NEGOTIATED STORIES OF THE INFORMATION SOCIETY

Sari Tuuva, University of Joensuu, Finland

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Introduction

This is the story of Oili and the development of the information society in North Karelia, the easternmost part of Finland. Finland has been developed towards the information society since the end of 1990s by official authorities, at the national as well as the local levels. Hundreds of information society development projects have been carried out during the past five years.

Most definitions of the information society offer quantitative measures (numbers of information workers, percentage of GNP devoted to information, etc.) and assume that at some point we enter the information society when this begins to predominate (Webster 1995, 24). In Finland, the information society and the construction of technology are discussed and constructed primarily in technical terms, using optimistic expectations. Public discourses often refer to Finnish world records in the number of computers, Internet hosts and mobile telephones. Finland is said to be one of the most developed information societies and economies in the world (Castells & Himanen 2001,6). Manuel Castells and Pekka Himanen (2001, 94) see the heart of the Finnish information society as a dynamic relationship between business and society, mediated by the state.

In my ethnographic study I approach the cultural interpretations of the information society. I explore the experiences and interpretations of information technology and the information society in the context of information society development projects in North Karelia, Finland. I have interviewed participants in information society development projects in North Karelia and followed their process since 1998. My informants are mostly women who have participated in the information society: women who construct their relationship to information technology and the information society. I examine interviews made as part of the research project “Information Technology and Civil Activity,” funded by the Finnish Ministry of Trade and Industry. In this project we (Marja Vehviläinen, Johanna Uotinen and myself) studied North Karelian information society development projects and interviewed their participants, especially women.

In this paper I focus on Learning Upper North Karelia, which was part of the North Karelian information society strategy. This strategy emphasized the citizen’s perspectives and people’s active role in shaping the information society. The projects sought to improve the participants’ information technology skills; the learning methods were based on their own needs and everyday life experiences. The aim was to build an information society for all and make IT part of North Karelian everyday life, where citizens have an active role as developers and shapers of the information society. This local information society development is connected to regional, national and European information society strategies and programs. At the general level, the development of the information society, the official-level viewpoint is central: the approach is from top to bottom. The users and citizens of the information society are mostly figures: number of computers and Internet connections. The viewpoint of users has been ignored in the
discussions or in the interpretations and meanings of information technology and the information society. In this study I approach the interpretations as negotiated stories: the meanings of information technology are negotiated in the contexts of information society development, local situations, everyday life and also with me in the interview situation and my research projects. Negotiated stories create and construct the interpretations of the information society.

The story of the information society development project

The Oppiva Ylä-Karjala (Learning Upper North Karelia) project was a information society development project that operated in the area of three municipalities. It began in spring 1998 and its aim was to “improve the information society capabilities of the people living in the sparsely populated and declining areas, and thus to fight social marginalization.” In Upper North Karelia the unemployment rate is very high, at that time almost 30% of the residents of the area were unemployed (http://unk.pkky.fi/home/oyk/esittely.html).²

The core of the project was a local intranet, a regional community network. In the project local unemployed people were trained as IT professionals and they created the local network as a part of an employment course. They also taught and instructed the residents of the area in using the local intranet. The network is based on sending e-mail. The local residents produce the content of the regional community network. The network has different kinds of discussion forums, municipal public services, organizational information, a flea-market, advertisements by local companies, and the users can chat, publish home pages etc. The central and most visible part of the network is the civil discussions by the local people: these include discussion forums and themes such as politics, the environment, an opinion section, and there are also forums for young people and women.

The project emphasized locality and regionality and local and regional learning: it was a survival project for a peripheral area. It had visions: people wanted to combine a marginal area and developed communications, they wanted to strengthen the possibilities of marginal and remote areas using new technology. They educated local people, the inhabitants of the area, various groups of people and met the challenge of the information society, which concerned the region. They wanted to create possibilities and equal access to networks and IT skills. The aim of the project was to intertwine ordinary everyday life and the information society. They wanted to challenge IT expertise by strengthening the role of ordinary people through flexible, networked teams and locality. They strove to generate positive effects in the rural and marginalized area.

Story of the study

I started the study in 1998 and sought to examine cultural interpretations of information technology and the information society. I started to follow up North Karelian information society development projects in a research group together with Marja Vehviläinen and Johanna Uotinen. The main method used in these follow-ups was the open thematic interview. We also collected materials produced by the projects: websites, flyers. We participated in meetings, seminars and collected materials from local newspapers. In this article I concentrate on the interviews. The informants were participants in the Learning Upper North Karelia project as well as people who implemented the project: project managers and employees.

The first interviews, made in autumn 1998, were open-ended, thematic interviews. I asked the informants about everyday-life settings and situations, life spheres, civil activities, information technology, the information society, experiences and expectations of information technology. The following autumn I continued the follow-up with the same interviewees. We discussed the progress of the development projects, how the informants get new information and IT skills, how they used IT in their everyday life and how the projects achieved their goals. The third interviews were made in spring 2000 and the final
interviews in autumn 2002.

In my work I have approach my collected material as negotiated stories (Tuuva 2003). This means that together with the interviewee we shape a common understanding and interpretation in the interview: in collectively discussing the themes we make sense of them. Negotiated stories are one example of ethnographic research. In the interviews the interpretations are negotiated in the contexts of everyday life, information technology and the information society. The interviews we produce have common and new understandings (cf. Hirsjärvi & Hurme 2001, 49).

Negotiated stories also refer to the context and commitments of the study: the information society development projects and discussion of the information society. The interviewees participate in the projects and therefore have a special commitment to the subject. They are not simply informants, but informants and users of information technology in this specific context. The descriptions of information technology are challenged on the grounds that they have an interest or stake in that description. One challenge for the informants is that they are do not make disinterested statements but state something biased by their own position, or in some way what they might be expected to say given who they are as participants in information society development projects (Hine 2000, 122; Potter 1996, 123). Ethnographic truths, stories, descriptions are partial - committed and incomplete (Clifford 1986,7).

Negotiated stories are not just descriptions, they also create and construct interpretations. Negotiated stories are formed as a part of the dialogue and negotiation in the discussions I had with the interviewees. These stories construct realities through the continual interchanges taking place between me and the informants. The result is not the unmediated world of the “others”, but the world between us (Murdock 1997, 185). I met and made 2-4 interviews with each informant. This relationship guides the interviews, although the idea was to keep the interview open to the unexpected. Using the same informants also leads to the idea that interpretations have changed, that the interpretations are processes that have been shaped during the study. The interviewees have learned to be informants during the study (Hirsjäärvi & Hurme 2001, 94). It has been a learning process for them as well as for me.

Negotiating a story with Oili

To clarify my point I want to take an example: Oili. She came a long way during the process. At first, in the first interviews she was an unemployed participant in the Learning Upper North Karelia employment course, learning IT skills and starting the local intranet regional community network. She was then employed by the firm set up during the course of the project. She is now is chief executive officer, CEO, of that firm. She has been doing peer group education or vernacular instruction, and has been developing the North Karelian information society. These roles and her development during the process have made her an ideal interviewee.

Interpretive work is rooted in intimate encounters. The slips, accidents and formative moments involved in constructing an account are as integral to the story being told as the eventual product (Murdock 1997, 185). In this article I want to reflect on my field notes to Oili’s story and how she interprets IT and the information society. I observe the process from 1998 until 2002.

In the first interview in 1998 Oili saw various possibilities in information technology. She discussed teledemocracy, virtualizations of municipal services, local discussions, virtual communities, cooperation. Oili spoke about the possibilities that the project created for the villages and the citizens and also discussed her favorite topic: the development of the villages and the possibilities IT and the information society can offer to remote areas (see Tuuva 2000).

For Oili, IT was the future and she was convinced that it would have a more meaningful and useful role,
especially in rural areas, and that it was very important that these areas try to participate in developing the information society.

I see this technology and this remote work and I believe that this is our future, that we can use the technology and do remote work from here. And that’s why I have started to educate myself, because I saw that this could be one possibility for me to be employed and I can still live here and that I won’t have to move to Helsinki or some other place. (Oili 3.11.1998, 14)

Oili was optimistic and exited about all the possibilities that information technology and the information society development project were offering. This was our first visit to this field site and Oili’s interview was the first one that I made with Learning Upper North Karelia project participants. After the first interview I wrote in my field notes:

We started the day at Nurmes by learning how to use the regional community network with third-grade schoolchildren. The participants of the project had organized the training so that Oili was the chief instructor and the others were around the class and every pair of students had their own instructor. In the end, Oili’s role was not that significant, she shuttled around the class hectically. Oili asked our names three times (although we had mailed them to her, had a couple of telephone conversations, and talked the day before). We didn’t manage to tell her our names, she had already run to another place. This seemed to be a dominant feature of the Learning Upper North Karelia project: we didn’t manage to solve things or say a whole sentence before the discussants were gone. Finally, we managed to give Oili our names on a piece of paper, but our invisibility continued. We were sitting in the class and tried to register in the network. The project participants knew of our presence, but the network didn’t start to work. At last we found out why. The network manager (who was in the same room) thought that this Sari Tuuva from the University of Joensuu was a projects manager’s joke, and he would first check this with him, before he could register me. Then things went ok.

I became a bit terrified of the interview with Oili: how can I interview someone who is never in one place?

When we finally started to find a suitable place for the interview, Oili started to calm down. And when we started she was calm and answered properly and very clear in standard language [normally they used the local dialect]. Oili turned out to be a good and easy informant. She described the projects of the villages. She described herself as a prophet of the villages, because villages and their development were close to her. (22.9.1998)

Afterwards I realized that in the interview Oili was giving a standard or public account of the Learning Upper North Karelia project and her experiences in it (Hathaway & Atkinson 2003, 163). Our approach used feminist methodologies and sought to build and explore intersubjective understandings of social reality (Smith 1987). In this case the problem was that the informants, like Oili, had different positions and interpretive frameworks (Hathaway & Atkinson 2003, 164). Oili framed her experiences through the project and the expectations that she had, not through her own everyday life or experiences. She wanted to tell the success story of the Learning Upper North Karelia project.

The next interview was made in autumn 1999. In this interview Oili concentrated on her role as a peer group instructor and the practices of the firm that had been set up in the course of the project. She believed that it was important to the project that they try to make IT familiar to ordinary people. The aim of the project was to combine the information society and everyday life. She also wanted to make information technology mundane and said:

Now I’m working as a instructor in the project and the starting point is that I’m not underlining
that I can; I don’t want to underline my know-how and expertise. It is very common that people who really know how these things work try to be very wise; there is a strong image that they want to be something special and that expertise is something extraordinary. IT is the kind of field where only a few have the expertise. And I have wanted to break down that idea that IT is something wise and needing special skills, I want to show that IT is for ordinary people, it is a tool as much as a whisk, a tractor or whatever, and that’s how I want to approach the subject. My starting point is that I try to teach people to use IT and that’s the most important point. I want them to learn and I try to teach in that manner so it will be easiest for them. (Oili 22.9.1999, 3)

After the second interview I wrote in my field notes:

Oili’s interview was ok, she was quite official again and this time she wondered if she was the right person to answer, could she give the right answers to my questions. Right after the interview, when I shut off the tape recorder, Oili stated that she probably gives too positive a picture of things, but it is her personality, she wants to see things positively, but of course puts things into different perspectives. Information technology is not the world’s most important issue. It is not that important for people to use the regional community network.

Oili mainly discussed the possibilities. I felt that the whole discussion was conditional, what would be possible to do. Maybe the most interesting part was when Oili described how she translates IT into common language and then gave some concrete examples of how she does that. In the villages, for example, she uses metaphors of tractors and different kinds of machines.

Oili’s interview was developer’s talk and she was interested in how users really use their opportunities. As a project worker she doesn’t have that knowledge. All in all, there are numerous possibilities in the regional community network and the Internet. And Oili is inspired by all these possibilities. She is also inspired by the fact that she can be the one who can tell others about these possibilities and is making it all come true. (22.9.1999)

In this interview as well as in my notes it is clear that Oili must deal with other people’s meanings; that is, there are meanings and meaningful forms, in which other individuals, categories, or groups in her environment somehow have a prior claim, but where she can also make a response (Hannerz 1992, 14). In this case it is necessary to note the ways Oili uses their meanings, through the generative power of personal and situational experience, and the way she takes meanings from others, in the communicative transmissions of interactions (Hannerz 1992, 46). In the interview Oili reflects her own experiences against those of the others, she constructs her interpretation through different positions and expectations.

The third interview was made in spring 2000. In this interview Oili also adopts the role of project representative: she describes what the project has achieved. All the interviews have been about possibilities, but this time it came out that Oili herself has not used these possibilities all that much. For example, she noted how the regional community network offered the possibilities to establish a new type of cooperation.

ST: What kind of things you have joined?
Oili: I haven’t.

She did not want to have homepages, nor did she trust the networks that much; she did not surf the web and she did want to spend her leisure time with computers. The high expectations had turned to critical considerations.

I use IT so much that there is not that kind of flush of IT as in the beginning — this is so
wonderful that I have to use it all the time — so I don’t use it. I have put it on the right level in my life, I have found a proper place for it. I have a food processor in the kitchen and I have a computer in the office, and I use these tools when I need them. But my life doesn’t revolve around some computer. ... We have to remember that we have to know how to cook and we have to know the traditions. We should be able to maintain the past and the traditional ways of doing things and keep our values. These all have their own places in life, and if we remember this, then everything is in good balance. (Oili 27.4.2000, 22-24)

Oili’s last interview was quite surprising. I was not expecting her to be so critical. I made the interview during a very difficult personal situation and I was not as “present” as was normally the case. Usually the interview situations are very intense: but this case I was too tired and confused, I hardly listened to what the informants said to me. Afterwards my feeling was that I gave more space to the informants, that I did not interrupt, there was not that much dialogue, I was not responding. Perhaps that is the reason there was space for critical notions, more space for their own voices. Oili was not telling the official or standard story of Learning Upper North Karelia, but her own experiences and views of the information society. She constructs her own understandings of the process and differentiates her own perspective from the standard story of the project.

Last autumn I made new interviews after a two-year break. During this period Oili had become CEO of the firm that had been set up earlier in the project. She was also participating in a management course for women entrepreneurs. This was guiding her choice of topic and in the interview Oili describes her role as women entrepreneur in the IT field, which she saw as challenging. She describes the practices that they use in the firm and how the firm they is challenging the dominant idea of expertise, challenging the notions about IT knowledge — in the same manner as in the Learning Upper North Karelia project.

The way I manage the company begins with the idea that it should be a personal, human-scale activity. By this I don’t mean anything negative, but that we respect people and we consider different situations and we give feedback to one another. ... We can sort things out so that you can be a human, you don’t have to be a machine. And starting from that, then we can take the customers into consideration, we can put ourselves into the customer’s position and understand that the customer can also have different kinds of situations. We don’t begin with our expertise, show that we know everything, but start from the customers’ standpoint and their needs. We all are humans. And that’s why our business is on the human scale, ordinary people and easy to face. There shouldn’t be any feeling of going to get some technical expertise and you don’t understand and the person is speaking some kind of jargon, and you can’t communicate with him. We’ve tried to do it in a way that we are just ordinary people. (Oili 7.10.2002)

What has happened to the information society? How has the information society idea changed?

Well, maybe it has changed, I haven’t thought about it, I have just gone along with it all. I think that we are heading towards a culture society model or something like that. Different kind of values have become more important. Well, I don’t know how it affects the information society, but what I have noticed is that I have became quite critical and I’ve tried to find values and morals and these kinds of issues. And I also have noticed that people want something else in their lives and a counterbalance. So is the information society moving away from us? Well, of course there are connections and telecommunication, information technology in use, but it is no longer a value as such; now there are also other things that are important and it is just a instrument. I don’t know. (Oili 7.10.2002)

This was the first interview that I made last autumn and I was testing of the frame of the interview. I wrote these field notes:
The first interview was with Oili, the busy CEO of the firm. The interview went ok: the framework of the interview was like Oili, the questions were relevant and important and Oili was inspired to talk about them. On the other hand, she took up many themes herself, I did not even have to ask. For example, the difficult theme about gender was handled well: she took up the theme herself at the beginning of the interview. She considered gender as a woman entrepreneur and also in regard to the course that she is doing. We discussed gender from the viewpoint of the women entrepreneur as well as the practices of the firm: human-scale activities. Other situations (difficult theme) arose in the interview about how Oili described managing the company and entrepreneurship. The interview was exactly what we were looking for. (7.10.2002)

In this last interview Oili had a clear vision of the development of the information society and she reflects her experiences in it. She defines information technology and the information society that is relevant to her. Her interpretation is not based on the definitions of the official story or the definitions of information society development projects.

After this last interview I realized Oili’s role in my study. Unintentionally, I have had Oili in my mind when we were planning the interviews and the continuation of the study. I realized that Oili has been in almost every text I have written. She has summarized many of my themes in few lines and made my points clear. At first I did not see that, but she has become a key informant for me.

Conclusions

Oili’s story is about the information society, the development of the information society. Through Oili’s story we can see the process: at first there is a information society development project, training for the unemployed, new jobs, setting up a firm — a success story as well as Oili’s personal success story. In the course of the study, we can also see how Oili learns to be an informant and how I learn to interpret her story of the information society.

Oili is an example of success, she is special, but there are also other success stories among the participants of Learning Upper North Karelia. Jukka Oksa,3 who has studied the Learning Upper North Karelia project and evaluated it, had to ask me who Oili is. He had couple of candidates in mind for who Oili might be. There were also other women in the project who had made similar careers.

Oili has participated in developing the information society; she has not been a passive target of these actions, but has shaped the local information society. Oili herself says that she just been a part of the process, that she has not thought about the process that much; in light of the interviews, she has been thoughtful and reflective. She also has power over the kind of IT they are using, she is defining IT and the IT they produce.

Oili is negotiating the meanings of IT, she is reflecting on her own relationship to IT and the information society: she is not adopting IT at such, but is able to articulate her own needs, her situations and her own perspectives. Oili has been a participant in an information society development project and has a commitment and position that guides her interpretations. All informants do not have such attitudes. Oili lives at the center of these development projects and has to reflect on her own interpretations: the information society is not a trivial matter.

The study has been in real time. The subject of the study, the development of the information society, is a reciprocal process and is more about the present and the future. In the interviews we are trying to make sense of something that is actually happening and something that is expected to happen. The information society is not something that the informants could have thought back to or readily recalled, as is usually
the case in cultural studies or folklore studies, like anecdotes or historical stories. In my study there are no ready stories, negotiated stories are not just descriptions, but a mutual process and constructions.

Oili’s story makes the information society concrete, which usually is described only on a rhetorical level or through figures of network connections or structural changes of society. Oili’s story is about experience and interpretation — and she, if anyone, has experiences of the information society.

References


Author:
I have continued the study in the research projects Information Technology, Media and Cultural Interpretations, funded by the Academy of Finland, and Information Technology, Citizens Perspectives and Everyday Life, funded by the Finnish Ministry of Trade and Industry.

See also Castells and Himanen 2002, 121-123.

See, for example, Jukka Oksa and Jarno Turunen: Local community net as a new model of regional policy in Finland.