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Resource Centre Netcafé
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Involvement in (the information) society – the Joensuu Community Resource Centre Netcafé

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Abstract
Finland is said to be at the forefront of information society development. However, the rhetoric has been deterministic, presenting an inevitable phenomenon to which all citizens have to adapt. There has been a tendency to ignore all social, regional and local differences. The province of North Karelia aspires to be a more citizen-oriented information society. The Joensuu Community Resource Centre (CRC) Netcafé is a place which provides the opportunity (but not the necessity) for spontaneous involvement and participation in (the information) society. It creates space for local interpretations and views about information society and technology. The research is based on a questionnaire and interviews. When information technology is combined with the CRC’s various other activities, it cannot be an independent, self-governed phenomenon. The CRC provides a context that allows a sense of proportion to develop in relation to information technology and the rhetoric of information society strategy.

Key words
citizen-oriented • community resource centre • ethnography • Finland • information society • information technology • internet café • North Karelia
The view that Finland is at the forefront of information society development is widely held, both at home and abroad. As early as 1995 the National Information Society Strategy said that ‘when it comes to the application of ICTs and the information industry, Finland competes in the world’s top league’ (Suomi tietoyhteiskunnaksi, 1996: 48). The strategy’s main goal was to establish Finland’s position as one of Europe’s – or even the world’s – leading information societies. This ‘world champion’ thinking is still strong and an important part of information society rhetoric. It is a view reinforced by statistics which show that, for example, in Finland nine out of ten households have at least one mobile phone, every other household has a computer and one in three of them has internet access. The public sector is also well equipped, with 80 percent of public libraries offering computers and internet access to their customers and all educational establishments having internet-connected computers (Tiedolla tietoyhteiskuntaan III, 2001). The Swiss organization, the World Economic Forum (WEF), recently announced that Finland had toppled the US as the leading IT country: in Finland, people, enterprises and authorities use IT more than in any other comparison country (WEF, 2003). As a result of all this, Finland has often been presented as a model for the information society. However, while it might seem impressive from the outside, this article argues that the picture is not as straightforward as this superficial impression gained from statistics and information society strategies and rhetoric suggests.

A question remains: what part do people play in the information society described in these strategies and rhetoric? The rhetoric of official information society documents has often been deterministic, with the information society presented as an inevitable phenomenon. Citizens have to accept and adapt to changes and learn the knowledge and skills required by the new society. Following on from this, the information society, and the skills it demands, are seen as involving everyone in Finland. However, this is a ‘top-down’ development. People are expected to adopt new technologies automatically as soon as they have the opportunity. In Finnish information society rhetoric, people are individuals who have equal personal responsibility to make good use of technology and the possibilities that it offers. As the 1995 National Strategy puts it: ‘in a developed society, the use of IT applications and networks is a basic skill in the same way as literacy’ (Suomi tietoyhteiskunnaksi, 1996: 67). Furthermore, information society rhetoric is universalistic. As such, it is easy to lose sight of all societal and regional differences, as well as the differences between people’s local circumstances. The individual’s perspective has not been considered or explored. Critics have pointed out that the Finnish information society rhetoric does not allow for the possibility that citizens of the information
society are a heterogeneous group and that information and communication technology (ICT) access will not mean the same for all of them (Aro, 2000; Vehviläinen, 2001a; Vehviläinen, 2001b).

The approach underlying the official information society strategy is further strengthened by Castells and Himanen. In their book *The Information Society and the Welfare State – The Finnish Model* (2002), they argue that Finland successfully combines an information and welfare society and thus builds a human-centred – not technology-centred – information society. They also present an almost mythic picture of Finns as a people especially enthusiastic about technology because of their country’s ‘history of survival’. Statistics-based maps which show differences between parts of the country are provided. However, these manage only to reinforce the view of locality and place as problems for remote areas of Finland, implying that those who are not part of information society developments are likely to ‘feel left behind the progress of the country – ultimately they may live in internal exile from the Finnish information society’ (Castells and Himanen, 2002: 114). When they present the Finnish model as a human-centred way of building the information society, they do not consider that the theory, strategies and practice, as well as the local circumstances of people, might differ in a positive way. Above all, there is no space for people not to use technology in the strategies and rhetoric they describe. The picture that Castells and Himanen draw thus shares all the characteristics of the official Finnish information society rhetoric described above.

This article describes an information society initiative in North Karelia, the most eastern province of Finland. It is a large area covering more than 21,000 sq km, sparsely populated with 170,000 inhabitants. Of these about 50,000 people live in Joensuu, the capital city of the province. North Karelia has long been seen as a problem area. The population is ageing and in decline as young people move to southern Finland. Unemployment is higher than in many other parts of the country, distances are long and remote villages depopulated. Information society strategies see ICTs as a means to decrease marginalization and the effects of remoteness. Thus there is long experience of different IT-related projects in North Karelia, beginning in 1985 when Ruvaslahti village got one of the first ‘telecottages’ in Finland, through to numerous information society development projects at the turn of the millennium.²

However, the North Karelian information society strategy differs from the national Finnish information society approach in some important respects. Significant actors in the process of developing the strategy were the Regional Council of North Karelia and former regional leader Tarja Cronberg. She has long experience of information society projects and research. As early as 1987 she wrote:
In the future the local community should be the ones who discuss their own needs, create a common view and, at the same time, take a stand on the development and use of technology. (Cronberg, 1987)

Thus as a regional leader, Cronberg promoted the social shaping of technology perspective as the basis for the North Karelian information society. The Regional Council launched the NOKIS (North Karelia Towards the Information Society) project in order to promote information society development which was genuinely human-centred. In the NOKIS project, technology was seen as a social construction, that is, as a product of social and cultural processes. One outcome from this project was the information society strategy of North Karelia (Joint Work Party to the Information Society, 1999).

Therefore, in North Karelia there was a desire to build an information society from the 'bottom-up', on a human scale, based on local circumstances so that it was citizen-oriented. The Joint Work Party to the Information Society argued that to avoid

harmful developments coming from the outside, we ourselves have to launch a process, where we have an influence on what kind of information society we want. It is not determined by technology and technologists, but a user-oriented information society rising from the objectives of the inhabitants of the area. (1999: 17)

It is as important that, in the North Karelian information society, space is consciously created for those people who do not want to use information technology. The strategy sees information technology (at least in theory) as being for those who are interested in it and want to use it, and definitely not as something to be imposed on everyone.

The information society is an entity of interactive communities built by North Karelians in which information technology is exploited for one’s own needs. Not using the information technology must not lead to displacement, but basic services and rights have to be guaranteed for everyone. (Joint Work Party to the Information Society, 1999: 5)

The Joensuu Community Resource Centre (CRC) internet cafe, NetCafé, is one local North Karelian example of how people build the information society into their local practices and how they create – if they create – space for the information society and technology in their life. The meanings that people give to information technology might seem trivial, especially when compared with the earth-shattering visions proffered by Finnish information society rhetoric. Their experiences and opinions are not usually highly dramatic, but instead show the ways in which people are embedding the internet into their everyday lives (Haythornthwaite and...
Wellman, 2002). This is important as a phenomenon at the grassroots level of the information society. When studied ethnographically, the everyday life experiences of people are highlighted and the triviality of ‘techno-hype’ becomes clear – an important point to make in the current Finnish situation (Seiter, 2000).

In this article I look both at the Joensuu CRC and its NetCafé as a place which offers possibilities for spontaneous involvement and participation in (the information) society, and in what kind of space people allow for information technology in their lives. My aim is to introduce people’s local interpretations and opinions, not only about the NetCafé but also about information technology, its use and meanings. The article first outlines the theoretical framework before introducing both the CRC and NetCafé and reporting on the research. I describe the CRC quite thoroughly because the specificity of the NetCafé is based precisely on the combination of itself and the CRC: one cannot be understood without the other. Liff et al. (2002) argue that visiting an informal public place can be a very beneficial way of gaining new acquaintances, ideas and support. This is exactly the case with CRC – without it the NetCafé would be just an ordinary free computer and internet access point. The research is based on a questionnaire completed by CRC visitors in February 1999 and eight interviews with the people representing the three main organizations involved, volunteers and visitors to the CRC. I have also collected news clippings, applications, brochures and observed activities at the place. The main study took place between 1998 and 2000 (Uotinen, 2000a).

MAKING SENSE OF (TECHNICAL) WORLDS AT THE CRC

As a commonsense conception, technology is usually taken to refer to different kinds of physical tools and machines. However MacKenzie and Wajcman (1985) argue that, in addition to such physical artefacts, technology should be understood to include people’s activities and the knowledge associated with them. Thus, technology is characteristically cultural. When technology and its meanings are seen as produced by (cultural and social) processes, its users are not just passively receiving something fixed, they also have an influence on it. So, the technology and its meanings are culturally built and determined: technologies as such neither speak for themselves, nor have effects outside their users’ interpretations. People determine what technology is, and what can be done with it. Technologies and their meanings can be understood only through these interpretations produced through local practices. This underlines the importance of researching (information) technology via people’s experiences and understandings (Berg, 1996; Vehviläinen, 1997; Vehviläinen, 2000).

In their everyday life people face a constant flow of phenomena, some of which might be new and strange to them. These may include technology,
programmes, information and the ways in which it is presented. Earlier ways of understanding cannot always deal with these new situations and fresh approaches must be found. People construct views, explanations and understanding about such new situations by producing meaning. This interpretation of phenomena and situations faced is closely connected with people’s locally-based everyday practices. The means and processes of making sense of things are constructed by the flow of experience. However, the processes of interpreting and producing meaning are not only conceptual or individual in nature. Meaning is produced within social and cultural processes and as such is connected with certain social groups, communities and societies. People produce and interpret meaning in their own situations, everyday life and local contexts, but always in interaction with other people and (worldwide) societal and cultural orders (Lehtonen, 1998; Vehviläinen and Eriksson, 1999; Vuorensyrjä, 2000).

In this article, the context for the process of meaning production described above is the Joensuu CRC and its NetCafé. At the CRC many different, even surprising, levels, principles, courses of action and actors come together. All the different levels and social networks are intertwined, inseparable in local activities and in the subjective processes of experience and signification. These are not permanent and so neither are the meanings produced: they need to be reproduced over time as the situation changes. Constructed in everyday activities, the meanings are not coherent, unproblematic or consistent (Vehviläinen, 2000). The CRC offers a supportive, flexible environment for the process of meaning production, through people’s own understanding, conceptions and activities. As such, the CRC can be seen as a community of networks.

Wellman et al. (2002) write that currently, communities can be best understood through the idea of a social network. Networked communities are formed by interpersonal ties and can be bound both locally and globally. Networked communities provide sociability, support, information, social identity, and above all, a sense of belonging. According to Wellman et al.:

In networked societies, boundaries are more permeable, interactions are with diverse others, linkages switch between multiple networks, and hierarchies are flatter and more recursive. (2002: 160)

Wellman’s concept of a community as a network aptly describes the flexible nature of Joensuu CRC. There, non-hierarchical ways of acting are aspired to and rigid boundaries are avoided. Therefore CRC and its NetCafé are constantly changing,6 as old networks dissolve and new ones form. This variation does not mean that these formations are somehow unreal: on the contrary, they affect local social reality and are an essential part of it.
This change in, and between, networks and actors creates space for different ideas, opinions and experiences to emerge. However, this is not simply achieved through a tolerance for difference: it is something which is actively rebuilt over time through practices. Supportive, consciously created tolerance is essential to a place such as CRC; without it the whole system would collapse. A large number of different networks operate at the CRC. Some of them interact with other networks, some do not. The interactive ones are particularly important in creating flexibility and, through this, tolerance and supportiveness. This happens throughout the system, at all levels of the CRC, including the NetCafé.

The thing keeping all the different people, ideas, principles, actors and networks linked is a spirit of togetherness and sense of belonging to somewhere. The CRC is a place where networks are bound. It is a hub for complex nets of different people, organizations and activities. Thus the importance of place is not weakened when communities are understood as networks – ‘any specific place still has a uniqueness in terms of a particular mix of these diverse social networks’ as Liff et al. (2002: 97) put it. And this is true for places such as the NetCafé and the role that they play. For example, Miller and Slater (2000) show that use of IT and the internet cannot be understood in isolation from particular places in which it occurs, both in relation to national culture and local access facilities.

‘AND I FELT SORT OF IMPORTANT’ – THE COMMUNITY RESOURCE CENTRE

The Joensuu CRC opened in 1996. The project arose from cooperation between the Soroppi Association and HYVE project of the Finnish Federation for Social Welfare and Health (FFSWH) and the city of Joensuu. The CRC is based strongly on ideas of the Finnish welfare state, the third sector and voluntary work. Nowadays the CRC’s three main actors are the FFSWH, Soroppi Association and Joensuu chapter of the Finnish Red Cross (FRC). Their coming together at the CRC has been very beneficial for all three organizations: their activities have became more versatile, their cooperational networks have grown wider and new volunteers have become involved.

Numerous people and more than 100 different organizations, associations, communities and groups operate from the CRC. The idea behind it is to create space for voluntary and civil activity and to encourage dialogue and cooperation between different parties. Attempts to create new jobs and prevent marginalization are among its shared goals. The activities of the CRC include Soroppi (the café part of the NetCafé), services for organizations, educational and international activities, the NetCafé, youth and group activities, a drop-in counselling service called ‘worry-checkpoint’, and training and employment services. These activities are
supported financially by two main sources; Finland’s Slot Machine Association (RAY)\(^{12}\) and the city of Joensuu. However, funding CRC activities has not proved easy, nor is getting the money straightforward. Thus, the essential resources for the CRC are the people: visitors, regular users of the services and premises, volunteers, trainees, students and people on job-support programmes.

In addition to the volunteers, trainees and employees about 600–1000 people visit the CRC weekly. Marko, Executive Director of the Soroppi Association, explained the idea of the CRC as follows:

> This kind of meeting place is for everyone, it’s very easy to just drop in. No need for any special reason to come. You can stay and look at the hustle and bustle of life, read the papers, maybe get a cup of coffee or tea.

The visitors include all kinds of people; men and women from a wide range of age groups. Most of them are unemployed, students or pensioners, but schoolchildren and employed people also visit the centre. The CRC is important precisely because all kinds of people are welcome there. Since staying for a long period of time is allowed, even encouraged, one day a visitor might become interested in its wider activities and through this gradually change from a visitor to a participant (thus Netcafé could be described as a ‘third place’ following Oldenburg (1999) with – as Liff et al. (2002) argue – the potential for facilitating the use of new technologies).

Those interviewed about the organization described how they made an effort to avoid ready-made solutions when developing activities at the CRC. Their objective is to offer people opportunities to do things by themselves: they can do things, have an effect and participate if they wish. When people in difficult life situations are offered the possibility of doing something constructive, one day they might go on to provide support to someone else. Being a player at the centre allows people the experience of being respected:

> And then when you have been fooling around a little and been unemployed and things like that. Well, then you sort of want a little respect and a kind of feeling that you are, like, important in something. And here you kind of felt that you’re important when you were given responsibility. The responsibility is a terribly essential part of this. (Joni, volunteer PC adviser)

The interviewees also said that equality is sought, and hierarchies avoided, in the internal communication between different parties involved in the CRC. There is no specific leader of the centre; different projects and organizations are not administered centrally. Instead each has its own directors and organization. Matters which affect everyone are decided by negotiation between the involved parties. This approach is flexible, fast and motivating when it succeeds.
This [CRC] is a sort of good community. Ideas can be tested very quickly to see how they work in practice. In principle everything can be tried here. And then, in a way, this is a community where different new ideas and ways of doing things come about naturally. (Marko, Executive Director of the Soroppi Association)

The many independent actors at the centre – organizations, communities and people – network over and over again in ways which depend on the particular situation. However, everyone acts according to their own values and principles. The interviewees described how tolerance and preservation of pluralism are the shared basic principles of the CRC.13 The other side of the coin means that operating at the centre demands a great deal of tolerance of chaos, difference in ideas and ideologies as well as patience. In fact, one employee remarked that

it is good that we have tensions here. It guarantees that you don’t get complacent . . . The tensions force us to develop. (Elina, planner for the FFSWH)

So even the differences have been turned into a resource: different perspectives, tensions and crises keep the centre and its activities moving – they evolve along with changes in society. For example, as the social significance of IT grew, the centre actors began to plan the NetCafé and its activities.

‘IT’S NICE TO DROP IN FOR COMPUTERS, THE PAPERS AND CHEAP COFFEE’ – THE NETCAFÉ

When the CRC was planned, the data administration manager and social services manager of Joensuu city suggested that the centre should have an internet café which was open to all. The idea created both excitement and resistance. On the one hand, there was a fear that IT would overrun all the other activities and concerns were raised about whether such a ‘nerd place’ could fit with the other activities and actors. Perhaps its opponents thought that an internet café had to be a trendy place furnished with plastic and metal, since this was the image of such a place most prevalent in the media at that time (Laegran and Stewart, 2003; Liff et al., 2002; Willim, 1999). On the other hand, it was suggested that the computers might bring new visitor groups, actors and possibilities to the centre (Pajula, 2001). In the end it was decided that the NetCafé should be built alongside the Soroppi people’s cafeteria, without any trace of trendy furnishing. The computers were consciously placed in a central place – specifically not in another room, out of sight (and thus out of mind). The idea was that when the computers were in open view, people would gradually get used to their existence and even use them. As one employee stated:
It could be . . . that it works merely through [the computers] being there. Then this information society doesn’t seem so alien. To see . . . people using the machines, that it isn’t just something happening somewhere else. It’s here. The machines are here, and they don’t bite. (Elina, planner for the FFSWH)

The NetCafé – the information technology and internet environment of the CRC – opened at the beginning of March 1997, three months after the opening of the whole centre. It is a central part of the CRC, not an independent unit. The NetCafé seeks to become an information society resource centre for all. The objectives of its activities are to make the information society closer to everyday life, provide citizens with the opportunity to produce their own information, encourage social interaction and handle their business electronically, improve citizens’ ability to function in the information society and maintain an up-to-date technical environment.14

The NetCafé is a free computer point open to anyone. Several workstations with internet access, different work programmes, a printer and scanner are available. One computer has special equipment for the visually impaired as well as a videophone system, which, for example, permits discussions in sign language. But the availability of help is perhaps even more important than the free access. An essential part of NetCafé’s facilities is PC support provided by volunteers and trainees who are specifically interested in IT. Other visitors and volunteers can also help with the computers.

For example, whoever happens to know something [about computers] goes and helps the visitors if they have a problem. (Marko, Executive Director of the Soroppi Association)

There are many places in Joensuu other than the CRC NetCafé where computers can be used free of charge. These include educational institutions, public libraries and museums. Even one of the department stores now has a free computer with internet connection for its customers’ use. There is also one café and a bar in town that offer internet services as a part of their business. However, places of access, whether free or charging, often assume that people are capable of using the computers. Whether one can get help often depends on whether there are staff present who can provide such support. Therefore the constant availability of help is a significant aspect of the NetCafé’s provision. The quality of the guidance is also important: at the NetCafé the aim is that help should be comprehensible. This is done mainly by using ‘normal’ language. Joni, the ‘guidance-guru’ at the NetCafé explains:

They like it [that you use colloquial language] since they’ve usually had bad experiences. Because, you know, these computer gurus are the kind of people who teach too fast and then you can’t make out anything they teach.
The NetCafè is a good example of the possibilities offered by cooperation at the centre. Similar cooperation exists between different funding sources and actors in the NetCafè as in the centre as a whole. This, according to an employee, was important because citizens’ computer use wouldn’t be possible without the city guaranteeing the networks, or if there were no donations, or no instructors coming from different quarters. So this is just one example, without this it wouldn’t be possible at all. (Marjatta, Chairperson of the local Red Cross chapter)

The NetCafè has benefited all the parties working to maintain it and the CRC as a whole. For example, it has brought new visitor groups to the centre, which as a result has lost some of its label as a place just for people with problems. This is important since the central aim of the centre and its actors is to prevent further marginalization and support those people currently marginalized. But if it is only people with problems who visit the centre this can prevent others from coming. The NetCafè has clearly changed this situation. The centre has also gained a touch of modernity and is seen as keeping up with the times through the NetCafè.

The specificity of the NetCafè arises exactly from the fact that it is combined with various other actors and activities of the CRC. Usually internet cafes are independent enterprises or part of other business. The Joensuu CRC is not a profit-seeking enterprise. Thus the principles of its NetCafè differ clearly from commercial internet cafes. Laegran and Stewart (2003) describe the different styles of internet cafes, including the tendency of commercial ones to seek a trendy look, while more community-based ones often promote a healthy image. Wakeford (1999) has also highlighted a commercial internet café’s choice of trendy decor, which included not only the interior but also the appearance of its employees. The CRC instead has chosen a healthy internet cafe image for NetCafè. The interior design is intentionally homely and the PC advisers are not expected to differ from the visitors – in fact this has been taken to the point that they do not have any identifying name tags.

However, the clearest difference between the principles of the NetCafè and commercial internet cafes can be seen in the way for which services are charged. In the businesslike internet cafe services normally include both refreshments and the provision of internet access: at least one of which is charged at a commercial rate to customers. At the CRC’s NetCafè the use of computers is free of charge, but the most extraordinary thing is the pricing policy of the Soroppi café, where there is no requirement to pay for refreshments either. People are trusted to put money into the café’s piggy bank in line with their conscience. Thus there are no permanent price lists, neither is payment monitored. If someone does not happen to have money for coffee or tea, they can still have a drink. However, those who can pay
often put something extra into the bank as a contribution. In this way the café breaks even. It does not bring in any profit – but that was not the intention of the facility.

According to the questionnaire, after the cheap coffee, newspapers and opportunities to chat, the NetCafé is the most common reason for coming to the centre, with three out of four respondents saying that they use the NetCafé’s computers at least occasionally. Of the centre’s 600–1000 weekly visitors, about 150 can use the services of the NetCafé (the number of computers does not permit greater use). The computers are used by a variety of people as is the case with other access places (Boase et al., 2002). Many youngsters visit the NetCafé, but, for example, foreigners and middle-aged women also come to use the computers. One of the volunteer PC advisers says that the visitors to NetCafé are eager to learn how to use the computers so long as someone provides help at the beginning. People are interested in IT because it is mentioned so often in media and talked about so much by children and younger people.

It’s just such a ‘pop’ thing in this modern society all this [ICTs]. You feel like you’re kind of a total outsider, if you don’t know anything about it. (Joni, volunteer PC adviser)

Most NetCafé visitors are generally satisfied with its facilities and are especially happy with the guidance and support available. The respondents to the questionnaire also said that the level of technology is adequate, although the NetCafé computers are not the newest and most powerful possible. This satisfaction with the machines might be due to the fact that their capacity is high enough for the most popular uses: internet, email and chat lines. People did hope for a few changes. Some wanted more programmes for image processing and web design as well as different games. However, the most common desire was for more computers, to decrease the queues.

According to the questionnaire, the most irritating thing about the NetCafé is the behaviour of other users. For example, one person said:

[It’s irritating] if the same people reserve the computers for the whole day, the shortage [of guidance] is sometimes irritating, and so is when people are whispering right behind your back – the tables should be turned around, screens should be used. And it’s also irritating nowadays that whenever I go to the machine it’s set for Cyrillic fonts. The users should learn to reset the computers if they have made some changes! It should be a MUST! (w42, student)

Such behaviour, it was felt, affected one’s ability to use the machines in peace and wasted the limited time allowed.

On the whole the visitors and actors at the CRC are quite pleased with the NetCafé. Still, the goal of the CRC’s NetCafé is not to bring IT to
everyone just for the sake of technology itself (whether people are interested in it or not), but to create opportunities for engaging with IT and making it a natural and useful part of the activities and everyday lives of people, organizations and communities. The NetCafé offers people a place that is safe and easily accessible, where they can face the information society and computers on their own terms and without any charge.

Well, these are the no threshold places into the information society. These kinds of places have to exist . . . because in the very near future there will be a lot of social services that at the very least are hard to use unless people are somehow capable of using the tools of the information society. So, people have to at least see, try and become familiar with such gadgets somewhere. (Tuomo, the centre’s ADP planner)

‘A GOOD SERVANT, BUT A BAD MASTER’ – ON THE MEANING OF IT
What kind of meaning do the people visiting the CRC give to information technology and why do they use it? Making sense and giving meaning can occur when IT is faced and maybe a place – no matter how small – can be found for it in people’s lives. Then an interface and connection is created between the individual’s life and IT which relates exactly to their local situated needs (Karvonen, 1997). When comparing Finnish information society rhetoric and people’s interpretations, differences arose: people see the computers as tools for doing certain things, and not – as the rhetoric describes them – as a phenomenon that spreads (and should spread) everywhere.

In the visitors’ questionnaires the positive personal meanings given to IT were connected to the things that can be done concretely with the computer – not to any world embracing visions. Thus for those respondents who use IT, the computer above all offers a fast, easy and inexpensive form of communication, which promotes and increases contacts between people even over long distances. In particular, email, the internet and chat lines are the services which encourage people to use information technology. One user commented:

I replaced part of my ‘old fashioned’ correspondence with email. With email, for example, my connections with relatives have become more active. The same holds for contact with a friend living in Russia – the post moves so slowly there. (w42, student)

The computer is also to a lesser extent a tool for work and study, and can be used to write and transact bank business. But no one wanted to manage everything with a computer, contrary to information society rhetoric which promotes e-business. The importance of obtaining, spreading and searching for information was also stressed in the answers. Therefore, the usefulness
and practicality of information technology were accentuated in the answers to the questionnaire. However, the computer can entertain as well. People—and not only young men—also reported that they play and otherwise spend some free time with the computer.

It’s nice to potter around with the computer and install programs on my own machine. It [the computer] is mainly for entertainment at home, but a tool for studying (and for work, possibly in the future). I might get a slightly empty feeling if there was no computer at home. (w35, unemployed)

If for some the computer is a tool that makes it quicker to handle matters as well as being a practical and entertaining thing, then for others it is insignificant, revolting or even terrifying. In this case, the meanings that are relevant to their lives and which would allow them to make sense of it have not arisen. Thus, refusing to use information technology seems reasonable. Why waste time, effort and money on something that is meaningless and useless? It is not (always) a question of passivity or incapacity resulting from a lack of knowledge and ability, though information society rhetoric might give such an impression. It can rather be the result of a person’s conscious choice to draw a line in a situation where information technology has no place or use in their life. IT simply ‘has not got, nor will it have, a meaning’ (w65, pensioner) in everyone’s life. A critical attitude towards information society rhetoric, IT and the techno-hype penetrating Finnish society can be read from such opinions.

Some people want nothing to do with information technology and at the CRC they have a right to this opinion: ‘I don’t like computers and I won’t learn to use them’ (m40, unemployed). The computers are in open view at the CRC, but no one is pushed into using them against their own will. However, some respondents were worried about whether such a refusal was valid now, let alone in the future—exactly because the technology is assumed to be relevant to everyone in Finland. What if someday everybody had to use computers, whether they wanted to or not, just to manage in society and be able to handle private matters? In that case information technology can become ‘a necessary evil’ (w43, unemployed) and familiarizing oneself with it begins to feel like an obligation or even a necessity. There might be a surprising number of people who are using computers reluctantly out of a sense of duty (Brosnan, 1998): three out of four respondents to the questionnaire said that they used computers at least occasionally somewhere—but not all were especially keen on IT.20 As one user said:

[Information technology] probably won’t have any crucial meaning for me anymore. But I have to keep up with the times, as I don’t know if it will be possible to do without computers in the future. (w63, pensioner)
The questionnaire not only asked people about their personal involvement with IT, but also about its wider social significance. The same people who saw positive aspects to IT at the personal level quite often thought that it was good on the more general level, too: ‘Really yes! More, more! Faster’ (w23, student). Respondents claimed (following information society rhetoric) that IT might be important, for example, as a global phenomenon enabling free communication beyond the restrictions of time and place, in saving paper (and hence addressing concerns about natural resources), even saving the country from recession:

It [information technology], together with automation, makes it possible for us to get some kind of social security from its different forms even though we have a lot of unemployment. (m55, pensioner)

The people with very positive attitudes hardly ever explained their opinions. Information technology simply is ‘a good thing!’ (m26, unemployed/trainee), which ‘makes many things easier’ (w22, unemployed). Perhaps having a positive attitude to IT is so generally accepted and even expected or self-evident within dominant information society rhetoric that there is no real need to justify it.

However the respondents who dislike IT also gave few reasons for their attitudes. The ‘technologization’ of society is simply ‘a shitty thing’ (m50, unemployed) if not just a trivial matter: ‘let it spread [into society], I’ll try to manage without it as far as possible’ (w43, employed). ICT developments may seem to be unavoidable. The coming of IT cannot be prevented, as one respondent noted, ‘it’s a part of the times, we just have to adapt to it’ (m50, employed). The ‘hype’ connected to the information society and increasing information technology might also seem oppressive, since the media is filled with stories about it; the information society is spoken of everywhere. As one person commented:

In my opinion the blessings of IT are too strongly emphasized. Especially in Finland. We could manage with less technology, but society is based too strongly on information technology. (m36, unemployed)

The majority of the respondents in the questionnaire did not see IT as either a negative or a positive phenomenon, but rather as something with both good and bad aspects. Most commonly the positive sides of IT were mentioned as faster and easier communication (email), easier opportunities for seeking, retrieving and distributing information (internet), providing job opportunities and study tools (word processing). Thus, the positive qualities of information technology are mainly connected with people’s personal lives, with familiar ways of using and experiencing things. The disadvantages, by contrast, appear as broad, general worries and fears.
When it improves the networking of NGOs it’s fine. But, then again, it speeds the movement of the money and the short-sighted self-interests of the multinationals, so it stinks. (28-year-old respondent, who give no other personal information)

Some respondents were worried about the ‘enslaving’ effects of (information) technology and its possible effects on people: ‘It’s terrifying to think of people changing into ‘machine people”’ (w30, student). In their answers to the open questions on the questionnaire, some wrote that they worried about human interactions decreasing as services became increasingly performed by computer. Social equality and, in particular, the ability of the elderly and children to cope, were also common concerns.

As described above, the CRC visitors produce different meanings to IT and information society based on their local, personal circumstances. Compared with information society strategies and visions, those meanings are very practical, down-to-earth understanding. This falls in line with wider studies of the way in which the internet is used in the developed world, as reviewed by Castells (2001) and Haythornthwaite and Wellman (2002). What is distinctive about this study is that it shows the way in which a social place, the CRC NetCafé, supports the development of such engagement with information technology by consciously building space for different meanings. Such places are rare in Finland, where using the computer is a norm, and non-use is not even an option – at least as far as information society strategies and rhetoric is concerned.

VOLUNTARY, NOT FORCED INVOLVEMENT

The Joensuu CRC and its NetCafé is one practical aspect of the Finnish model that Castells and Himanen (2002) describe in theory. However, while they see such initiatives as simply rolling out a centralized information society strategy, this account has shown that in North Karelia (and specifically within this project) it is possible to take account of people’s local practices, their own voice and the meanings that they choose to give to information technology. The activities at the Joensuu CRC do not seek to force people’s involvement from the top-down, but only to offer the potential for self-motivated involvement in the information society. This may result in people choosing to learn about information technologies and changing their practices to accommodate them, whereas initially they might have felt hostile or disinterested. But it might also confirm their view that they want to have as little to do with the technology as possible.

Experiences of involvement in the general activities of the CRC arise in two ways. On the one hand, the centre offers a place where simply hanging around is permitted. A person spending time at the centre might become interested in the activities and jobs provided and thus gradually move from visitor to active participant. On the other hand, the centre also offers more
structured opportunities to participate and experience responsibility and success through employment and training, which can lead to self-directed involvement. Similarly, the NetCafé also offers opportunities for participation. The computers are placed at a central location in full view and they can be freely used, but there is no pressure to use them. Thus, involvement in the information society is created in a sort of roundabout way: when people look at the computers long enough, they might become interested in trying to use them. In the NetCafé people have an opportunity to familiarize themselves with IT without any cost, with support and, above all, voluntarily.

Information society rhetoric easily gives the impression that you have to be at least a moderate, and preferably a heavy user to cope with this technological world. Non-use has tended to be understood simply as a lack of education and equipment, with computer competence often equated with literacy as a meter for societal fitness in information society rhetoric. Gaining IT competence can even be described as some kind of obligatory educational enterprise, as conventional literacy once was in Finland. Only the poorest dropped out of the literacy campaign; and the same idea can be seen in information society rhetoric. It is not difficult to imagine how this view appears to those who want to keep their distance from IT despite all their education (Himanen, 1995). Therefore it is extremely important that the NetCafé provides space for differing personal interpretations of information technology. There is room for both ‘heavy users’ who are excited about computers, ‘moderate users’ and even for ‘total refusers’ who want nothing to do with IT. Personal attitudes to information technology are the result of conscious choices and as such they are respected at the CRC and its NetCafé.

The Joensuu CRC NetCafé, as a combination of the third sector and the information society, is an exceptional place from the perspective of information society rhetoric and IT. On the one hand, the CRC and its NetCafé are a peculiar success story. They have an excellent image: many people from other parts of Finland and abroad visit the place and are interested in its activities. Furthermore, the publicity is usually positive. The intertwining of the NetCafé and the centre has also become stronger with time and the importance of the NetCafé has grown, both to the centre and its visitors. The visitors consider the NetCafé to be useful and a beneficial thing to have – so long as IT does not overpower either the centre or themselves.

On the other hand, there have been a surprising number of difficulties in securing permanent funding for the NetCafé. Perhaps the NetCafé’s success is not seen as sufficiently in line with the ideas propounded by information society strategies and rhetoric. It has not secured funding as frequently as other information society development projects in North Karelia. This
limited support might be as a result of visitors to the centre and the NetCafé having shown that the demands of the information society have not been accepted as such. The space given to IT in people’s lives is not as great, or achieved as straightforwardly, as the information society rhetoric has led us to expect (although the influence of this rhetoric is noticeable in people’s opinions and words).

The visitors to the CRC and its NetCafé have proved that even a Finn can decide not to use IT at all, or to use it as little as possible – in spite of the fact that IT is said to be for everyone in Finland. And they dare to say it aloud when the atmosphere is sympathetic to different opinions, as it is in the centre. Thus, the main point of NetCafé is exactly that when information technology is combined with the CRC’s various other actions, it cannot be an independent, self-governed phenomenon – nor can it be a separate nor closed (nerd) world which is larger-than-life. CRC is a place and a community of networks that produces a sense of proportion concerning information technology and the rhetoric of information society strategy.

Notes

1 The concept of the information society has became one of the most central slogans of society level (as well as other) discussions in Finland; all social and cultural questions tend to be looked at through information society filters (Aro, 2001). A significant part of the information society is the language – that is, the information society rhetoric – connected with it. According to Knuuttila (2001) typical features of information society rhetoric are first, that the whole (of the information society) stands for its parts. Second, that the information society, or its coming, has universal consequences which concern everybody. And third, the causes and results of the information society are not seen as open to general or individual influence. These features could be dismissed as ‘just’ rhetoric, but they have actual effects on Finnish society, on local practice and in people’s lives – as information society-related actions are based exactly on this rhetorical approach.

2 Maybe the best known example of the latter is the ‘Upper Karelia Learning Project’ (see Castells and Himanen, 2002).

3 On the social shaping of technology, see MacKenzie and Wajcman (1985).

4 NOKIS lasted four years (1997–2001) and was part of European Union’s RISI 1 – programme.

5 About 90 visitors responded to the questionnaire during the course of one week. There were fewer respondents than anticipated because of extremely cold weather that is rare even in North Karelia. This reduced the number of visitors to the centre. I refer to the answers to open questions as follows: m54, unemployed means the respondent is a 54-year-old unemployed man. For the interviews I refer to the name and the occupation of the interviewee.

6 I have considered the fluidity of the centre and its NetCafé using Mol and Law’s (1994) concept of fluid space (Uotinen, 2000b, in Finnish).

7 Soroppi ‘is an association, which aims to unite and involve people interested in voluntary work and who are living in the association’s domicile (Joensuu) and nearby
districts, to prevent people’s marginalization and improve their social intercourse, to activate communication between the citizens and decision-makers, to improve joint humanity as well as to develop services and support activities at the area of the association and the near municipalities’. See Soroppi Ry, URL (consulted September 2002): http://kansalaistalo.jns.fi/soroppi/soroppy.htm (in Finnish). ‘Soroppi’ means ‘coffee and cake’ in Karelian dialect.

8 The city of Joensuu and the Finnish Federation for Social Welfare and Health had common HYVE projects in Joensuu and North Karelia. HYVE is an acronym for ‘Regional support networks, for citizens’ welfare’. The aim of HYVE was to build connections between the third sector and public administration.

9 The Finnish Federation for Social Welfare and Health is a national association comprised of different organizations in the social and welfare fields. The purpose of the federation is to improve well-being of all citizens and the social and health politics relating to them at national, regional, local and international levels. The federation acts for social rights, equality, to increase citizens’ opportunities to participate and influence as well as to decrease and prevent underprivilege and marginalization’ (Yhteisvastuullinen ja osallistava hyvinvointiyhteiskunta, 2002: 3).

10 The Joensuu chapter of FRC is exceptional in Finland, because it acts in networks with other CRC actors and all its activities take place at the centre. Usually the Finnish Red Cross chapters act as independent units.

11 The idea of the ‘worry-checkpoint’ is to be a ‘cloakroom for worries’. People can come there and ‘check in’ their problems while having a chat with a trained helper. According to the ideology of the CRC no one can, or should, take away people’s responsibility for their own life, so the visitor then takes their issues away with them after the discussion, but with the benefit of encouragement and advice on how to deal them – and then decides by themselves what to do with their problems.

12 Finland’s Slot Machine Association (RAY) has a monopoly on slot machines and casino operations. The purpose of the association is to collect money in order to support the work of voluntary social and health organizations. The members of RAY are 97 national social and health organizations. See RAY lyhyesti, URL (consulted September 2002): http://www.ray.fi/ray/index.htm (in Finnish).

13 This tolerance is not the easy ‘anything goes’ type, however. The line was drawn, for example, when an extreme right-wing organization applied to hold a meeting at the centre. Those involved in the centre discussed this and in the end they decided that everyone is tolerated at the centre except for those who do not tolerate others.

14 The CRC’s information society involvement includes the NetCafé, as well as citizens’ support services and Jelli-services for associations (Tietoyhteiskunnan resursikeskus -application – see URL (consulted September 2002): http://kansalaistalo.jns.fi/admin/hake99v6.htm (in Finnish). In the Jelli-pages there are numerous contacts to different organizations and associations. See Jelli-järjestöt, URL (consulted September 2002): http://kansalaistalo.jns.fi/jelli.htm (in Finnish).

15 61 percent of the respondents said that nothing irritates or disturbs them in the NetCafé. If something is disturbing, it is the queues and the booking system (25%) and the noise (6%), but not the old technology or lack of programmes or guidance.

16 The most used NetCafé services are all associated with the internet. Thus, the popularity of the NetCafé is completely based on the internet. Without these web connections the computers would probably not be crowded at all: other possible uses, such as word processing, printing, reading the newsgroups and file transfer, are rather limited compared with the popularity of surfing the internet.
17 In an attempt to reduce queues, no person is allowed to book a computer for more than one hour. One computer dedicated only for checking email and other short-time use (maximum 15 minutes) is outside the booking scheme.

18 The opinions and experiences of the respondents to the questionnaire were explored through open questions. Out of 94 people, 60 answered the question: ‘What is the meaning of IT in your life?’

19 It is interesting that making contact with other people and the sociality resulting from, and mediated by, this technology is exactly what interests people about IT and makes them use it. This is in contrast to the common accusation that information technology destroys ‘real’ human relations between people by decreasing face-to-face contact (see Jones, 1997; Nguyen and Alexander, 1996).

20 Three out of four respondents to the questionnaire said that they use computers at least occasionally somewhere: 33 percent of the respondents use computers daily, 23 percent weekly, and 18 percent more seldom; 26 percent of the respondents never use a computer. However, more than half of these non-users are, or might be, interested in learning some IT skills, with 55% percent of the respondents stating that they sometimes need help with computers. However, 73 percent thought that they could manage in the information society (with some help).

21 Out of 94 people, 65 answered this question: ‘What do you think about IT and its spread throughout society?’


In IT rhetoric the ambivalent nature of technology is usually described via the contrast between the challenge and the threat. The ‘correct use’ of technology is usually presented as a solution to this problem. Thus the essential theme of the culture-critical and political rhetoric concerning the information society is finding this magical solution, the ‘correct use’ of IT.

See also Brosnan (1998: 26): ‘People can hold both positive and negative attitudes towards computers; they are not opposite ends of a single dimension.’

References


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