An Autopoetic Understanding of Information

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Abstract

Scholars offered different definitions of information. Some view information as a *thing*, others see it as a *conduit metaphor* while for some information is a *flow* that can best be understood when seen from a cognitive perspective. There also developed a branch in philosophy, philosophy of information, which among many other things examines the truth-value of information. But, still it is not easy to comprehend what makes something informative and what elements are involved in the making of information. This presentation, by reviewing the main stream theories of information, offers an alternative perspective: an autopoetic understanding of information. Autopoiesis, which presupposes an organization maintaining and reproducing its properties in a systemic way, offers an understanding of how something becomes informative. An autopoetic theory of information first understands what is informative and then systematically defines what information is. Something’s being informative from an autopoietic perspective means to understand the complex process by which we mediate our attention to a given object that has a semiotic presence, and how we cognitively work upon our stock of knowledge with an aim to assign meaning to that very object. Nothing becomes informative out of the blue: everything that informs is an outcome of a process of articulation, something like the *Language Game* concept of Wittgenstein, which refers to the system it belongs to. Like the Language Game, which considers language as a set of tools that we use to construct and assign meaning defined within a particular knowledge system, information is the product of an articulation of a number of micro-concepts in a systemic way that makes a given object meaningful and thus informative. Since the tools, in this case concepts, have a systemic boundary for their operation, the process of assigning meaning is self-referential and system-referenced: one concept reproduces another by reference to the system to which the concepts belong to. Everything that is used as a unit by the system—process, boundaries, and the system itself—is produced by the system. An autopoietic theory of information as proposed in this presentation first understands what is informative and then systematically defines information. Object of perception—visual, auditory, tactile, olfactory, etc—become informative when we attend to them with a specific stock of knowledge and assign meaning to them. Information is an explicit meaning or value assigned to an instance of perceptual data through mediation between perceptual data received by the system and knowledge of the world held by the system. According to an autopoietic theory of information something becomes informative through a triadic relationship between an object, perception, and the system. A perceiver uses concepts from the stock of knowledge in figuring out what the very sign in perception mediates and refers his/her consciousness to. The mediation process takes this specific consciousness along with perceiver’s background knowledge held by his/her system. Autopoietic theory of information actually combines cognitive and semiotic understanding in a systemic view. Cognitive perspective unveils the way perception takes place and how the particular usage works in invoking a meaning, while semiotic aspect helps to understand how the signifier operates. And the whole process of signification is understood as the way system organizes and structures our perception and its outcome. Humans having a literary mind—organized into a common system—are in a state of thoroughness that makes our information acts automatic most of the time. Thoroughness is possible also because cognition works in constant reference to a set of schema that frames the world we perceive and that is how information makes sense to a larger community. back to top