



Organised ignorance

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This special issue explores the role of ignorance in contemporary organisations.¹ In recent years, ignorance has received growing attention in sociology, organisation studies and cultural studies (Gross and McGoey, 2015). Scholars have taken an interest in how corporations invest time and resources in producing and maintaining ignorance (Proctor, 2008). Organisations' ability to marginalise potentially uncomfortable knowledge can be crucial and rich and important work has illuminated how organisations manage ignorance strategically. Studies of ignorance have revealed how ignorance is weaponised as individual and corporate actors gain from the production of ignorance and the concealment of information from the public. While ignorance and knowledge are often thought of as opposing phenomena, research demonstrates how ignorance may be a carefully manufactured and productive asset that helps individuals and organisations to command resources, deny liability and continue with operations that have harmful effects (McGoey, 2012b; Michaels, 2008; Oreskes and Conway, 2011; Proctor and Schiebinger, 2008).

With this special issue we aim to move the field of ignorance studies forward – conceptually, methodologically and empirically – by exploring the work and practices involved in producing and maintaining ignorance. The contributions are characterised by conceptual developments and empirical

¹ The cover depicts the arbuscular mycorrhizal fungi. The authors thank Professor Emeritus David Read for kindly allowing us to use the photo.

studies that go beyond an understanding of ignorance as something driven by strategic intentions and performed by individual or collective actors. With the construct of organised ignorance, we do not treat organisations as unitary strategic entities; instead, organised ignorance references what Justesen and Plesner (in this issue) call pluralistic collective ignorance. This highlights how ignorance is produced and reproduced in daily interactions between multiple social actors and the recognition that they may have differing and ambivalent agendas. As such, ignorance is conceptualised differently when we zoom in on organisational processes and the plurality of actors involved in acts of ignoring and the (re)production of ignorance.

The articles in this special issue explore the constitution, dynamics and functions of diverse forms of ignorance with a special focus on the different kinds of work it takes to produce and sustain ignorance. The contributions investigate the work involved in ignoring or repressing what is known, and the practices of ‘unseeing’ that allow organisational actors to know what not to know (Otto et al., 2019). Such practices of ignoring are entangled with artefacts, affects, infrastructures, dynamics of power and diverse organisational rationalities. Thus, we suggest conceptualising organised ignorance as an emergent result of the entanglement of practices, processes, structures and power. With this construct we are able to ask questions regarding how ignorance emerges and unfolds in organisations – without assuming that organisations are unitary strategic entities.

The organisation of ignorance tends to remain in the background of organisational self-descriptions and may therefore be a challenging phenomenon to study. A set of methodological problems accompany this research, as does the study of absences in general (Frickel, 2014). Ignorance seldom flags itself as such and the obvious answer to the question ‘what do you not know?’ is ‘I do not know’. To go beyond such answers, methodologies are required that make it possible to identify the processes, infrastructures, organisational structures and dynamics of power that allow people and organisations to not know. In this special issue we have therefore devoted a special section reflecting on methodological questions in the study of organised ignorance.

Below, we first review and discuss previous work on ignorance in organisation and management studies and beyond. Thereafter, we offer some reflections on how we can think about organised ignorance. This sets the scene for a presentation of the individual contributions. Finally, we read across the contributions to summarise the offerings of this issue to fields of ignorance and organisation studies.

Ignorance studies

In the concluding remarks following his review of studies of ignorance in organisations, Jalonen (2023) states, ‘the fundamental question remains what exactly is meant by ignorance in organisations’. Indeed, numerous concepts have been offered to unpack ignorance in organisations. Conceptual discussions of ignorance (Croissant, 2014; El Kassar, 2018) have not developed typologies of ignorance per se but of observers’ consciousness of ignorance (such as known unknowns, unknown unknowns, unknown knowns) (Gross, 2007, 2010; Kerwin, 1993; Roberts, 2013). Moreover, studies of ignorance experiment with different conceptualisations. Concepts like nescience (Gross, 2010), negative knowledge (Cetina, 1999: 63ff), non-knowledge (Luhmann, 2022), active ignorance (Medina, 2013), strategic ignorance (McGoey, 2012a) and wilful ignorance (Alvesson et al., 2022; Schaefer, 2019) all consider different aspects of ignorance.

Ignorance is often conceived of as an absence or a lack; however, this does not mean that it is without importance, impact and consequences (Croissant, 2014). In her ‘sociology of nothing’, Scott (2018) notes that ‘nothing is always productive of something’. As nothing, as absence, ignorance may very well have organisational preconditions, functions (Moore and Tumin, 1949) and constitutive effects (Paul and Haddad, 2019). Ignorance – and especially its other side, knowledge – has been associated with selection. In the book *Information, Mechanism and Meaning* MacKay (1969) examines how information is always a form of selection and not merely a transfer in the physical sense. Information includes an observer and the selections made by the observer. Different observers obtain different information depending on the frameworks of meaning that guide their observations. Something is selected as information – the rest remains in the

dark. Knowledge – and thus also ignorance – is a result of complexity and necessary selection processes from this perspective.

Along with selection and ignorance are concepts such as uncertainty (Smithson, 1989) and risk. Gross (2016) suggests that Beck's theory of the risk society should be complemented with a theory of non-knowing. The argument is that 'numerous spheres of action and politics in contemporary societies are conditioned by non-knowing rather than by knowledge' (Beck and Wehling, 2012: 33). From this perspective ignorance is a condition, while the reaction to it is politicised. The politicisation of non-knowing was illustrated in the different reactions to Covid-19. No one knew how the disease would develop and what the adequate reactions would be. This raised the question of how to navigate the ignorance regarding the disease. Ignorance about the disease and its dynamics was an important element in the decision-making (Parviainen et al., 2021).

A number of studies have explored ignorance not only as a condition, but also as socially constructed. Across fields such as economics (Davies and McGoey, 2012), psychology (Hertwig and Engel, 2016), anthropology (High, Kelly and Mair, 2012), environmental studies (Gross, 2010; Kleinman and Suryanarayanan, 2013), sociology of medicine (Duttge, 2015; Heimer, 2012), feminist and race studies (Sullivan and Tuana, 2007; Staunæs and Conrad, 2019) scholars have explored how ignorance is constructed and negotiated. This focus on the social construction of ignorance brings attention to relationships between ignorance and power. Studies demonstrate how ignorance is a resource for those in a position of power (McGoey, 2012b). Knowledge is power, but so is the control of ignorance and to control the line between knowledge and ignorance is clearly a form of power – what McGoey (2019) calls oracular power. Ignorance and self-interest are indeed related. This has triggered studies on the strategic social production and maintenance of ignorance. Ignorance may be related to specific facts and information such as the relationships between smoking and cancer (Proctor, 2008), between antidepressants and suicide (McGoey, 2007) or between fossil fuels and the climate crises (Oreskes and Conway, 2011). But it may also be of a more generic nature. Terms like situated knowledge (Haraway, 1988), standpoint theory (Harding, 2004) and white ignorance (Mills, 2015) emphasise how knowledge – and thus ignorance – is tied to certain

perspectives and categories (gender, race, class etc). In this context, Kleinman and Suryanarayanan (2013) discuss 'epistemic forms', referring to the concepts, methods and interpretational perspectives that shape what is known and thus also what cannot be known.

Attention to how ignorance is (also) socially constructed, strategic and wilful has opened questions about the different and complex manners in which ignorance is produced. Perhaps the most obvious strategy is to hide and suppress knowledge in the form of secrets which make others ignorant. A growing number of studies explore processes of hiding and secrecy in organisations (Alvesson et al., 2022; Bakken and Wiik, 2018; Costas and Grey, 2014; Essén et al., 2022; McGoey, 2012a, 2012b, 2019; Knudsen, 2011; Knudsen and Kishik, 2022; Roberts, 2013; Schaefer, 2019). Scholars analyse how ignorance can be produced by casting doubt on certain knowledge (Michaels, 2008; Oreskes and Conway, 2011), suppressing knowledge (McGoey, 2019), organisational compartmentalisation and decoupling (Heimer, 2012; Schaefer, 2019) and an overabundance of data (Schwarzkopf, 2020). Studies also investigate how actors themselves can strive to be ignorant – to avoid liability (Brice et al., 2020; Luhmann, 2022) or to avoid uncomfortable (Rayner, 2012), awkward (Heimer, 2012), potentially destructive (Goffman, 1990) or disconfirming (Schaefer, 2019) knowledge. Terms like 'unseeing' (Otto et al., 2019) and forms of inattentiveness (Knudsen, 2011) indicate the ways in which actors ignore information that they do not want (Dedieu et al., 2015). Relatedly, Essén et al. (2022) study how self-inflicted ignorance is made possible by 'ignoring rationales' understood as actors' explanations and justifications of why they ignore data which they have themselves produced. Ignorance can be used as means to preserve power but may also have positive functions as it can guard against prejudices or unwanted knowledge regarding medical issues (Hoeyer et al., 2015; Wehling, 2015).

While most of the existing literature tends to focus on strategic ignorance, recent work moves beyond assuming that ignorance is always intentional (Frickel and Edwards, 2014). Paul, Vanderslott and Gross (2022) broaden the perspective under the title 'institutional ignorance', conceiving of ignorance as an integral aspect of institutions and institutional operations. Recognising the significance of this institutional perspective, with this issue,

we seek to move the concept of ignorance beyond actor-based terms. We endeavour to explore ignorance as an organisational phenomenon – not (only) as intentional, strategic, deliberate or wilful but as a distributed, collective, enacted and emergent phenomenon. Thus, we offer the concept of organised ignorance in addition to a range of contributions that all empirically investigate how ignorance becomes possible through different forms of organising.

Contributions

This special issue includes six articles exploring organised ignorance, three notes discussing the methodological challenges of studying ignorance and one book review.

Based on a study of a digitalisation flagship project that failed to fulfil its promises of efficiency gains and improved services, Ursula Plesner and Lise Justesen offer the term ‘pluralistic collective ignorance’. This construct references ignorance in the form of collective denying, as almost all actors contribute to it, but it is also plural as the members do not necessarily agree, share norms or act in consistent ways. Multiple and diverse motivations and strategies are involved in the collective denial of the failing digitalisation project. The article investigates the different ways human and non-human actors maintain ignorance about the failing project. A core concept is denial which involves perception but also a refusal to accept the potential implications of this perception. Tech optimism and tech determinism are among the factors that enable the denials. The article demonstrates how organised ignorance may be the emergent result of different actors with different purposes, tasks and ways of denying.

The second article is Kate Kenny’s study of whistleblowing as a form of counter-ignorance practice. Like the other contributions to this issue, Kenny’s study demonstrates the ways in which ignorance rests on processes of organising and foreground questions of power and the political in relationship to ignorance. Drawing on the work of Judith Butler, the paper develops a framework of censorship that is appropriate for investigating how some speech acts are deemed impossible, un-hearable and non-sensical with

the concomitant dismissal and exclusion of the speaker. By examining how national security and intelligence organisations react to whistleblowers, the article demonstrates how ignorance depends on maintaining and reinforcing an organisational and institutional matrix of control that creates an implicit, normative ‘domain of the sayable’. Kenny argues that whether and how whistleblowers are listened to can depend on the framing of their subjectivities by others with whom they interact. Thus, she reveals how ignorance is maintained via the organisation of the authority to influence what can be known and what must not be acknowledged; what can be said and what is successfully upheld as un-sayable. Ignorance is thus maintained via the censorship of certain speech acts and the vilification of those who make them.

Betina Riis Asplin examines how what she calls ‘unintended ignorance’ can arise when patients are involved in redesigning health services. In the Norwegian health service, there has been a desire for patients to be more involved when it comes to designing tomorrow’s health service – so-called user participation. The research presents an ethnographic study based on the actor–network theory (ANT), emphasising translation processes. In ANT, knowledge is a consequence of a wide range of material resources, actors and networks that involve heterogeneous bits and pieces; test tubes, reagents, organisms, skilled hands, scanning electron microscopes, radiation monitors, other scientists, computer terminals and other elements. Riis Asplin’s study uses the concept of translation from ANT to illustrate how ignorance emerges when the desire for a patient-centred project was translated into a specific concept of ‘the missing patient voice’, in which actors were enrolled and unintentionally contributed to the actual patients’ voices being ignored. This is how ‘labels’ and/or other non-human actors can help to create ignorance. A paradoxical effect is thus established in which the patient-centred care project translated into the label of ‘missing patient voice’, which gradually enrolled other actors and which, paradoxically, resulted in ignoring patients’ voices.

Holger Højlund and Thorben Simonsen show how a psychiatric hospital built of glass would generally be thought to ensure a space that is open and transparent for both patients and staff; however, the use of glass walls creates conditions in which patients and care providers place ‘self-imposed

restrictions' on their actions and observations. Ignorance is not only an objective occurrence but a relational concept. The study shows how patients react as ignorant individuals when they observe staff communicating but cannot hear what they are saying when they are behind glass walls of the nursing stations. In such a circumstance, an interaction can easily be created that is the opposite of what was intended by the transparent glass walls. Højlund and Simonsen draw on the philosopher Peter Sloterdijk's (2016) concepts of spheres and social spaces. Spheres are arranged in such a way that they create fragile compromises between the parties in an interaction when they separate an inside and an outside between them. Spheres require attention and supervision when people have to engage with one another, as material surroundings then become important. In Højlund and Simonsen's contribution, we gain insight into how a psychiatric hospital can be thought of as a sphere of sociality, where the intention is to maintain co-sociality, but where spatial and material conditions structure the way people interact and how the parties see and do not see each other. This results in unintended consequences from an architecture that was meant to contribute to openness and transparency. In this way 'zones of ignorance' are created. The empathetic intentions regarding openness and visibility shaped into the architecture are not realised but replaced with new forms of boundaries.

Theresa Steffestun and Walter Ötsch highlight processes of economisation in modern societies, particularly how economisation can be an act of epistemic imperialism which is understood as an act of subsuming the diversity of reality under one singular concept – the market. Viewed from the organisational ignorance perspective, epistemic imperialism (based on a pure market interpretation of the economy) knows no boundaries, while complementary disqualifying knowledge of those boundaries as illegitimate. The dichotomy of legitimate and illegitimate knowledge controls and organises the landscape of knowledge and ignorance in societies. The article discusses and challenges economist Friedrich A. Hayek's concept of the market as 'efficient' in terms of information, which is crucial when it comes to what is interpreted as knowledge. To Hayek knowledge is information about market prices and prices are like languages, and buyers respond to prices in rational ways. As with language, prices are the building blocks from which people form mutual expectations of the market. The efficient market

hypothesis claims that financial markets are efficient because prices always reflect all available information. Hayek's approach in which economic behaviour is an unconscious reaction to a given set of market rules implies that the problem of human ignorance has its solution in the market. Drawing on a wider perspective of analysing the economic system, the article challenges the concept of economisation and 'market-based' knowledge.

Drawing on Deleuze's interpretation of the Nietzschean concept of a 'will to ignorance' Line Kirkegaard, Anders R. Kristensen and Tomas S. Lauridsen analyse how ignorance has organising effects as it fosters fantasies. The authors do not treat ignorance as strategic or intentional but as a productive force that forms subjects and objects of ignorance. The paper presents a fascinating case based on a public administration artificial intelligence (AI) project. An algorithm for decision support forms an object of ignorance as the management team in charge of the project does not know how the algorithm works. The algorithm originally targeted case workers working with the unemployed but ignorance about the algorithm triggers a process in which a general question about the reasons for unemployment is raised. Ignorance (now about the reasons for unemployment) leads to the idea that ongoing unnecessary unemployment is due to a lack of creativity, professionalism and knowledge among employees and a lack of initiative among the unemployed. A line of wishful fantasies regarding the algorithm follows. In these fantasies the unemployed are highly motivated, able to read and write unhindered in Danish and able to use this kind of app. A new caseworker is also imagined who is able to identify opportunities that are invisible to the unemployed and is an expert in handling tough conversations and motivating people to lose weight if relevant. Obvious objections against the fantasies are ignored and the fantasies proliferate on the ground of ignorance. The original ignorance about the algorithm thus instigated a process in which both the algorithm, case workers and unemployed were re-interpreted and re-imagined. The article demonstrates how fantasies can compensate for the empty space left by ignorance.

Elise Lobedez's note indicates the start of the methodological section. It reflects on the methodological challenges she faced as an ethnographer navigating organisational secrecy in the context of an ethnographic study of the French yellow vest movement. In this politically charged context of high

risk activism, the researcher regularly weighed up the pros and cons of knowing versus not knowing to evaluate the potential consequences for her research trajectory, position on the field and the production of the ethnographic accounts as well as in relationship to her personal life and safety. As the activists that Lobedez studied shared a common motto: ‘You can’t report to the police or leak information you don’t know’, the ethnographic work became an oscillation between becoming a knowledgeable agent and accepting the state of remaining in the dark. Thus, the reflective note offers a mapping of the dilemmas of studying communities in which the distribution of ignorance has a key role as an immune mechanism against legal sanctions and prosecutions.

Christian Wåhlin-Jacobsen and Elisabeth Naima Mikkelsen ask how we can examine that which is ignored and thus is not directly observable. Their answer draws on a discursive psychological perspective and suggests combining a psychodynamic perspective with conversation analysis. While the psychodynamic perspective is associated with the study of unconscious processes, conversation analysis is strictly focused on the observable. The authors suggest that the unconscious may become manifest in interactions in the form of irrational or unreasonable practices and contradictions which work as defences against unconscious emotions. Traces of defence mechanisms are revealed through conversation analysis of interactions. The authors demonstrate how ignoring practices (conceptualised as ‘blindness’ in psychodynamics) can be observed by means of an exemplary and detailed analysis of an interactional sequence between a nurse at an emergency call centre and a man calling for help. The analysis shows how unconscious processes can promote ignoring, and how this ignoring can be examined by means of conversation analyses.

Finally, in their note, Meghan Van Portfliet and Mahaut Fanchini suggest a methodological strategy for studying ignorance by focusing on the role of objects in producing or maintaining ignorance. Rereading Susan Leigh Star’s (1989) work on boundary objects, they explore how attention to objects that travel between parties can be sites of ignorance. Star (1989: 46) famously defines a boundary object as an object which is plastic enough to adapt to local needs and constraints of the several parties employing them, yet robust enough to maintain a common identity across sites. While this concept is

often used in research regarding how knowledge and knowledge practices are shared and translated, Van Portfliet and Fanchini propose that boundary objects are sites where knowledge and ignorance co-exist, as meanings are both present and absent for those involved. As such, boundary objects have an influence in the production and maintenance of ignorance as well as making collective practices of ignoring possible. This assertion makes it possible to develop a methodology for observing practices of ignoring that are often hidden from the ethnographer's view.

The special issue also includes a book review. In 'Oracles, ignorance and expertise: The struggle over what not to know', Philipp Arnold reviews *The Unknowers: How Strategic Ignorance Rules the World* (McGoey, 2019). The book is a philosophical and sociological investigation of strategic ignorance. It approaches ignorance not in contrast to knowledge or interest, but as an arena of a social power struggle. Arnold reviews the book and discusses its aspirations to offer at once a political intervention and a sociological analysis.

Key learning points and new agendas

Across the contributions of this issue, a set of insights emerges that advances our understanding of organised ignorance. While it is clear that many aspects of this construct remain to be explored, these contributions expand our understanding of what characterises organised ignorance.

Ignorance is enacted. Albeit in diverging manners, all the contributions in this issue theorise and examine ignorance as a practice rather than as a cognitive phenomenon in which knowledge may be available but does not make a difference as people act as if they are ignorant. Organised ignorance may thus be understood as enactment rather than a question of cognition. What is enacted is the selection of knowledge and ignorance. Organised ignorance can be understood as both selective structures ordering what people should know and not know *and* as the enactment of these selections in specific situations.

Ignorance is enabling. The contributions document how ignorance can enable the continuation of certain practices despite the fact that knowledge that

might challenge or threaten this practice could be selected. The contributions clearly demonstrate how this practice has functions and functions that often benefit the continuation of the existing practice and organisational projects – as demonstrated by the analyses of Kenny (this issue) and Justesen and Plesner (this issue).

Ignorance is productive. It *does* something; it holds agency. Kirkegaard, Kristensen and Lauridsen (this issue) and Højlund and Simonsen (this issue) show how the lack of knowledge triggers different kinds of activities and fantasies. Ignorance may instantiate a replacement logic as the lack of knowledge is replaced by guesses and fantasies.

Ignorance is relational. As illustrated in Højlund and Simonsen's article ignorance is not only an objective occurrence but a relational concept (for instance between patients and staff and material structures). To know something means to have something in an attention-observing horizon. In this horizon a recognition-object is constituted as an 'epistemic object' without being able to articulate the object with complete certainty. The completeness of knowledge is replaced by a search for relevant knowledge. Is our current knowledge regarding the impact of material structures to our lives all too limited? Should we always consider transparency as advantageous? Here, it is not calculation and justification, but judgement and responsibility that are emphasised.

Ignorance can be socially constructed. Several of the contributions enhance the understanding of ignorance as a collective rather than solely individual accomplishment (e.g. Højlund and Simonsen, this issue; Kenny, this issue; Plesner and Justesen, this issue). Ignorance emerges via communities. We have experienced how communities of ignorance are supported by organisational arrangements (in the form of IT-systems, decision making procedure and architectural arrangements). The organisation is geared in ways which make it possible to remain ignorant, e.g. about things that do not work (Plesner and Justesen, this issue). This also means that ignorance is not necessarily driven by clear intentions. Organisational members may also be ignorant about the reasons for their ignorance and denial, as demonstrated in the contribution by Wåhlin-Jacobsen and Mikkelsen (this

issue), in which the actors are not conscious about the drivers of their own acts of denial.

Ignorance is non-human. Ignorance involves human collaboration as well as non-human actors such as glass walls (Højlund and Simonsen, this issue), contracts (Van Portfliet and Fanchini, this issue) and apps (Plesner and Justesen, this issue). Several contributions explore the role of materiality in supporting, mediating and or enabling ignorance. Rather than computer supported decision systems, we get computer supported ignorance systems and ignorance-supported computer systems. Information systems that could produce more information and knowledge co-produce ignorance but also presuppose ignorance.

In summary, the contributions move beyond the understanding of ignorance as a cognitive and/or individual phenomenon and expand our understanding of what we have termed organised ignorance. The analyses contribute to our understanding of organised ignorance as well as our understanding of the politics of organising. If the political is the constitutive moment of the social (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985) then ignorance is definitely political. Ignorance involves deciding what can be talked about and what cannot be talked about; what should be remembered or forgotten; known or not known; seen or unseen.

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