

On Equity: Why Storytelling Matters in IT Management

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Abstract

This paper analyzes concepts of equity across several texts centering around the intersections of management and technology. Equity can have different meanings in different contexts as it influences both civic and information architecture which in turn shape reality. While information can be physical like a *Mean Girls: The Musical (2024)* movie poster or digital like an Online Transactional Processing (OLTP) system, it is an indisputable fact that information is used as a means to make connections with other people. As such, information, and its subsequent architecture, is imbued with the perspectives and related biases of the people who contribute to it. Biases can include both negative values, like prejudice, and positive ones, like equity. This essay posits that IT managers can and should embed equity into the information architectures of today's digital native society with a techno-historical lens.

Introduction

Before transitioning to the techno-historical aspect of managing information architecture, it is imperative to first establish a unified conception of equity. Fortunately, each text presented in IST 614: IT Management & Policy offers a unique perspective on equity in the context of managing information technology, allowing for thoughtful comparison and analysis of what equity can and should look like at work. Additionally, The Management Center's (TMC's) how-to on *Management in a Changing World: How to Manage for Equity, Sustainability, and Results* claims that "equity calls for managers to account for unconscious bias and systemic barriers in supporting people to succeed,"¹ contributing a clear definition of equity to use as an initial framework for assessment. The other texts analyzed in this essay include; *The Essential Drucker: The Best of Sixty Years of Peter Drucker's Essential Writings on Management*², *The*

¹ Imani, and M. Wong, B. Ahuja, 2023, Wiley, p. 11.

² Drucker, 2008, HarperCollins.

*New IT: How Technology Leaders are Enabling Business Strategy in the Digital Age*³, *An Introduction to Holistic Enterprise Architecture (4th Edition)*⁴, and *The Internet in Everything: Freedom and Security in a World with No Off Switch*⁵. While none of the assigned texts come right out and define equity like in TMC's how-to guide, every text touches on the subject because of its incredible significance to life and work. *The Essential Drucker*, the pièce de résistance of business management and Dr. Bernard's own *An Introduction to Enterprise Architecture* approach equity in similar ways. On the other hand, *The New IT's* glass half-full outlook on managing information technology directly contrasts the more Orwellian *The Internet in Everything*, which paints a horrific picture of technological advancement. Comparing these diverse perspectives and measuring them up to TMC's definition of equity allows for a unique discussion on the differences between valued concepts like technology and undervalued concepts like history. Because of their divergent positions, a blended, techno-historical perspective sits at the perfect intersection to discuss the importance of equity when it comes to decision-making at the management level.

Technology, like history, is made in real time, and both originate from the exact same source - information. While technology is a product, history is an art that requires practice, discipline, and empathy much like the practice of management. However, managers in information technology spaces often lack or simply do not value the skills needed to identify, communicate, and preserve the stories that build an organization's culture. There is one aspect of information technology, information architecture, that can be approached from a techno-historical perspective because of the innate historical nature of information architecture itself. Much like the storied physical architectures of the Egyptian pyramids and the Parisian

³ Dyché, 2015, McGraw Hill Education.

⁴ Bernard, 2020, AuthorHouse.

⁵ DeNardis, 2020, Yale University Press.

catacombs, the digital architectures that shape today's world reflect contemporaneous society. For example, The Internet Archive and their Wayback Machine contain multitudes on what equity can and does look like in cyberspace. As automation continues to replace human resources in industrial work, relatively new domains like cyberspace offer more favorable conditions for much-needed innovation in today's culture of work. Coupling innovation in cyberspace with a foundational pillar of equity in managing information technology creates the perfect platform to reinvigorate the value that historians bring to society, both physical and digital, through adaptive storytelling and preservation.

Literature Review

While Drucker does not explicitly mention equity in his sixty years of writings on management, his chapter on *The Educated Person*⁶ carefully addresses the subject of what would constitute a “postcapitalist”⁷ or knowledge society, meaning the society's most valuable resource is one that is intangible and therefore accessible, the resource of data, information and ultimately, knowledge. Similarly, Dr. Bernard never explicitly mentions equity in *An Introduction to Holistic Enterprise Architecture*, but instead implies the concept of equity both when using the term *Holistic* to describe organizing information into a three-dimensional structure and when referencing Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs in the early chapters.

History, while it may not seem related at first, is the study of the present through change over time, and it strictly adheres to the old adage that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. In other words, the study of history is similar to the idea that the world is complex and three-dimensional with multiple, intersecting truths. Despite similar concepts like holistic enterprise architecture reinvigorating the value of storytelling and documentation in the workplace,

⁶ Drucker, 2008, HarperCollins, p. 218

⁷ Ibid, p. 221

history is still not considered a valuable discipline. Instead, the wealth-dominant technology industry distorts what would traditionally be considered a Historian into a “Subject Matter Expert” (SME), while Librarians are transfigured into “Systems Architects,” and Archivists morphed into “Risk Analysts” in the name of cybersecurity. While physical historical repositories collect dust, massive digital repositories like Git reproduce both the helpful and harmful aspects of contemporary culture through the digital architectures they choose to sustain.

One radical shift in this development of digital architecture is the recent ability to intentionally incorporate equity as a fundamental value into the digital structures that endure. Drucker calls the kind of society where infrastructure is information-based a “knowledge society,”⁸ or one “of organizations, each dependent on the other and yet each very different in its concepts, views, and values,”⁹ similar to the diverse array of people and cultures that influence any given enterprise today. To Drucker, what would unify such a society is a “universally educated person,” someone who would know and understand all cultures creating a paradox of homogeneity. However, Drucker’s vision of a universally educated person can be achieved simply by equally valuing the diverse opinions, skills, and experiences of each contributor.

A manager does not have to be universally educated themselves to recognize and elevate diverse opinions and approaches. In fact, Dr. Bernard’s cube model does a wonderful job of visually explaining this phenomenon. At its core, the cube is a microcosm of the present, a representation of the three-dimensional world and the various planes and dimensions we inhabit in space. In other words, the cube is a visualization of change over time from a three-dimensional perspective, similar to the discipline of history. History often focuses on a specific subject matter and the intersections of politics, society, and economy that created said subject matter. With the

⁸ Drucker, 2008, HarperCollins, p. 221

⁹ Ibid

cube, much like in life, each component that makes up the cube contributed to its overall health. Although both Drucker and Dr. Bernard approach societal models in different ways, there is the theme of a unifying force, that there is knowledge at the intersections of society, in both texts.

Because people rely on connection to survive and because storytelling is a means of connection, incorporating storytelling into information architecture would allow for a more secure infrastructure. As technology becomes more and more integrated into society and ultimately outgrows what physical architecture is capable of, more and more people will rely on technology to connect with each other in spite of the risk it may bring. Because of this, its important that the stories technology leaves behind are ones of security and equity.

Both *The Essential Drucker* and *An Introduction to Holistic Enterprise Architecture* discuss the power of information at a high level, and they ultimately come to the same conclusion - that there must be “a unifying force”¹⁰ holding a knowledge-based society together as the intangible world cannot be physically separated from the tangible one. While Drucker argues that this unifying force takes the form of a universally educated person, the argument is turned on its head when considering that a three-dimensional, graphic view of society allows for infinite and complex interpretations of that unifying force. While from my perspective, Drucker and Dr. Bernard both hold mostly positive views of information technology and the people who make it, Dyché’s *The New IT* and DeNardis’s *The Internet in Everything* take a more critical approach to the people behind that unifying force.

As Dyché mentions in chapter nine of her book, *Fighting the Talent Wars*, information technology has completely transformed from a localized role to a globalized one. Dyché is of the mind that “as leaders begin considering different genders, races, cultures, and belief systems, they expose both their direct teams and their companies to broader experiences, fresher ideas,

¹⁰ Drucker, 2008, HarperCollins, p. 219

and even newer technologies,”¹¹ allowing for a new environment in which people can craft new ideas and create a better world. In Dyché’s words, “what previously would have been seen as incompatibilities will actually result in more creative teams, driving a higher degree of innovation,”¹² akin to the idea that understanding your place in the world will contribute to not just individual success but global economic growth. Identifying these points of connection can eventually create the platform needed for a more equitable and sustainable world. However, it is exactly these points of connection that Risk Analysts view as potential threats, and as such it is exactly these points of connection that get shut down in the name of security measures. If the result of information security is a lack of communication, the points of connection we rely on to craft innovative and fresh ideas become obsolete, introducing long periods of stagnation into the creation and dissemination of collective knowledge, all in the name of security. It begs the question, what are people so desperate to protect?

In *The Internet in Everything*, DeNardis describes a short timeline of how the internet has transformed from a means to connect with others to a means of control. To explain the phenomenon of today’s digital first society and the impact that a technology-first society has on the global economy, DeNardis takes to the lens of cybersecurity. “The stakes of cybersecurity rise as Internet outages are no longer about losing access to communication and content,”¹³ she claims, “but about losing day-to-day functioning in the real world, from the ability to drive a car to accessing medical care,”¹⁴ as daily infrastructure becomes increasingly entwined with intangible technologies. The connection between the digital and physical world continues to prove its inseparability. As such, technology must be created and sustained with care. There is no

¹¹ Dyché, 2015, McGraw Hill Education, p. 185

¹² Dyché, 2015, McGraw Hill Education, p. 185

¹³ DeNardis, Yale University Press, p. 4

¹⁴ DeNardis, Yale University Press, p. 4

going back to a society without virtual components, and as such, the new virtual components that make up our lives should be imbued with the value of equity, effectively creating security for those even on the margins of society, including technological society, at the foundational level.

Discussion

In order to return to this idea of equity as a part of infrastructure, it is important to revisit the model of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs presented in Dr. Bernard's *An Introduction to Holistic Architecture*. According to Dr. Bernard and many other information professionals, Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs is an excellent metaphor for the idea that people are often self-interested, focused on surviving, and then it is only after people are secure in their survival that they can focus on living a high quality of life in their communities and beyond. While this hierarchy effectively demonstrates that some problems can only be addressed at the root, because it focuses on the individual, it lacks a structure of security. However, because Maslow's view of society was undoubtedly informed by his six-week visit in 1938 to "Siksika — which is the name of the people, their language, and the Blackfoot Reserve,"¹⁵ it is important to consider how his hierarchy compares to Blackfoot society of the time.

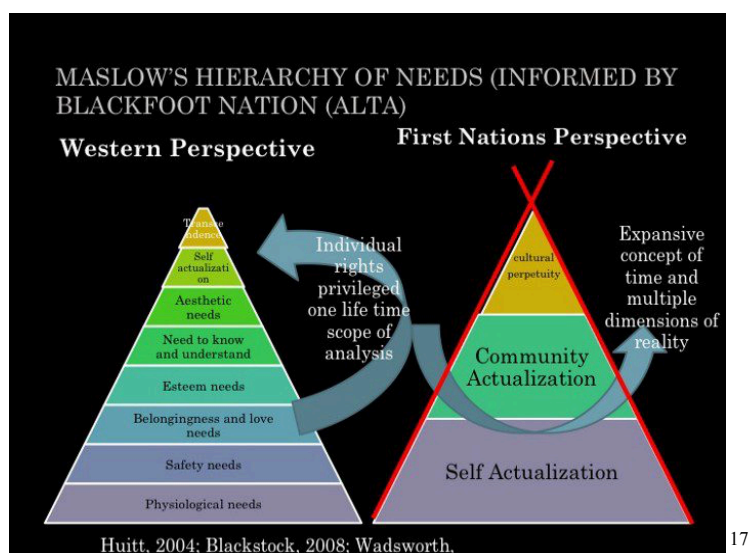
While there is no neat and well-studied diagram from the 1940's to explain Blackfoot culture in the same way Maslow's Hierarchy seems to explain the hyper-individualistic culture of 1940's Western society, there is an article from 2021 that compares the two. In Ravilochan's piece for [resilience.org](https://www.resilience.org), the main difference between the models is made clear:

“Whereas mainstream American narratives focus on the individual, the Blackfoot way of life offers an alternative resulting in a community that leaves no one behind,”¹⁶

¹⁵ <https://www.resilience.org/stories/2021-06-18/the-blackfoot-wisdom-that-inspired-maslows-hierarchy/>

¹⁶ Ibid

or an equitable, secure community. Below is Ravilochan's visual representation of the major differences between the societal models:



In comparison to the Blackfoot model which includes a structure of security through community actualization, it is Maslow's hierarchy, with its lack of foundational equity that has had the most influence on psychologists, sociologists, and technologists. This influence has shaped the stories and realities which have in turn shaped the technological infrastructure of today. As a result, tech as we know it lacks foundational, communal security even as it influences almost every aspect of quotidian life. As technology becomes more and more ubiquitous, we must revisit basic skills like storytelling and strategically craft the stories that will sustain the future, stories of community and security.

Conclusion

In the not-so-distant future, two worlds diverge. There is one world where defensive security measures prevent spaces for innovation as it closes traditional points of connection in the name of control. The other world, a brighter one, incorporates the culture of the people into

¹⁷ <https://www.resilience.org/stories/2021-06-18/the-blackfoot-wisdom-that-inspired-maslows-hierarchy/>

the information that it produces *with intention*, allowing for values like security and equity to be baked into the infrastructure.

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