

# Chapter 5

## Tracy Kidder, Media Pundits, and the Academe

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### ABSTRACT

*This chapter critically examines how Tracy Kidder's story *The Soul of a New Machine* was received over the past three decades by the academic community as against the non-academic media punditocracy. Bruno Latour, 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. The chapter exposes how these two different viewpoints of the story reinforce the assumptions about how we approach narratives about technology. The arguments 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, thus making the Latourian viewpoint an important voice of reason.*

### 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),

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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 chapter, 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.

## **The Soul of a New Machine**

As a backdrop to this chapter, I attempt a brief overview of Tracy Kidder’s book in as far off my critical stance as possible to only present just what Kidder himself wanted it to be – that is, a good story (Peters, 2002, p. 47). Kidder, an American literary journalist, had spent nearly two years at Data General, an American computer firm that separated itself from the mother company, DEC. Both companies would now compete with IBM’s mainframe series – the minicomputers that were a new technological innovation with high market demand. However, Data General, which was one of the market leaders with its 16-bit minicomputer, could potentially lose ground to DEC, which had just released a 32-bit minicomputer called VAX. Kidder narrates how Tom West, a computer engineer at Data General manoeuvred through internal organisational politics in order to build a 32-bit minicomputer which was codenamed ‘Eagle’.

Data General’s internal politics were somehow revealed in the tensions that existed between two project teams, a privileged North Carolina team and Tom West’s amateurish project team, which he formed by recruiting young graduate engineer rookies. With that, Kidder details the tension between these two engineering project teams as they both compete to build their own machines. As the story unfolds, the reader cannot help but admire how Kidder carefully details the toil, frustration, pain,

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