
Summary



We live in a time when digital information and communication technologies are spreading and contributing to new cultural formations and processes. These are naturally interesting to study, but within research about “the new information society” there are often difficulties in perceiving the familiar as well as a naivety toward it. The emphasis lies on the unique possibilities of the new technologies. Within the near future our ability to communicate is expected to intensify and multiply — for better or for worse.

It is obvious that the digital technology gives people new possibilities for information and for means of expression. However, faced with this anticipated revolution, it may also be useful to stop and think for a moment. People have always communicated with each other and all previous societies could therefore also be called information societies. Every societal community has its specific need for communication, and creates from this its own media tools. So what, then, is new? What qualities does “the new information society” hold, that the previous ones didn’t?

With these comparative questions as the basis, perhaps one can begin to see the familiar. An important ethnological contribution to IT research is to shape a larger historical consciousness (and reflection) about the ways in which new information technology and new media change a society and how this change is associated with both expectations and misgivings.

For ethnologists the IT-field entails new challenges — theoretically as well as methodologically. Just as there is a need for ethnological and cultural science perspectives within the debate, it is obvious that studies in a field as expansive as this could radically redefine the conceptual apparatus of cultural theory.

Much of the current IT research is to be found on a discursive level. With broad strokes of the brush a picture is painted of the developing information society and the effects it will have on our future living conditions. These visions of the future are characterized — as prognoses usually are — more by hopes than by definitive truths. The only thing we really know about the IT society is that it will not turn out the way we predict it will for the simple reason that it first has to be *done* — with all what that entails — before one can say it has been realized. “The new information society” is still in the making, and in this process the predictions about this society are certainly not insignificant. But word must be set against deed and deed against word, and it may be here that the theoretical challenge lies. In this issue of *Kulturella Perspektiv* therefore, six different writers present articles that can be seen as paths into the research field that arises in connection with IT.

First, in *The Century of the Telepaths*, Magnus Bergquist analyzes those visions that exist behind the emergence of a modern information technology. He is of the opinion that a kind of communicative utopia can be discerned behind the development during the 20th century of telecommunications. Using one of August Strindberg’s plays as a take-off, he addresses the dream of being able to communicate telepathically and couples these thoughts to how one with the help of technology continuously tries to expand and go beyond the limits for human communicative capabilities. With these utopian visions, however, come the fear of exceeding mankind’s natural limitations. The concept of possible telepathic communication will thereby stand in tense relation to the communication techno-

logies it has created. An important theme in this article is thus how technological visions relate to the technology that is actually realized.

In *A Longing Beyond the Machine*, Per-Markku Ristilampi discusses a striving toward total sensory experiences and an unlimited interaction which he suggests characterizes the information technology of today. Also the relationship between ideas of how technology ought to be and what is practically feasible is addressed. What does it entail, for example, when a longing for "seamless flow" in the interaction with technology is contrasted to the practical use of a technology experienced as too slow or complicated? The starting point for Ristilampi's discussion is an artistic experimenting with new technology and new possibilities for communication with the aim of regaining closeness and tactility in a postmodern society.

Johan Fornäs' contribution, *Digitalized Weaves of Meaning*, develops thoughts about the meaning of play in establishing new communicative situations, as well as putting IT technology into a larger medial context. Fornäs points to how culture-theoretical tools can enrich the understanding of digital communications media, but also to how the metaphors around IT can help re-illustrate and further develop the cultural theories. His own empirical starting point is a current study of karaoke song — a situation where one for a moment can leave one's everyday self and, before an audience, step into a virtual artist's role.

In Robert Willim's contribution *Back to the Future*, an area is presented which was perhaps one of the first to use computerbased technology

and to experiment with new forms of expression, namely music. He focuses on electronic pop and rock music and describes how these music forms have changed in step with the computer technology development. Willim shows how unpredictably the electronic music has adjusted to the technology, and how the technological development has partly been forced to give in to the wilfulness of musicians. Important components of his study are also how trend movements and the dynamics of a consumer society stand in relation to the development of technology.

Gunnel Andersdotter works as an ethnologist and teacher at a department for computer science, and she is also doing research on IT. She sketches a portrait of a folkloristic character, *The Computer Nerd*, in the most boyish of media worlds.

In the sixth contribution "Please Hold" — *Telephone Operators as Cogs in a Machinery*, we are transported back to the beginning of the century. Göran Sjögård works with a project in Lund in which he describes the construction of the communications system which today's IT technology emerged from. In a much more radical way than IT, the telephone has changed everyday life in the 20th century. But the telegraph agency struggled with the problem of developing a smoothly running system without access to automated technology. The solution was a female work force which was to be trained as impersonal cogs in a large machinery and at the same time represent a gentle spirit of service.

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