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Taking the Longer Road

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Reflection note

Taking the Longer Road

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Ole and I met as we became colleagues in the late 80s at NR (Norsk Regnesentral, the Norwegian Computing Centre). An applied research institute, NR belongs to a sector which has an outsized presence in Norway due to the relative scarcity of large corporations with internal Research and Innovation (R&I) capacity. Thus, many outsource their R&I activities to the applied research sector as it has traditionally been perceived to be closer to the ground of private and public client organizations than universities. It is an unholy mix of science/ research and consultancy, jockeying for competitive research funding opportunities. Among the rich flora of such research institutes, NR was a relatively small one which was self-aware of its quirky, against-the-mainstream identity. It was a vibrant site for animated, late-night discussions, where both Ole and I participated diligently.

NR, seamlessly bleeding into the IS group at the Dept. of Informatics, University of Oslo, had a long history of engagement and experiences with participatory approaches to technology in the workplace pioneered by the highly visible NR-and-University of Oslo maverick Kristen Nygaard. Like other sites across Scandinavia, Norway engaged in bold, real-world experiments with alternative ways of developing and appropriating new technology, leading to a series of workplace reforms, regulation and methodological guidelines from accompanying research colloquially known as the Scandinavian approach. As a result, a healthy stream of international scholars with related interest would visit (including Susan Leigh Star, Marc Berg, Claudio Ciborra, Pelle Ehn, Jonathan Grudin and Langdon Winner).

Over a period of about ten years from around the mid 90s till about the mid 00s Ole and I collaborated closely. Across a number of publications and presentations we developed what we at one point coined information infrastructure (II). II was a socially informed conceptualization of IT explicitly pitted against the prevalent one: IT as an 'artefact'. In contrast, II thematized the interconnected, evolving and distributed na-

ture. As such, it represented a clear alternative to dominant, existing conceptualizations of IT on offer. After this period of intense collaboration, we have hardly published anything together. Despite the considerable attention and recognition that II attracted in some quarters, we decided to pause our co-writing. This decision was neither due to some unresolvable disagreement nor any quarrel. We ended it for pre-emptive, hygienic reasons: collaboration, even when productive, fun and rewarding as ours had been, risk becoming too comfortable and convenient. Thus, we wanted to break out of our comfort zones. While practically ending joint writing, we however never ended our ongoing discussions of research of shared interest, tipping off the other when we read something intriguing and routinely commenting on each others' draft papers—not to mention heated exchanges around football, politics and wine. More than the ostensive product, the II theory, what I have learnt most from interacting with Ole over many years, in fact, for most of my professional career, is the process of it all, i.e., the approach and sentiment Ole brings to research. I highlight what I take as a few key elements that for sure has influenced my own take on research.

Against closure. In developing ideas, not to mention as you approach submission deadlines, many feel the pressure towards closure, to tie up the loose ends. Not Ole, as I admit it took me a little while to grow accustomed to. Rather than closure, Ole is always looking for ways to open up, to destabilize prevailing framings. An important manifestation of this was Ole's push to seek inspiration from competing, often unfamiliar, alternatives to conventional conceptualizations. As a result, we, and notably Ole, organized and promoted formal and informal meetings, discussions and coffee chats on readings that might but need not be tied to some visitor dropping by. Interleaved with reading groups and discussions, this inspired us to explore a variety of social theory and philosophy perspectives. To illustrate, Pelle Ehn's early interest in phenomenology inspired us to dive in some detail into the work of Heidegger but, inviting the philosopher Dagfinn Føllesdal, also comparing and contrasting him with his old teacher, Husserl. Albeit not the straightest line to an IS publication, our excursions into Continental philosophy resulted in a rich backdrop, against which more contemporary IS discourse could be interpreted.

Analogues. Related, but different, from that above, is Ole's tendency to explore analogous thinking, looking for what is similar but never quite the same. Already on the look-out for empirically rich, conceptually novel (at least to us) perspectives, we were profoundly influenced by science and technology studies (STS). We found ourselves in the middle of the formative stages of what later developed into a full-fledged discipline,

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viz., STS. It came with considerable variety and generative controversies. It also comprised a delightfully generous ‘smorgasbord’ of empirical cases—bicycles, electric power systems, hamburgers, microbiological cells, and much, much more—that certainly was not the same as IT, but, we wondered, perhaps selected aspects were. The stream of STS that spoke most immediately to both of us was that which combined attending—seriously—to considering the social and material circumstances of technology in general and, we argued, IT in particular with wonderfully rich and evocative, typically ethnographically or historically oriented empirical accounts. Our crush on STS, as it happened, overlapped with the establishment of the STS centre at the University of Oslo, which proved to be a particularly prolific seminar and workshop organizer. Like NR/ Dept. of Informatics at the University of Oslo, the STS group saw a steady stream of visitors to its seminars and events, small and large. Both Ole and I thrived around STS making it more than natural for me, when I in the early 90s moved up north from Oslo to Trondheim, to spend a lot of time at NTNU’s STS centre, Norway’s second. Given that I at this point felt at least as strong an affinity with STS as to IS—I tended to prioritize STS conferences and workshops over IS ones—I practically moved in on a part-time basis with the STS group despite, ostensibly, my chair being with IS at the Dept. of Informatics, NTNU.

Empirical overflowing. From what I have outlined already, it is probably clear to most readers that both Ole and I shared an affinity with theory. However, without driven and motivated by an empirical agenda, such an interest tends to be rather sterile (not to mention boring). Ole’s strong interest to dig into the nitty-gritty empirical details, looking for how and when a candidate theoretical framing of the empirics was ‘overflowing’ hence needed elaboration was really the motor in the whole enterprise. Ole had this as a natural instinct, while for me it was an acquired skill I learnt among other through my dealings with Ole. No wonder, then, that the healthcare sector emerged as an important empirical domain in our research. Starkly different from the neatly bounded and focused case studies of digitalization in, say, a hospital or a ward, what attracted first Ole and later me was its interconnections across geographical, organizational, institutional and disciplinary boundaries; in short, we were fascinated by its empirical complexity. The development of II outlined above was born out of digging into this complexity in ways our strong instincts told us went dead against the (then-?)prevalent artefact-centric understanding of IT dominating in IS, CSCW and HCI alike.

The kind of academic flower Ole represents is, it seems, a species struggling for survival. Ole, with his old-school, liberal arts sentiments, has influenced my professional work

in ways no other colleague has. He embodies the argument for Humboldtian academic ideals in contrast to the rising tide of market-orientation of higher education and academic life. Moving sideways as often as forward, investing in the detours, is a mode of 'doing' academic life that is under existential threat. Younger academics, increasingly, struggle with institutional conditions encapsulating the disciplining effects of modern academic incentive and reward structures that mimic market mechanisms. Ole, like so many of our most cherished researchers, were allowed to mature and blossom under conditions that policy makers today are busy dismantling. Hopefully, we will realize in time that over-emphasizing rankings and other expressions of quantified renderings of research quality is a recipe for short-term, not long-term, excellence. Which is a pity given that research is a marathon, not a sprint.