BOOK REVIEW

The Labyrinths of Information: Challenging the Wisdom of Systems

Claudio Ciborra

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How well did I know Claudio Ciborra?

Claudio emerged in my consciousness through his performances at Information Systems (IS) conferences, the guru with a message about bricolage and a large band of followers.

In 2000, Claudio was appointed Professor of IS at the London School of Economics and Political Science in competition with four other short-listed candidates. When I was asked in my interview if I was willing to be Convenor (Head) of the Department of IS if I was appointed, I replied that I would not come unless I was-not an 'LSE' answer! As mentioned already in this Special Issue, it is reputed that Claudio replied with 'I see myself on the sun deck not in the engine room.'! Nevertheless Claudio was appointed Convenor a little while later and continued to hold the post until his death.

In 2003, when I retired from a permanent academic post on medical grounds, Claudio generously and quickly appointed me as a Visiting Professor in his Department. My first meeting was a Department Strategy Day at which, when colleagues questioned who or what they and/or the Department are, Claudio declared that he saw himself as a 'hero figure'. Hero or not, from that day onward Claudio had no hesitation in seeking my advice where it was clear to him that my expertise exceeded his (note though that this was about research measurement, not about research).

When I was appointed to two sub-panel subjects for the U.K. Government's Research Assessment Exercise 2008, Claudio sent a message of congratulation from his hospital bed not long before he passed away.

What do I think of Claudio Ciborra?

With anyone's loss, their contribution often becomes alarmingly apparent because of its absence. I have to admit that I was surprised by the extent of the hole in LSE's IS Department and how much Claudio in his own way was quickly building and leading his colleagues prosperously forward. He may have appeared to be on the sun deck but the engine room worked extremely well.

Claudio wrote as he spoke and acted. Claudio could be bitingly critical of his colleagues' ideas, but he would take similar criticism from others in his turn. This review is my second attempt at reviewing this book. My first attempt was a sardonic review, which the publisher refused to print after legal advice! Claudio's response to my piece shows that he was surprised at the content, but that he would never think of censoring his colleagues.

Claudio had matchless intellectual integrity as well as having great social skills making him an excellent colleague.

He was in my view, as he said a hero figure. He spoke his mind without fear or favour, telling people what they did not want to hear for those very reasons, or what they knew to be true before but did not want to admit. With his courage and adoption by many as a role model, he fully qualified as a genuine 'guru'. The term 'guru' has come to be used pejoratively equally by those who do not have a particular view of their own or do not have sufficient talent for them to ever be associated with the word.

Hero, leader, guru, all plus integrity. But I never knew him as well as many contributors to this special issue of the *European Journal of Information Systems*. And although I try to have no regrets in my life (consumption of the future on the past) I do regret missing the opportunity to know him better. Of course, one can read his work, and this is what this review encourages you to do.

Review of the labyrinths of information: challenging the wisdom of systems Claudio Ciborra

In June 2003, Claudio Ciborra asked me if I would review this book for the *European Journal of Information Systems*. To get straight to the point, I strongly recommend that the IS community at large read this book since Claudio readily brings the problems in IS that are obvious, after he has explained them, into the light.

The book is based on the development of a series of executive seminars, whose delivery apparently generated either the view 'Great, a speaker who understands us!' or 'Never call him back again'. This is an ideas book, with an introductory chapter inviting the reader to go with the author in taking the IS field towards an Age of Baroque in the deployment and management of technology in organisations and society. Passion and improvisation.

Each subsequent chapter has as its title a non-English word 'aimed at creating an uncanny dislocation of perspective, suspending, if only for a brief instant, his or her usual attitude and expectations.' So the seven central chapters are called as follows:

- Krisis: Judging methods
- Bricolage: Improvisation, hacking, patching
- Gestell: The power of infrastructures
- Dérive: Drift and deviation
- Xenia: Hosting an innovation
- Shih: Architecture and action
- Kairos (and Affectio): Seizing the opportunity (and moods and mental states)

Each chapter introduces new ideas around a concern for human existence rather than technology drive. I will not discuss the ideas in these chapters since their best articulation is, of course in the book, which is succinct anyway and written with the passion and wit of its author which I am unable to get anywhere near.

In particular, I found the Methodological Appendix fascinating, where Claudio explains how on reflecting on the process of his own creativity, he 'discovered' Heidegger after many attempts to read *Being and Time (1962)*. This enabled Claudio to see that when he approached an organisational phenomena he encountered two forms of evidence. First, the set of ideas and models taken for granted, which usually become identified with the phenomena itself. The second is the shared tacit background between people when speaking and which is not written down. I certainly found Claudio's text revealing since I observe that problem solving using models often turns out to be model solving, which produces answers to the wrong problem.

In this book you will read some views you already hold expressed as new ideas – but with the benefit of being expressed better than you have (if not, why have we not heard of them?).

You will read some views that are either totally new to you or that present what you thought you knew in a breathtakingly new way.

You will be stirred; you will find passion.

I strongly recommend that all academics, practitioners and students of IS read this book. It does the greatest thing any book can do.

It makes you think!

Postscript

My personal thanks go to the Guest Editors for putting together so fascinating and compulsively readable a collection of works written in honour of Claudio Ciborra.