

Motivation and Proposal for PhD Research on Memetic Governance

Øyvind Vada

Background and comprehensive motivation

I hold a cand. polit degree (M.Phil. in Political Science) from the University of Oslo, specializing in organizational theory, economics and communication.

When I started my studies in 1988, I had already finished my education and duty as an operational officer in the Royal Norwegian Navy and a private pilot education in the US.

Parallel to my University studies I worked as a freelance journalist, and after one and half year of studies, I got my first full time job as press secretary and spokes man for The Federation of Norwegian Commercial and Service Enterprises. A few years later I turned out to be one of four executives in the Scandinavian consumer electronic group Elkjop when it was listed on Oslo Stock Exchange.

Dixion Group, listed in London, acquired Elkjop at nearly ten times its initial stock value after a strong expansion in the Nordic markets. I then got the role as CEO of Mogul, an IT start-up in Oslo where I led the initial organic and profitable growth of the company. Later after several mergers, Mogul was listed on the Stockholm Stock Exchange.

During these years I was studying part time, and I completed my M.Phil. in Political Science in year 2000 with a thesis on “Lobbying in the European Commission”.

The constant shifts between theory and practice has always been a part of my educational journey.

I am fascinated by what I experience as large gaps between sense making and perspectives on governance of organizations in the theoretical realms at universities and other educational institutions on one hand, and how different practitioners navigate and make organizations work in practice on the other.

The complexity in operational practice, and what I see as a strong simplification of reality in reductionist theory in traditional social science and strategy, has led me into studies of complexity, evolution and pragmatism applied to social systems.

In 2003 I established Memetor, a consultancy company that reduces the gap between theoretical strategies and operational practice in organizations. Memetor’s facilitators and trainers come from diverse backgrounds, and share the passion for helping individuals and collectives engage to make organizations flourish. The company has offices in Brussels, Oslo and Singapore. The Memetor concept is delivered all around the world.

In 2005, I joined the multidisciplinary research group, ECCO directed by prof. Francis Heylighen localized at the VUB. Since that time I have been developing a platform, both in theory and practice, for governance of complex social systems.

Research Proposal: Memetic Governance

How can governance be executed in a world where the public, private and third sectors are changing rapidly due to globalization and increased complexity? How do we, as individuals, think, talk, decide and act together in all types of social systems, both locally and globally in a more and more interwoven world?

Traditional reductionist and hierarchical approaches to governance tend to fail in practice due to these changes, and we see signs of a “governance sclerosis” where national and global organizations are struggling to produce intended outcomes in an effective and efficient way.

To reduce the gap between governance theory and governance practice, there is a need for approaches that embrace complexity. I will in my PhD further develop a *memetic* (Heylighen 1992, 1998) approach for doing so, taking into account that we as individuals belong to different formal and informal social systems. These systems can be regarded as combinations of hierarchies, networks and markets (Williamson 1975).

Memetics is a post-positivist way to approach perception, thought, communication and action in social systems. Memetics is derived from natural science and genetics, and uses the same research programme studying social diffusion and adaptation of signs and objects.

Individuals and groups of individuals in social systems are in my approach treated as agents. As agents, we are free and goal-directed entities that maximize utility, benefit and/or fitness (Heylighen 2009:6). We often have local and limited knowledge, and cannot always foresee effects of our individual actions on larger collective wholes (Simon 1957).

Governing organizations includes governing agents. I assume it is possible to design for a desired emergent outcome, where agents interpret predefined memes that influence how they perceive and process themselves, their surroundings and the tasks at hand. Different sets of predefined memes are created as tools and cognitive templates that form and process subjective thoughts, communications and actions, both individually and collectively.

My aim is to develop an alternative way of allocating resources and exercising control and coordination in social systems – a new form of governance through a method where predefined memes are instrumentally infused into social systems through processes where free and bounded rational agents are regarded as participants and players that impact their surroundings based on their own subjective agency.

I will show how agents become carriers of shared information elements called memes in different arenas for diffusion and adaptation. The predefined memes are formed as iconic and discrete models that can be applied to individual day-to-day situations as well as complex collective challenges. In the arenas, memes are woven into active exercises and assignments. Individual agents recognize the value of other agents’ viewpoints, make sense of the social systems they are part of and collectively create solutions that reduce the gap between the system’s strategic intent and its operational success.

I will present selected empirical systems where the theoretical approach developed in the thesis is applied in practice. This will be in organizations I work for developing governance models based on my theoretical work. The presentation and investigation of practical application will be introduced with a discussion of the thesis' methodology with a specific emphasis on validity and reliability

The main task of my PhD work is to merge an improved version of Memetics with contributions within the literature of governance theory developing a replicable method for Memetic Governance.

References

Christensen, T. & Læg Reid, P. (2009). Transcending New Public Management: The Increasing Complexity of Balancing Control and Autonomy.. *Journal of Public Administration*. ISSN 1674-2486. 2(1), s 1- 29

Heylighen, F. (1992): "Selfish Memes and the Evolution of Cooperation", *Journal of Ideas*;

Heylighen, F. (1998): "What makes a meme successful? Selection criteria for cultural evolution", in: Proc. 16th Int. Congress on Cybernetics (Association Internat. de Cybernetique, Namur);

Heylighen, F. (2009): Complexity and Self-organization, in: Encyclopedia of Library and Information Sciences, eds. M. J. Bates & M. N. Maack (Taylor & Francis);

Simon, Herbert A. (1957): *Models of man - social and rational*. New York, John Wiley and Sons;

Williamson O.E. (1975): "Markets and hierarchies: Analysis and antitrust implications" Free Press, New York.