Is it The Soul of a New/Lost Machine?

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ABSTRACT

This paper is a throwback to The Soul of a New Machine by Tracy Kidder (Kidder, 1981b). Bruno Latour (1987), upon examining Tracy Kidder's story, observes that the heroic tale of engineers who worked on Eagle, a 32-bit minicomputer, was actually inspired by a machine! Over the years, however, this Latourian viewpoint seems to have been ignored. This paper thus examines how Kidder's story was received over the past three decades by the academic and non-academic communities. It exposes how various reviews of the story reinforce one's assumptions about how one approaches narratives about technology. A total of 228 reviews/analyses/commentaries about the story were analysed in a qualitative undertaking that also led the enquiry into a detailed analyses of the story's historico-cultural agency. The findings indicate that non-academic reviews focused largely on heroism, whereas in the academy, the story was approached in light of the prevailing academic discourses in management theory per any given decade of the book's journey; the story then became The Soul of a Lost Machine!

KEYWORDS

INTRODUCTION

The relationship between humans and technology has long been a thing of interest to philosophy and the humanities. This interest not only remains in the abstract but also finds its existential outworking in society. In the academy, we continue to struggle with our conceptualisation of technology and its role in the social; this is evident in the ever increasing debates surrounding technological determinism (Marx & Smith, 1994), the social shaping of technology (MacKenzie & Wajcman, 1999), the social construction of technology (Pinch & Bijker, 1987) and so on. While we grapple with these concepts, we also observe certain belief states about individuals who deploy technology. I define a belief state as a momentary (non)acceptance of a 'truth' state of events until a counterfactual position opens up a new way of thinking about that same 'truth' state. One example of this phenomenon can be found in the portrayal of Tracy Kidder's *The Soul of a New Machine*. That is, how have society, academia, and reviewers-journalists-subject matter 'experts'-public intellectuals-commentators (who make up the punditocracy) shaped an understanding of Kidder's 1981 Pulitzer award-winning story?

In this paper, an analysis of academic reviews, non-academic reviews and newspaper commentaries about Tracy Kidder's *The Soul of a New Machine* over the past three decades (that is, from 1981 to 2013), is made. The aim is not to quantitatively analyse what was said over the period, but to qualitatively examine how the story was received in both academic and non-academic circles, as well as the discursive resources that are drawn upon in light of the prevailing cultural and academic ideas of the 1980s. A two-fold mission is thus taken for this study: First, to examine the cultural reception of the story from the 1980s into the millennium. Second, to assess the academic treatment of the story vis-à-vis a Latourian approach that it was not so much about the human engineers in the story as it was the machine.

HOMO SAPIENS AND HOMO FABULANS

Humans 'are born, bred, live and die within a great sea of stories' (Szabo, 2013, p. 6) and this fundamental human need demands that they assess, first, what stories they feed on, and second, how they feed on them. This is because narratives intricately weave our *weltanschauung* which then forms basis for individual and collective action. Schiffrin, De Fina, & Nylund (2010) for instance argue that 'narratives are fundamental to our lives. We dream, plan, complain, endorse, entertain, teach, learn, and reminisce by telling stories. They provide hopes, enhance or mitigate disappointments, challenge or support moral order, and test out theories of the world at both personal and communal levels' (p.1). Additionally, it is important an examination is made of how stories are related to by *Homo sapiens* because their very nature as social animals make stories part of the thread that holds their communities together and in some cases, gives them a social identity. On the flip side, individualism suggests that 'basic narratives', as Czarniawska (1998) argues, 'can carry a load of ambiguity and therefore leave openings for negotiation of meaning' (Czarniawska, 1998, p. 3), the advantage being a weakening of any hegemony of the narrative (Boje, 2001) where a one-voiced omniscient narrator is behind every line.

Nonetheless, because humans are also *Homo fabulans* – makers and tellers of stories – a challenge to their understanding of narratives as they make and (re)tell is created. First, in making a story, the *Homo fabulans* risks neglecting some hidden aspects of the narrative. Ricoeur's argument here is instructive: 'A story describes a sequence of actions and experiences done or undergone by a certain number of people, whether real or imaginary. These people are presented either in situations that change or as reacting to such change. In turn, these changes reveal hidden aspects of the situation and the people involved, and engender a new predicament which calls for thought, action, or both' (Ricoeur, 1984, p. 150). Second, in (re)telling a story, the *Homo fabulans* risks presenting a narrative that fits existing *weltanschauung* (worldview), or a make-belief, or inadvertent omissions or distortions which may be attributed to the complex nature of the events that generated the story. This is particularly so when we consider that narratives are usually outcomes of 'complicated, prolonged, and ambiguous social, economic, and political interactions by many persons' (Cooper, 2003, p. 84) although other reasons are possible. For instance, narratives can also be outcomes of single-laned interpretations of what is believed to be of social relevance. Czarniawska (1998), in criticising our attempt to become modern, cites literature on collective memory in non-literate societies asserting that 'what continues to be of social relevance is stored in the memory while the rest is usually forgotten' (Czarniawska, 1998, p. 9 Here, she cites Goody and Watt (1968).) In other instances, narratives could be a result of availability bias – that is, 'unwarranted importance to memories that are most vivid and hence most available for retrieval' (Mlodinow, 2008, p. 28).

Notwithstanding, it is agreeable to say that stories have some 'truth' to teach the human and the case to rename the *Homo sapiens* a *Homo fabulans* is worth a thought (Currie, 1998). The English have a saying that there's no smoke without fire and therefore 'truth' (the fire) can almost always be located at the base of stories (the smoke). Cooper informs us that stories 'tell us truths about basic human experience' (Cooper, 2003, p. 85) and for a story like Kidder's *The Soul of a New Machine*, Moon's words hold true that it 'has much to offer scholars beyond the pleasures of a story well told' (Moon, 2004, p. 601). This is because 'stories like these do more than merely entertain or divert us. Like ancient myths that captured and contained an essential truth, they shape how we see and understand our lives, how we make sense of our experience. Stories can mobilize us to action and affect our behaviour – more powerfully than simple and straightforward information ever can' (Reich, 1987, p. 77).

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