

THE GRAMMAR OF THE HYPE ...

10 pages - from the book by Johan Cronehed

SUMMARY IN ENGLISH /// SHORT VERSION

Introduction

My thesis does not deal specifically with the so-called information society as such but focuses rather on a particular “hype” and the relationship of all that it might have involved as a force capable of influencing society at large. What is implied here, then, is a technology – digital information technology - IT - that was generally introduced in the years immediately before and at the turn of the millennium. My thesis could also be applied, I think, to other situations of a similar kind that, from a social point of view, might be characterized as hypes or “periods of irrational exuberance”, but I consider, nevertheless, that what is usually referred to as “IT within information society” is an excellent illustration of such phenomena for contemporary times.

Consequently, the concrete case discussed here should be understood as an ethnographically based example of what the so-called IT hype meant from different mythological perspectives. The thesis considers the experience and significance of working with digital information technology with regard to social interaction at various workplaces – also in terms of those possibilities for symbolic interpretation that might have occurred. Furthermore, the thesis aims at discerning what different aspects of the IT phenomenon that were symbolized within our society and the possible

significance of this for some of its users during the principal phase of “irrational exuberance” – the years immediately before and at the turn of the millennium.

The so-called IT hype as the focus of my thesis

I shall now present a preliminary and concise definition of the hype considered as a social phenomena where it may be compared to a state of euphoria, a kick, for a large number of social actors – a state quite beyond the ordinary that also harbours clear visionary qualities. Hypes bring about dreams and hopes for the future that may be associated with specific sequences of events, “what actually goes on within society”, and could thus furnish a kind of developmental “overdrive” to certain tendencies of similar historical specificity. Hypes may often arise in response to national, international or global expectancies and/or guide lines connected with different religious and political ideologies or, as in the case investigated here, when a new technology is introduced – IT – but it could also emerge, I argue, quite spontaneously on a popular basis.

Hypes may harbour various “-isms”, all the way from nationalism to internationalism, traditionalism to modernism, etc. Combinations of ideology and technology with particular social conditions are, of course, are always a possibility to reckon with, precisely as market forces, PR and manipulative commercial strategies underpinned the “euphoric tendencies” of the IT hype. Even so, I claim that a critical evaluation of any hype can only be fully accomplished when these tendencies have subsided and become less prominent.

My preliminary definition of the “hype phenomenon” is now completed. However, I return to the issue in the final chapter of my thesis. Hence, when summarizing my thesis

below, it is first of all a question of examining the IT hype from the perspective of social anthropology as based on its mythological properties.

IT between myth and reality

Another way of expressing the “point” of this heading is to say that myths often form part of the understanding that different social actors may have of reality and that it frequently is difficult to discern their individual elements when they are communicated by means of narratives that flourish within society. An important aspect with regard to digital information technology is that it consists of “ones and zeros” contained within swiftly transmittable signals that make possible various digitally regulated functions in everyday life. Another crucial aspect is the particular context within which information technology operates and where it constitutes a concrete force capable of influencing a number of everyday activities – practically, socially and mentally.

Such is the situation, I argue, when *IT, its present and potential future utilization, the different ways of comprehending the influence of digital information technology in everyday life* become the principal issues of various fairs, exhibitions, presentations, political announcements and analyses, that is, different kinds of events and statements focusing on IT.

I am quite conscious that my previous argument might be considered oversimplified. Of course, these events and statements are the creation of different actors who participate in a variety of social fields involving relations, ideas and intentions that may often be quite well-defined and well-organized. My point is the following: the IT hype, when it happened, was an occurrence in our society that was already

“on its way”; it had and still has a real potential in terms of its properties and functions that are as yet not realized, but may be so in the future. These properties and functions are handled more or less consciously by different actors in our society in accordance with the following principle: some people are true believers but not everybody and neither belief nor doubt is a permanent social condition from a perspective laying stress on historical continuity. In other words, the “parameter” linked to the mythological character of IT society is how involved the social actors are in its cosmology when it comes to interpreting, comprehending and visualizing information technology. It is, in other words, not a hype for all actors in society even during such times of irrational exuberance, but it still exists as a kind of resource when on its way. **/// from pages 313 to 315 in the book ///**

In the thesis, the phase of the IT hype is illustrated through a guided tour of an IT fair in Karlskrona in November 1999 and some exhibitions focusing on technology and IT in the years 1999 and 2000. Furthermore, I give an account of lectures and presentations from the SNS conference – SNS or *Studieförbundet för Näringsliv och Samhälle* is a Swedish organization for promoting entrepreneurship in society - held in Karlskrona in September 2000.

The above-mentioned events also communicated ideas about IT as a social phenomenon and it is certain of these ideas that I discuss in my thesis – ideas of a mythological, imaginary character, as they often provided an extension of the thoughts concerning technological development of that time. **/// from pages 315 to 344 in the book ///** The picture now emerges of a work environment which is partly traditional, but also new in so far as it creates an “overdrive”

with regard to decentralized functions and processes of individualization at particular workplaces. For my informants, this occurs in connection with competition that is often fierce and a much increasing working pace. Here, the importance of keeping up with the rapid development of digital information technology should also be added. Next, to conclude the summary of my thesis, I shall present an interpretation of the hype in “cultural” terms.

Starting-point no. 1 for a hype is ...

... that its message is accessible to as many people as possible. It becomes a question, then, primarily of coming into contact with the “world of ideas” that it represents, which implies that a majority of people will not immediately be involved in using it in a practical sense – as when, for example, a new technology is introduced. The same analytical starting-point may also be valid for an ideology, a religious or political message and those activities which they entail. Deciding for or against the message of a particular hype, that is, estimating its content or potential also means to come into contact with it.

On these grounds, it becomes possible to determine how IT, the personal computer and the Internet were introduced in contemporary society and, in a short span of time, went through a series of phases: *introduction*, *hype* and as *everyday instrument*.

Digital information society – the question of whether to fit in or not

A person may sometimes create an image of himself or herself in order to examine how he or she fits into a particular type of society. This person is in a position, then, to reflect about what the result would be if he or she was trying to

adapt and acquire those skills required to gain entrance to the dominant social model. In our case, the dominant model is the heavy investment in IT, a new and rather untested technology on a larger scale, in the years immediately before and at the turn of the millennium. If such a “projection” would correspond to the individual’s concrete situation in life and he or she fits in, the individual in question is, no doubt, welcome to participate in the dominant social model – in a society, for example, that for a period of time is focusing very heavily on the handling of digital information technology.

Starting-point no. 2 for a hype is ...

... that it would give some leeway for various expectations before it has “landed” and obtained a more stable form. It may then provide nourishment for hopes and dreams, *but* also for their opposites as it, in creating certain expectations, makes other kinds of reaction impossible. For a lot of people in society, however, a hype is distinguished by its ability to inspire hopes for something new, better and different.

The IT hype provided a “visionary overdrive” to a number of activities that already had a permanent form and sometimes even existed in a state of stagnation – at least in terms of their organizational handling – the political project, parts of our system of public education, transports and other services connected to infrastructure.

The foregoing type of scenario may give rise to conscious as well as unconscious strategies among social actors and when a hype would seem to be radiating with success, it attracts many people who are only too willing to bask in its light. This state of affairs, however, could quite suddenly turn into its opposite as radiation diminishes.

There is no ambivalence in the investment in something new

The hype forms part of a process where members of society, by investing in something new and often innovative, are trying to get rid of that “negative energy” which has been gathering within their world of ideas and on the emotional plane. From this perspective, a hype also becomes a phenomenon that, for a time, may unload society of such negative energy and ambivalence.

If the hype gives rise to social movements, it is only because of those expectations that are contained within its own peculiar character. A hype may, therefore, provide nourishment for a number of existing social movements, as the hopes and dreams of many people - especially in the initial phase of a hype - become associated with the implementation of a new technology, a new instrument or with the practising of a specific ideology. Consequently, on the psychological plane, there is a broad register of expectations contained within a hype. Both rightwing and leftwing groups, technocrats and humanists may be nourished - even if only selectively so - by that expectation of continued nourishment characteristic of a hype. This, however, should not be understood as if nothing has happened as the “euphoria” of the hype begins to fade away.

Starting-point no. 3 of a hype is ...

... that something has actually happened as the attraction of the hype diminishes or would sometimes collapse because of its own preposterousness as to fulfilling everybody's expectations - not all people will be “winners” when things are changing and neither, of course, will all be “losers”.

A hype always entails a “output” that is different from its “input”. The world or life in general will always look and function a bit differently after a hype has occurred as compared to what went on before. Hypes based on ideological, political as well as technological reorganizations may after the historical event - in hindsight – be evaluated either as successes or a failures, even as a phenomenon falling somewhere in between.

Our present success on technological grounds, giving us the opportunities of mass communication in real time and on an individual basis, independent of the great geographical distances that could separate people, is a material fact. In addition, however, there is the possibility of being transported rapidly over long distances only to have some hasty meeting, while simultaneously, the implementation of digital technology often acts to eliminate close and personal encounters of people in everyday life. This contemporary technological “success” may in social terms easily be considered a failure from a perspective based on a less intensive and more “deep-going” and “collectively reflective” form of communication.

However, sometimes a past failure could turn into a future success, and the combinatory possibilities of judging whether we are dealing here with a technological success or social failure are, of course, almost without limits.

From construction to reconstruction and that something is also happening

It is possible to conceive of a process consisting of *the concrete implementation, the actual sequence of events and the retelling* where the “accumulative” effect is to be found primarily in the “final stage” of retelling. This “phase”

amounts, in our case, to a retelling of those possibilities intrinsic to information technology that will become available to many members of contemporary society. However, the three italicized concepts mentioned above should not be understood as representing a series of chronologically fixed stages, but as placed upon an imaginary peg-top or spiral the movement of which is accelerating. When the speed has become sufficiently high, the various elements of the units begin to mingle. And with a further quickening of the rotation, the concrete meanings and contents of the previously distinct units become imperceptible in relation to one another like what happens in the case of the contours of a colour-painted peg-top.

What remains, then, is the “image” of that which is, or probably is, technologically possible to realize. Thus, it is a process of creating ideas and images, which, in its mental projection, forms an integral part of information technology as well as other types of technology that are undergoing development.

It is important to emphasize, however, that processes of change – also those carried along by means of a hype - are not a “zero-sum game” consisting merely of winners *or* losers. Naturally, it is more complex than that, and in processes of change that are based, for example, on technology and/or ideology you may always accomplish something, but will simultaneously lose something too. In working life and in leisure time where nowadays, for instance, a high degree of rationality and planning is introduced, what is frequently lost is the unplanned and irrational. With processes of individualization in working life, you have often to give up any collective co-operation.

Some final words

Perhaps, the so-called IT revolution may only become “truly revolutionary” when digital information technology is capable of solving the paradox that consists in combining increasing efficiency with a lowering of the pace in society, a solution that, in turn, would correspond more closely to the intrinsic resources of humans both to handle speed and diversity.

Of course, trends towards increasing speed and diversity are a more constant factor in our present society, if seen over time, than the contemporary and large-scale introduction of IT – in working life and leisure time. Yet, it seems reasonable to argue that digital information technology is responsible for creating a particular form of speed and diversity, which, in turn, still contributes to defining what is “hard work” in the Western world. From having been primarily something very demanding physically, contemporary working conditions are much akin to a situation of “over-stimulation” within the sphere of creating communication. Probably, the conflict-ridden scenario discussed above does not constitute any major problem from a time perspective including several generations, since people who grow up with an already existing technology will usually develop a quite natural relationship to it. Here, we may speak of a harmony between orientation and the implementation of a technology, that is, in the relationship between people and instrument – IT – that is as constant with regard to time as humankind itself considered as a species occupied with building society.

In contemporary society and in a situation oriented towards mass production *and* “individual design” with a relatively short life-span, the decision making that would also

make possible a slowing down of speed is for the moment entirely up to ourselves ... while waiting for the next hype and the next

Most likely, even a hype may change its character as based on the technological means available. The suggestion could thus be made that IT has itself also been a force influencing the IT hype as well as other upcoming hypes on the premise that digital information technology is associated with diversity, large-scale organization and very fast communication – not least in global terms. On the same grounds, it might be said that, as a social phenomenon in so far as its global extension, large scale and the swiftness in its “rise and fall” are concerned, the hype was probably influenced by IT– all this while waiting for the next hype and the next, and those transformational processes of which a hype, nevertheless, would form an integral part