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Traveling ideas like a global virus infections for leadership

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Abstract

'Traveling ideas' denotes that virtually identical management ideas crop up more or less simultaneously in similar organizations globally. The encounter between thought and practice may be lasting; beliefs may affect training and practice. Leaders in organizations may play a more active role than the one often depicted in management fashion theory. The ideas represent a trade-off between business strategy, leadership, and employees. We keep acceptable and adequate ideas while we drop unacceptable and inadequate plans. The ideas work like a sensitizing concept of directions along which to look for temporary order and stability. Adopting a business idea is like a virus spreading worldwide, leaving an enormous strength through global corporations and societies.

The study methodology is built upon a total of 20 in depth interviews in Telia and Telenor done in 2019 and 2020. We also analyzed the annual reports for 2020 for the 20 largest corporations at the stock markets in Oslo, Stockholm and Copenhagen (N=60) to compare the results. We developed seven hypotheses from the literature foundation for empirical testing.

We identified the following ideas at Telia (Sweden) and Telenor (Norway): Globalization, digitalization, sustainability, trust-based leadership, value-based leadership, virtual teams, project management agility, and flexible workplaces. The ideas came up both top-down as strategic intentions and bottom-up as the direction of work or by the COVID-19 crisis. We found that most of the 60 largest corporations at the Scandinavian stock market practice the same ideas. We have thus concluded that strategic and leadership concepts work as traveling ideas. These buzz words go to almost any private business forming the way of thinking and working as a traveling virus. We argue that this article's empirical test supports our belief that a virus-inspired theory gives a more vibrant picture than the fashion theory. Our analysis shows that four of our six hypotheses, derived from the virus-inspired theory, are strengthened by Telia and Telenor's empirical explorative story. Telia and Telenor have decided upon what is adequate and acceptable as their business ideas and beliefs, similar to other corporations globally as a virus infection. The virus might hit the corporate culture in different ways, Virtually identical ideas crop up globally more or less simultaneously in similar organizations. A primary idea virus is running in every larger organization with a smaller differentiation than anticipated.

In Telia and Telenor, the virus ideas worked like mission statements giving meaning and belief to work as a spiritual business soul of belonging to the modernity and the future. The virus works like directions along which to look for meaning, belonging, and modernity. The image of

modernity through global buzz words might be a self-betrayal and most businesses would probably benefit more from critical reflections and a learning from their own culture and history.

Keywords: Traveling ideas, Fashion theory, Virus theory, Digitalization, Sustainability, Business spirituality

1. The rise, decline and fall of travelling management ideas

"Travelling ideas," denotes that virtually identical management ideas crop up globally more or less simultaneously in similar organizations. The purpose is to understand the adoption and development of these travelling management ideas. In studies of this phenomenon, the dominant theoretical perspective is "management fashion theory" (Abrahamson 1991; Abrahamson 1996; Abrahamson & Fairchild 1999). Proponents of this research tradition liken the spread of ideas about how organizations changed and organized to the global diffusion of specific clothing fashions (Gill & Whittle 1993). Style describes the spreading of strategic, leadership, and management ideas. Fashion creators are the leading global consulting companies. The fashion might be ideas of the lean, core business, outsourcing, agility, or new public management dressing up organizations in the same way. Weick (1997) looked upon fashion theory as an explanation of fashion and design stories making sense of temporary organizational theory.

Røvik (2011), who launched his alternative "virus-inspired theory" approach, believes that the metaphor of virus propagation can serve to fill several of the gaps that fashion theory has left us. He stresses how fashion theory seems to presuppose the fleeting nature of ideas: that they come and go without exerting any impact on business practice. Using the virus metaphor, Røvik (2011, 2008) seeks to pinpoint the possibility that the encounter between idea and exercise may be lasting, beliefs may affect practice, and leaders in organizations may play a more active role than those often depicted in the fashion theory. The involved parties in these descriptions are usually the idea producers, in consulting organizations or management gurus. In contrast, the consumers, leaders, and employees in an organization often describe as passive virus recipients.

2. Research questions

1. What similarities do we find between a virus infection and travelling management and leadership ideas?
2. Why do travelling leadership and management ideas crop up at the same time locally and globally?
3. How do we adapt, develop and reject the travelling ideas in our organizations?

The paper is positioned as an inductive clarified, subjective research paper within leadership and management theory. The theoretical foundation for the paper is the fashion theory within leadership and organizational theory which we propose do not have the necessary explaining power opening up for a new virus theory.

3. From fashion theory to virus inspired theory - the theoretical foundation

In the past few decades, we have seen a rise in the creation, dissemination, and commercialization of management ideas. Ideas emerging in one part of the world are packaged with descriptions and examples and then disseminated worldwide and across sectoral boundaries through the business press, consultants, conferences. This distinctly global phenomenon may be characterizing modern businesses (Enwall & Kipping 2004). This phenomenon has also boosted researchers' interest in how and why management ideas spread and what happens when they interface with organizations (Abrahamson 1996; Davenport & Prusak 2003; Sturdy 2004).

One of the more robust perspectives in this research field has been comparing management ideas to fashion. This approach has shown how management ideas resemble other styles by observing their popularity trends, both rising and falling. One of the proponents of this perspective is Eric Abrahamson (Abrahamson 1991; Abrahamson & Rosenkopf 1993; Abrahamson 1996; Abrahamson & Fairchild 1999). Recently, however, management fashion theory has been increasingly called into question, notably because it offers little explanation of what happens to an idea once it is adopted by, or penetrates, an organization (Scarbrough & Swan 2001; Clark & Greatbatch 2004; David & Strang 2006; Morris & Lancaster 2006). To offer a more differentiated and nuanced understanding of what happens after a management idea penetrates an organization, Røvik has presented a theory comparing management ideas to viruses instead (Røvik, 2011).

Røvik (2011) argues that a virus metaphor might be fruitful for understanding and describing organizations' handling of management ideas. Using the virus as a metaphor for idea handling processes, Røvik combines knowledge from biology and virology with organization research and management ideas. Metaphors have been used in organizational theory for many years and, by taking a concept from one domain and transposing it to another, and using the metaphor as a "surprise machine" (Gouldner 1970). New insights have come, and we have expanded our knowledge in organization theory. A challenge in using metaphors in theory development is balancing between sharing sufficient similarities between the two domains and keeping a high potential for novel insights. We feel that the virus-inspired theory presented by Røvik (2011) intuitively shares many similarities with idea handling processes (i.e., diffusion, adoption, contagion, and the complexity of the diffusion process).

Nevertheless, the similarities are not trivially, and the potentially novel insights are apparent. In the article, Røvik (2011) applies Ortony's theory of "salience imbalance" (Ortony 1979a, 1979b) when describing the virus-inspired approach. Røvik (2011) describes the procedure of salience imbalance as follows:

"By mirroring the target domain in light of prominent source domain features, one can reinforce features of the target that we consider previously non-salient or even borrow notable elements from the source. Attribute them to the mark and thus reveal qualities of the goal formerly unperceived" (Røvik, 2011, 634).

4. The development of an empirical hypotheses

We have used the theoretical fundament to develop seven hypotheses for testing the traveling virus idea empirically. To our knowledge, our approach represents the first empirical test of the virus theory upon management processes.

H1: It is probable that Telia and Telenor initially is an active part, which also involves local "actorhood," i.e., actors who actively translate and transform the traveling idea.

A virus will trigger a defense mechanism or an immune reaction when trying to infect a host organism. When it comes to ideas, this kind of defense mechanism could, in its most severe form, lead to non-adoption or, at a later stage, rejection of the concept. Nevertheless, other idea-handling types of processes, such as isolation or expiry, are also possible in later stages. Loneliness could be described as the idea only being present in documents at the leadership level and lacking significance for organizational practice. Expiry is another way to disarm the traveling idea. When the employees in the organization simply stop caring. The idea gradually evaporates.

H2: When the virus ideas meet Telia and Telenor, it will trigger one or several forms of defense mechanisms.

In virology, a virus contains a genetic code that dictates how it will reproduce in the host cell. The virus's phase takes control of the host cell's metabolism and uses it to multiply rapidly is called replication. Replication is part of concerning management ideas. Entrenchment is the term used to describe how a concept or a design transforms into practice, like routines or other organizational structures. Specific intended effects are in line with how the ideas integrate within the host could imagine that a public organization adopting the concept of new public management, for example, would discuss how and what Value they produce and somewhat later introduce new roles like process owners. Contrary to the fashion theory, this indicates that traveling ideas can be implemented and sometimes have long-lasting and considerable impact. The views behave more or less as a permanent virus for many years and not like a temporary fashion.

H3: The idea will materialize into changes within Telia and Telenor. These changes will be following how the concept describes in theory.

Viruses require a period of incubation. There is a period varying in length for different viruses from when the host is exposed until the symptoms appear. We claim that management ideas follow the same route and often linger in latency states before they materialize. A virus refers to a maturation. The maturation phase seems to vary depending on the intensity, i.e., the strength and the duration of attempts to materialize a management idea in an organization. Power, in this case, refers to how massively the designs promote.

H4: An intensive initial campaign within Telia and Telenor will result in a short period before changes in line with the traveling idea notice.

Sometimes, when it comes to viruses, an error may occur in the replication process: the virus mutates, i.e., miscopies itself. The mutation can happen when, for example, two viruses invade a single host cell and form an entirely new infection. Some variations are successful and do not harm the virus. These mutations also often result in the mutant virus becoming invisible to the immune system. Here, we draw the parallel with the renaming of management ideas, when the linguistic label is changed, and a local name perhaps attached to a general, globally diffused thought. But in other cases, the mutation can be compared with the translation of management ideas, i.e., generic ideas that in a specific organization more or less deliberately transform into something different (Czarniawska & Joerges, 1996; Hellström, 2007)

H5: The traveling idea will in the local version at Telia and Telenor in some or several aspects differ from how the concept describes in theory.

To conclude the review of the virus metaphor, we have to understand the idea of dormancy. One feature of certain viruses is that they may be challenging to eliminate once they have entered the body. They may then, for example, alternate between active and inactive states. The introduction of a new idea often initiates great enthusiasm, grand plans, and a generally high activity level. The views get over in the "bend over here it comes again" phase where the employees do not identify the purposes as urgent or useful or adequate. Inactive management ideas reactivate when actors other than those who worked on them initially present new plans for their introduction and use. Reactivated management ideas often assume an original shape (mutate) where leaner get smarter and online homework get flexible or globally get glocal, or greener get sustainable.

H6: In the longitudinal story describing process management within Telia and Telenor, there will be an alternation between active and inactive states.

The idea-handling processes the virus uses as a metaphor we relate in various and sometimes complex ways. Their relations can be of three general types: succession, tangling, or competition (Røvik, 2011, p. 645). We might ask ourselves how H1 and H2 are related if we look at the seven hypotheses presented in this article. They are both in the early phase of the idea handling process, and the interpretive flexibility (Bijker, 1995) in Telia and Telenor is probably still high.

H7: The virus buzz words tend to give meaning for the leaders, managers, and employees as a spiritual star or soul for the corporation.

There is a strong need for a mission star or meaning to believe in working in today's corporations. The virus buzz words might work as a spiritual belief for hope and order, and togetherness. The managers often behave like prophets for the virus ideas and present them as the gospel of modernity.

Nevertheless, are they in succession, intertwined, or conflict? What is the relationship between H5 (mutation) and H3 (replication)? They are in a competition with each other since H3 is more or less a replication (i.e., copy) following the original idea. At the same time, H5 transforms the unique design into another shape. However, H3 and H5 are also similar since both are active phases where things happen. Another thought might be that H5 can have a relation to H2 (immunity), in which the protection (i.e., resistance force) is regarded as a fundamental reason for the occurrence of the mutation (H5). Finally, it might be tricky to separate and classify H6 (dormancy) and H4 (incubation), which is probably best seen as complementary.

5. Methodology

The virus theory comprises several parts, and the time aspect is crucial for understanding (of replication and dormancy, for example). Scope for comparing two periods, the early phase pre-COVID-19 and a more current phase during COVID-19, is a component of our study.

The study is a case study with interviews and central documents as the primary data sources. Throughout, the Telia and Telenor showed interest in our research, and we were thus guaranteed good access.

We have conducted ten interviews in April 2019 (5 in Telia and 5 in Telenor) with various "process owners," managers, and work developers. Each meeting will focus on the respondent's views and experience of traveling ideas and lasted 1–1 1/2 hours by phone. We repeated the ten interviews in April 2020. Many questions will focus on the changes in the organization during the years. The historical situation and how the respondent perceived and interpreted the changes made along the journey to the present case. What did they see as critical incidents in why things turned out to be the way they are. For this study, we found their general strategic overview of what has happened in the organization to be an advantage (Feeser & Willard, 1990). A potential disadvantage of choosing organizational leaders as the prime source might be that they can be seen as biased and not likely to criticize strategic decisions partly responsible for themselves. However, we feel that most of the respondents were very open and reflecting during the interviews.

Our approach regarding Telia and Telenor from without and within — also means that we devote relatively little space to the internal organization. It is considerably more interesting to study the transformational processes, i.e., traveling ideas as workflows.

We decided to look into the annual reports of 2020 for the 20 largest corporations at each of the stock markets in Oslo, Stockholm, and Copenhagen to investigate if we could find a description of similar traveling ideas as followed in Telia and Telenor.

The paper represents a form of clarified subjectivity exploring roads less travelled discussed in leadership and management. The paper describes the complexity of trends forming nearly all

organizations. The study is an explorative qualitative study based where conclusions are based upon inductive subjective interpretations of interviews and documents.

6. Analyses of hypotheses

H1: It is probable that Telia and Telenor initially is an active part, which also involves local "actorhood," i.e., leadership actors who actively translate and transform the traveling idea. The extended leadership groups in Telia and Telenor actively supported the ideas of globalization, digitalization, sustainability, virtual teams, and value-based leadership as a part of the corporation's strategy. In contrast, trust-based leadership and online workplace and homework are actively supported by the trade unions and the employees. There are top-down support and bottom-up support of traveling ideas and dynamic top-down and bottom-up support. The traveling ideas translated and transformed into the context and culture of Telia and Telenor.

H2: When the traveling idea meets Telia and Telenor, it will trigger one or several forms of defense mechanisms.

There is a defense mechanism both in the extended leadership group and among the employees. The employees did not support digitalization, virtual teams, and globalization, and the leadership group did not support trust-based leadership and value-based leadership. The practice of work during COVID-19 increased the support for handling work both from the workplace and from any distance. The defense mechanism met with the Scandinavian trust of not reducing the number of employees or early retirement or merely negotiating between the leadership and trade unions.

H3: The idea will materialize into changes within Telia and Telenor. These changes will be following how the concept describes in practice and theory.

To know an organization, we have to change the organization. The theoretical description of the ideas had no meaning neither for the employees nor for the leadership group. The COVID-19 changed the way Telia and Telenor worked without any script or theory behind the changes. The hypotheses are not supported since it is not the concept is described that matters,

H4: An intensive initial campaign within Telia and Telenor will result in a short period before changes in line with the traveling idea id into taking practice.

The leadership group might launch several ideas either as strategic choices or as work out plans. However, the employees might look upon the n ideas as traveling consulting ideas without a content ("bend over here the consulting ideas come again"). The initial campaign in Telenor and Telia was well-planned cooperation between the leadership group and the trade unions agreeing upon an initial campaign.

H5: The traveling idea will in the local version at Telia and Telenor in some or several aspects differ from how we describe a concept in theory.

The local version will not be a theory or concept, but an acceptance that digitalization, sustainability, and globalization does not threaten the jobs but creates new opportunities. Value-based leadership and trust-based leadership guarantee a just and acceptable working situation. The COVID-19 proved the success of working from home, and both Telia and Telenor adopted a model with up 50% home or distance work. The trade-off between the need for profitability and employee involvement and engagement builds into trust-based leadership.

H6: In the longitudinal story describing process management within Telia and Telenor, there will be an alternation between active and inactive states.

One-third of the employees are very actively involved in the ideas and of practicing them. One third is active in practicing them, and one third is neither active nor involved in the theory of the concept nor the practice of the traveling. There are active participants and not active participants. The intensity of the virus and the numbers affected will decide upon the participation.

H7: The virus buzz words tend to give meaning for the leaders, managers, and employees as a spiritual star or soul for the corporation.

In Telia and Telenor, the virus worked like mission statements giving meaning and belief to work also as a spiritual business soul of belonging to modernity and the future. The virus worked like directions along which to look for meaning and belonging.

7. An Analyses of travelling viruses in Scandinavian corporations

We investigated the 20 largest companies in the stock markets in Norway, Sweden, and Denmark(N=60). We found that 41 companies (69%) subscribed to the seven same virus ideas as Telia and Telenor:

Globalization

Digitalization

Sustainability

Virtual teams

Trust-based leadership

Value-based leadership

Project management agility

Flexible workplaces

Globalization means that the market and the production of services are global. Digitalization means that all facilities plan to be working digital—sustainable means to work for greener societal solutions. Virtual teams say that all organizations should be operating independently of geography and time. Trust-based leadership means that the leaders and managers trust the employees to find the best solutions. Value-based leadership means no tolerance towards discrimination or violence towards gender, race, sex, age, and mobbing cases. Project management agility means that we perform as agile projects. Flexible workplaces suggest that the employees might define if up to 20% of the job might be distance or homework. If we exclude trust-based leadership, about 80% subscribe to the other ideas. We conclude that at least 70% of Scandinavia's leading corporations subscribe to the same virus infected purposes as Telia and Telenor.

8. Towards a framework of a general virus theory

Below we present a table that illustrates similarities between viruses and management ideas. We then “mirror” the virus metaphor with our cases — Telia and Telenor — and generate our

hypotheses. The six characteristics from Rovik (2011) is adapted into a table for transformational process management to transform the theoretical organizational contribution into a summarizing Table 1. There are six characteristics possessed by viruses presented by Rovik (2011):

- (a) infectiousness,
- (b) immunity,
- (c) replication,
- (d) incubation,
- (e) mutation and
- (f) dormancy.

Table 1 Summing up viral features and corresponding idea-handling processes

1. Adoption: The formal decision in an organization to adopt an idea.
2. Non-adoption: The more or less deliberate organizational decision not to utilize an idea.
3. Isolation: A formally adopted but not implemented virus residing in units often at an organizations' top-level (e.g., in some actors' memories, in documents, and decoupled from organizational practices).
4. Expiry: The gradual evaporation of a formally adopted idea, often without any formal decision to quit.
5. Rejection: The decision to stop using an assumed idea regarding experiential learning (e.g., unsatisfactory results) and incompatibility, i.e., that it has proven not to fit in with institutional norms, logic, and sophisticated practices).
6. Entrenchment: The transformation of a virus into practice (i.e., it anchors in organizational structures, routines, and daily activities) in such a way that specific intended effects reproduce
7. Maturation: An idea lingers in an organization, often for a long time, before materializing, leading to a gradual, slow-phased transformation of the concept into practice.
8. Translation: The more or less deliberate change of methods and approaches occurred when they transfer and attempts offered to implement them.
9. Inactivation: Organizational activities related to an adopted MI either decrease or are discontinued.
10. Reactivation: An adopted but dormant idea is "turned on" again, and organizational activities connected to the idea increase.

Summing further up, we might relate four phases to the traveling and adoption of an idea:

- Replication
- Incubation
- Mutation
- Dormancy

One central aspect of the fashion metaphor that we seek to refine is the passive recipient image. A typical property of viruses is that they spread contagiously through direct contact

between the infected and those who are free from infection or various carriers. A virus cannot spread itself; instead, it spreads by infecting a living cell. However, in the complex and dynamic process of virus infection, involving the virus and the host cell, the latter is not a passive victim of an invader. The host cell absorbs the illness rather than that the virus breaks into a stirred cell. The sickness will spread through all the organs, and the idea has to be accepted as adequate and adopted throughout the organization as a fever calming down to average temperature. In our view, this description tallies with what often happens when ideas utilize in organizations. The consultant might contribute with masks or respirators to get the patient to accept the notion through isolation before the patient might meet the market.

9. Conclusion

This article aimed to discuss traveling ideas within leadership and an empirical test of if the ideas behave like a virus in an organization. We believe that the metaphor of virus propagation can fill several gaps that fashion theory has left us without an explanation. One clear example is the weak demonstration within the fashion theory of what happens within an organization after an idea has "traveled in" (David & Strang 2006; Scarbrough & Swan, 2001). Another example is simplified adoption-rejection dichotomy. The virus-inspired theory identifies more possible processes in the idea-handling process, leading to a variety of different outputs. Our study's significant contribution is this positive empirical test, which indicates that the virus metaphor can help us identify and understand idea-handling processes in greater detail with more sophistication than the fashion theory. By that, we have given a theoretical contribution to using our virus theory as an alternative to the fashion theory.

The empirical explorative story covers adoption (the formal decision and the initial local actorhood), entrenchment (the approach has led to changes), translation (the idea has transformed to something partly different), and inactivation/reactivation (related to key actors). The idea-handling processes related to immunity and incubation show that ideas like sustainability, digitalization, virtual teams, and trust-based leadership might have immunity in Telia and Telenor. In contrast, the incubation process of flexible work and trust-based leadership has a short incubation period.

10. Further research

We would also like to propose an area where the virus-inspired theory, through our study, can be further developed. We suggest the relation between entrenchment and translation in idea handling processes as one specific area toward which research should direct. Our case adds greater nuance to this area by presenting what we earlier in the text named miscopying. Through ignorance or lack of time, a kind of mutation arises when central elements in the genetic code are skipped or replaced by others. The mutation explains how an organization can assert that it is working following a specific idea but maybe doing something completely different. The concept of sustainability is an example of how Telia and Telenor support the idea but do some completely different in practice. It would be valuable to conduct an empirical test

through a longitudinal study in real-time. A longitudinal study would give better prerequisites for testing the hypotheses that we did not find support for in the present study.

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