



# Eureka moments in the works of Claudio Ciborra

<sup>1</sup>Kiran Jude Fernandes

<sup>1</sup>*Department of Management Studies, University of York, York YO10 5DD, U.K.*

**Correspondence:**

Kiran Jude Fernandes, 40th Anniversary  
Lecturer in Management, Department of  
Management Studies, University of York,  
York YO10 5DD, U.K.  
Tel: +44 1904 432693;  
E-mail: kf501@york.ac.uk

*European Journal of Information Systems*  
(2005) 14, 498–499.  
doi:10.1057/palgrave.ejis.3000556

The authoritative works of Claudio Ciborra, have been one of the chief intellectual influences and sources of motivation in my career so far. Claudio was an ‘advocate of relationships’, in both his personal and academic life. In his academic life, he focused on the study of relationships between technology and organizations, while in his personal life, professionalism was the foundation stone to his relationship, with both his peers and colleagues. The greatest fact in the story of Claudio’s achievement is not his academic endeavors, the journals and books he published, but the purist attitude and focus he had towards knowledge contribution in general. In most of his work, Claudio sets up radical theory-driven hypothesis that could be operationally tested against empirical observations. For example, the use of the ‘learning ladder’ model to describe the unfolding of multiple organizational knowledge creation, transformation and transfer (Ciborra and Andreu, 2001). It is precisely for such reasons, that I feel readers would receive Claudio’s work with an instantaneous ‘eureka’. This attitude of Claudio to constantly test the ability of conjectures to withstand refutation, positions him as a well regarded moderate positivist (Popper, 1989).

Both during his ‘socio-technical’ and ‘phenomenological’ days, Claudio was critical about how management of corporate information infrastructures was conducted, and argued that such systems were complex, open-ended, value-laden and needed to be tackled using a multidisciplinary approach. Sending such ripples through the Information Systems (IS) community was one of his defining features. His critical approach to analyze the strategic alliance phenomenon, was by no means pursued for the sake of pleasing some members of his audience, rather it stems from a long, thorough and attentive observation to, what Heidegger calls ‘metaphysical ontology’. Like Heidegger, Claudio argued that philosophy was not necessarily a scientific discipline, but more fundamental than theory itself (Heidegger, 1992). This is one explanation as to why he looked at radical theory-driven hypothesis in his work.

While such radical thinking did not cause negative turbulence in the field, it certainly raises the question, as to why did Claudio consider using ‘bricolage’, a predominantly bottom-up approach, appropriate to analyze strategic alliances and new forms of work organizations, which are typically policy driven? The eureka moment for Claudio is perhaps embedded, when he discovered that (1) post rationalization does not do justice to the richness, contingency and unpredictability of managerial actions, and (2) dismantling of product lines or teams was not the solution to achieve competitiveness. Claudio promoted actively the need for active and deeper transformation of cognitive frameworks, and the need to disassociate one from traditional ‘technology-change’ linking. This is perhaps the first instance in the field of strategy management, where a strong case has been made to dissociate researchers with Pavlovian conditioning. It is important to note that Claudio did not explicitly use the concept of ‘tacit knowing’ in his works (Polanyi, 1983), but the author feels that Claudio’s emphasis on ‘role of individuals’, particularly when he

referred to them as 'smart bricoleurs', suggests that he like Polanyi's believed that 'We know more than we can tell'. In addition to this, Claudio's work on using learning ladders to describe the unfolding of knowledge (creation, transformation and transfer) suggests that knowledge often consists of habits and culture that is not easily recognized – thus implicitly introducing 'tacit knowing' within the concept of 'bricolage' (Ciborra and Andreu, 2001).

In my opinion, Claudio's inventive usage of the term 'bricolage' has three dimensions. The first, as stated in his seminal work, 'The Platform Organization: Recombining Strategies, Structures, and Surprises', refers to the term 'tinkering' or 'fiddling' (Ciborra, 1996a). This reference relates to the fact that organizations are complex and behave in an unpredictable manner, and organizations must become smart 'fiddlers' to compete and survive. In reference to the exemplar about Olivetti, he describes an array of moves (fiddles) the company had to make to become a 'network firm'. Claudio stops short of using the term cluster in his work, perhaps with the intention of highlighting the importance of tacit relationships within firms. It is by this constant fiddling activity, argues Claudio, that firms will give rise to (emergence) a bottom-up culture of strategy, which is a vital and integral part of maintaining a successful competitive advantage over a longer period of time.

The second dimension of the term 'bricolage' brings to light the importance of 'trial and error' within strategy making. Bricolage within this context means that strategies are not established paradigm, but are results of implicit or explicit trial and error actions. This view in thinking contributes to the positivist view, where the general belief is that there is a priori that is not derived from sense, but can, however, be justified by experience, illustrating Claudio's reference to AT&T. On the other hand, it can be argued from an epistemological perspective that this thinking contributes to empiricism, as Claudio actively refers to knowledge as a product of

human experience. Regardless, of which stance is taken by the reader, this thinking gives rise to the third dimension of bricolage – existence of an entity.

Claudio refers to the phenomenon of strategy as an 'entity'. This entity, as Claudio puts forth, needs to be creative and get resources like information together, in ways they were not originally designed to do. For example, he points out the fact that Olivetti's new network form, implicitly emerged from the tensions created at the periphery of this pasted-up organization. In all three of these dimensions, Claudio's work clearly highlights the need for this fuzzy 'bricolage' as the source of strategic and competitive advantage.

Claudio was quite critical about the gap that was resulting from technological change and the lack of progress on the organizational transformation front. His work on teams, markets and systems is a classic testament to this view (Ciborra, 1996b). Such criticality was not an exception, but rather a feature of Claudio's work. Such criticality also filtered through his work, not merely through his observations and comments, but by relating his personal experiences to the context, which was informed from rigorous scrutiny. For example, while developing his 'bricolage' concept in platform organizations; he conducted over 25 interviews to argue his case. It is perhaps no surprise to any of his readers that his arguments are multilayered and wrapped within his thinking, like a Russian doll effect, each argument interlinked with his central argument. Claudio's narration is comfortable and sublimely assured, and gives the reader a sense of his authoritativeness, and at the same time generates an extraordinary excitement and tension. Claudio in exploring some of the most challenging ideas had developed an impressive body of work, which at times were critical, but nothing less than 'eureka'! On a closing note, Claudio would agree with me, that meeting President Bill Clinton was one of his eureka moments too. 'Ciao' Claudio – you will be missed by the IS community.

## About the author

**Dr Kiran Jude Fernandes** is a 40th Anniversary Research Lecturer in Management at the University of York. An alumnus from Walchand Institute of Technology (WIT), Mississippi State University (MSU), Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) and the University of Warwick,

he worked on the Space Shuttle Main Engines program at the National Aeronautics and Space Administration's John C. Stennis Space Center in Mississippi. His current research work focuses on Technology Management, Interactive Situation Modeling and Strategic Information Systems.

## References

- CIBORRA C (1996a) The platform organization: recombining strategies, structures, and surprises. *Organization Science* 7(2), 103–118.
- CIBORRA C (1996b) *Teams, markets and systems*. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge.
- CIBORRA C and ANDREU R (2001) Sharing knowledge across boundaries. *Journal of Information Technology* 16(2), 73–81.
- HEIDEGGER M (1992) *The Metaphysical Foundations of Logic (Studies in Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy)*. Bloomington, IN, USA: Indiana University Press.
- POLANYI M (1983) *Tacit Dimension*. Gloucester, MA, USA: Peter Smith Publishers.
- POPPER K (1989) *Conjectures and Refutations: The Growth of Scientific Knowledge*. London: Routledge.