own experiences of what he could mean. Significant information is concerned with what is, meaningful information, once discerned or at least potentially discerned, is experienced as what it could be or what we believe it could be, until we are, or are at least, experiencing it in the meaningful way in which it was intended to be experienced.

When I refer to meaning in a text I am, or we are, potentially relating with instances of meaningful information, including what I am now saying, not so much in the words themselves (their dictionary definitions) but with the words, by way of pointing or sign-posting what is my intent in using those words. The resolution of whether the information in view is actually meaningful (i.e., whether it gives rise to an experience of meaning) is the extent to which our experiences co-incide with what is being viewed. I am suggesting that there is a constant discovery (albeit, in many cases, unconscious) of this distinction in texts and material that we come across and I refer to this process in this paper as relating-with-a-text, i.e. we need to be aware of allowing ourselves the contingency of relating with two distinct structures: significant information which we relate to and relating with meaningful information. We need this distinction in order to prepare ourselves for the journey of coming to know what is being pointed to in the case of meaningful information and appreciating what is explained to us by way of significant information.

Reader and Text

The necessity for relating with (in our terms) the perspective of two distinct structures also derives from hermeneutics itself. We see in many of the works in this field mention of the fact that hermeneutics originally came about through the need to "translate" religious and philosophical texts. The translation was more in the nature of rendering of myths, metaphors and perspectives into a truth (and, I submit, then back again into a perspective). Such truths were to be "taken" unambiguously often in the form of rituals (re-enactments or "re"-experiences) from the text. To present the "truth" for re-enactment required an interpreter. One - of many - such examples of a religious interpreter was the theologian and philosopher Schleiermacher who worked in the area of the early Gnostic texts and, according to Gadamer [Gadamer 1976, p7], Schleiermacher "defined hermeneutics as the art of avoiding misunderstanding". Quite clearly Schleiermacher had in mind a text that required some struggle - no doubt less struggling with practise - in interpreting, but that after the struggle born of thinking through the arguments; allusions; metaphors etc and drawing upon a background of education in that area and disciplined as a thinker, an unambiguous "understanding" was possible. Clearly this kind of text was meaningful and required some effort of interpretation, whereas an early Gnostic religious leader's shopping list with, perhaps, detailed instructions on what to look for with explanations of possible difficulties and where to find the items, did not fall into the previous category. For the shopping list and instructions, which we can treat purely objectively and hence perceive as being significant, logic can largely dictate the process of interpretation. An interesting case (devised by Frank Land) arises when the shopping list has a hidden message for the person who is to do the shopping, i.e., the shopper is not to be trusted unless he/she has been given a shopping list. The hidden message shopping list does not cease to be perceived in an objective way, i.e. it still remains significant, but now subjective considerations enter into its contemplation: the shopper starts to conceive of its importance (or trigger or pointer) to the question of lack of trust and it may be that the shopper is now more careful with his/her purchases, wanting to obtain the best possible products within the constraints of the list to make up for, or lay to rest, the trust aspect. Once the meaningfulness has been noted it returns alone to being significant. I argue that meaningfulness is always a coming together of the object with the subject and I refer to this as a subject as object experience. When the list was purely treated as an object it was significant and no more. When it carried a meaningfulness it also carried the potential for extra benefits. The same situation is pervasive in an Information System (IS). If the relationship between humans in an IS is perceived in no other than objective terms - as no other than significant - then its potential for enriching the IS is limited.

Reader, Author and Text

Let me consider Wolfgang Iser [Iser 1987] who extends the relation between text and reader to also include author. Iser's view introduces the concept of mimesis as referring to a pregiven "reality" behind the wording that is meant to be represented in the context of a performance, where the words have to be performed in order to replicate this pregiven reality see [Iser 1987, p 325]. Iser raises two important issues. Firstly there is the Aristotelian notion of representation entailing two distinct aspects: what is immediately perceivable, which we shall construe as appearance and what is not so obvious is the act of bringing apparent absences into presence or in Aristotelian terms "completing what Nature has left incomplete", which we shall refer to as Reality. Secondly in order to distinguish appearance from Reality and thereby determine a sense of the work, we have to engage in a performance of the work, i.e. we have to attempt to experience the work. I agree with Iser that we need to experience the work as a performance, but I disagree that there is a pre-given Reality newly fashioned from the work. I see the "Reality" of the work as its meaning which I see as implicit in the work in the way a script is implicit until it is performed. I argue that it is the actors who make the meaning explicit for the audience to experience. In the case of a text, the reader is both actor and reader. The reader performs the text, that is, the reader brings to the text his or her subjective experiences and relates those experiences to the experience of the text. In this way the objective experience in the text for the reader, is mediated by the subjective experiences of the reader and as these two experiences co-incide or are synthesised, the meaning of the text for the reader arises indirectly via his or her subjective experiences. I am not suggesting that the reader needs to try to think him/herself into being the author or try to experience what the author would experience, in the same way I would not suggest that a psychiatrist needs to experience paranoia in order to diagnose it, but the psychiatrist does need to allow her/himself to experience a sense of the symptoms of paranoia (How? By bringing to bear on the diagnosis previous experiences of diagnoses of paranoia), and it is the getting of this sense that I submit is an indirect experience. In order for the reader to get a sense of the work as the text s/he has to sort out the chaff from the wheat; determine if the work is masquerading as more than what it really is; directly observe the appearance but indirectly experience at some level what lies "behind the work" (sic) (the Reality - or real meaning - of the work); what the author is really getting at. I submit that experiencing meaning (in my terms, the Reality of the work) is always an indirect experience. The same scenario applies to an IS. It is not new to suggest that the script and actors are all in place in an IS, or that the author of the script (in the above example) might represent the goals (or intentions) of an IS, but what has not been adequately explicated in the literature is the relationship between the actor as subject and his/her relation to the objective script. I suggest that there is a reconciliation between subject and object and that reconciliation is a necessary condition for the emergence of meaning, namely a subject as object experience which can only arise indirectly. I suggest that if the relation between actor and script remains purely significant then the IS confines itself to limitation. One type of limitation of purely significant relations is that they can never be thematic (their commonality cannot merge - because they are perceived as objective disjoint parts). If an IS cannot be thematised, i.e. if there are not one or many common goals threading their way through the IS, then it can be potentially crippled. Business Process Re-Engineering and a host of similar methodologies recognise the importance of commonality of goals in an IS, but as far as I can see the process of commonality has never been considered from the point of view of a theme. Once it is recognised that only meaningful relations, where the subject (from previous experiences) makes the decision to identify with the object, and this decision to identify is a new experience, ie, a subject as object experience, then the unity of the two emerges as the theme of that reconciliation of differences. Successful ISs are characterised by people that invest themselves - their subjectivity - into the objectivity of their work: they become one with their work. This oneness - which is not able to be perceived directly; it is not an object, rather it is a product which arises indirectly out of the union of subject and object and its presence can only be experienced - is the primary theme that is evident in successful ISs.

Significance and meaningfulness are not elusive, their discovery requires cogitation and the distinction itself between significance and meaning is itself meaningful; the distinction is a subject as object experience and is therefore a meaningful example of information.

Conclusion

I have presented the view that significance is a property of information whereas I argue meaning is not a property of information but is rather a property of what the information is pointing to, be that an experience

or the intention of another (as in the case of the hidden meaning of the list). Perhaps then it could be said that significance is a direct property of information but meaning is an indirect property. I offer the view that all information initially labels something, the label is either sufficient for its explanation, i.e., it is sufficient at face value (in which case it is significant) or it raises further issues. If it raises further issues then in simplified terms, it becomes meaningful. When we see it becoming meaningful for us we have a subject as object experience of that meaning. What the information points to as either significance or meaning arises out of what the reader (or subject in an IS) perceives as a point of intersection between the interpretation of the text (or the object as in an IS) as it is and the reader's (or IS subject's) current levels of understanding or knowledge or capacity to generalise from past subjective experiences. If there is no intersection then the reader will perceive the text as nonsense or have some intuition that there is something there but it is at present elusive. If there is an intersection then the information is either perceived as significant if it is familiar in background and directly able to be divided into parts for which an experience of learning of the subject is no longer able to evolve from an understanding of the nature of those parts, or, it is conceived as meaningful if there is a familiar context for the work and an understanding of that work impinges on the subject such that the subject can expand his or her awareness and when that expansion process is within an IS, then that IS is enriched accordingly.

References available upon request from the author.