

Cloudy talks

Exploring accounts about cloud computing

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The aim of this thesis is to discuss the character, purpose, and use of the language surrounding new technology, specifically cloud computing. The thesis is situated within library and information science. Its theoretical basis and argumentation builds upon notions articulated by Berger and Luckmann (1966), known as “the social construction of reality”, and upon conceptual metaphor theory developed by Lakoff and Johnson (2003). The thesis discusses the consequences of how cloud computing is explained and legitimised by various actors, such as cloud providers, computer scientists, IT professionals, business leaders, and strategic staff in organisations that had implemented cloud services. It builds on four articles that are based on diverse empirical materials and methods.

A starting point is that IT has been talked about as neutral and unobtrusive. Instead, the results of this thesis show that accounts about IT hide its complexity both regarding its implementation and use. Talk about computing as a utility from the 1950s and forward was surprisingly precise in predictions concerning future IT. However, rather than accepting such accounts as communicating clear insights, it can be argued that this use of language led to the legitimation and institutionalisation of certain normative ways to talk about IT. The *utility metaphor* could, therefore, be seen as a powerful persuasive device, guiding changes in policies and investments. In today’s promulgation of cloud technologies by Google, Apple, Facebook and Amazon, the four internet giants sometimes referred to as GAFAs, it is possible to distinguish the extension of the utility metaphor into images of power, choice, and a transformed life, while complexity issues are considerably downplayed.

Societies, organisations, and individuals all over the world are now, more than ever before, connected to the internet through various cloud technologies. Scrutinised in the thesis are accounts about Google Apps for Education (GAFE), a suite of cloud-based apps increasingly introduced in schools in Sweden and all over the globe. These cloud services are described as free and able to fulfil various user needs. This persuasive promulgation, together with various rhetorical strategies in their privacy policies, disguises the circumstance that Google exploits user information for its own business purposes by creating algorithmic identities of users based on individual web behaviour. With customers’ utilisation, cloud providers such as Google can act powerfully from a distance. As they develop remote control through their widespread cloud technology, they can affect individuals, businesses, and society at large. In this and other ways, IT will continue to reshape communication, the way people relate to each other, and to themselves.

Keywords: information management, cloud computing, cloud services, cloud technology, social constructionism, social construction of reality, conceptual metaphor theory, Google Apps for Education (GAFE), GAFAs, algorithmic identities