

Book Review

Meeting People: Reframing ICTD Through Choice?

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Dorothea Kleine, *Technologies of Choice? ICTs, Development, and the Capabilities Approach*, Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2013, 267 pp., \$34.00 (hardcover). ISBN: 9780262018203

“Meeting People” is the title of the fifth chapter in Dorothea Kleine’s book, which nicely signals Kleine’s desire to reframe how ICTD is approached. The chapter’s title emphasizes the importance of focusing ICTD analyses on people rather than solely on technologies. The chapter introduces four case studies that examine research respondents who live in Algun, a rural town 600 kilometers south of Santiago, Chile. The chapter illustrates how individuals work within structural confines, using agency and other resources to overcome barriers and achieve self-defined development outcomes.

In this book, Kleine explores how Amartya Sen’s capabilities approach (Sen, 1999) might be drawn on and used as an alternative to economic growth models of development. Sen’s approach focuses on the process of expanding the real freedoms of people so they can live the kind of lives they have reason to value. This includes personal, social, economic, and political choices. Kleine’s “choice framework” attempts to operationalize the capabilities approach with a focus on ICTs. To illustrate how this might work, Kleine uses the example of Ana, an indigenous woman in her 50s and head of an extended family of 13 individuals spanning three generations. With little formal education, Ana developed entrepreneurial skills, obtained a state loan, and started a small ethnotourism business. This was made possible not simply by the availability of the loan, but by strong social and familial support relationships and a determination to achieve her goals. Ana’s prime motivation was to keep her family together and develop a sustainable livelihood for them all.

Ana’s capability to lead the kind of life that she has reason to value, and the ways in which ICTs might help or hinder her, is in essence the book’s central focus. Kleine sees this kind of self-identified capability as an appropriate development goal, and one that ICTs might help people achieve by expanding their choices. Paying particular attention to microentrepreneurs in Algun, Kleine develops her choice framework as a tool to analyze, understand, and represent the role of ICTs in this development process.

Kleine’s fieldwork was undertaken in 2006, at the height of enthusiasm for using the Internet to connect peripheral communities to an emerging knowledge economy. It was undertaken in the context of Chile’s national ICT policy, Agenda Digital, launched in 2004 with the specific

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goal of working for “digital inclusion.” Its focus was on competitiveness and productivity as well as addressing social and regional inequality. Telecenters, or *infocentros*, were part of this national agenda, offering training and access to computers and the Internet free of charge. Kleine explores the effectiveness of the national ICT agenda through a close study of microentrepreneurs and an *infocentro* in Aljun.

The book begins by presenting its various contexts: ICTD and the need to focus on people first (rather than on technology), the Chilean context, and in particular, Agenda Digital. Chapter 2 develops Kleine’s particular approach to development and expands on the concept of choice. She presents the choice framework as a way to understand the development process and maps how ICTs can improve choice and development outcomes by effectively increasing capabilities. Chapter 3 presents Aljun in more detail, in terms of the physical spaces for Internet access, the implications of national policies, and the social norms of time and space. Chapter 4 details the national *infocentros* and digital literacies initiatives, both in terms of the intentions of national policy makers and of local experiences. Chapter 5 (“Meeting People”) introduces four case studies, including Ana’s, through a technique Kleine calls “media footprints,” which produce diagrammatic representations of media use. She uncovers the key capabilities that her respondents are aiming for and charts ICTs’ role in achieving those capabilities. In chapter 6 we learn about the Chilean state’s e-procurement policy, Chilecompra. Chapter 7, the conclusion, reiterates the need for ICTD to move beyond economic growth as the central concern of development and reasserts the choice framework as a means of operationalizing the capabilities approach.

The Choice Framework

Kleine’s choice framework is designed to translate Sen’s capabilities approach into a tool for systemic analysis in ICTD. The underlying tricky challenges that become evident when trying to apply Sen’s capabilities approach are, after all, fundamental and difficult to navigate. Kleine identifies the two main challenges as, first, the issue of operationalizing a complex approach and, second, the issue of an

approach that focuses on individual rather than collective choice. Kleine’s concern in developing the choice framework is to move “ICT4D toward people, toward choice” (p. 1, and the title of her first chapter).

The four key elements in Kleine’s choice framework are structure, agency, choice, and outcomes. The outcomes are “achieved functionings” (p. 44) that act as proxy for “capabilities.” The framework is designed to operationalize the conceptual richness and complexity of capabilities, which is ontologically appealing but difficult to apply in the development arena. Here, after all, tangible, measurable impacts are prioritized within a largely economic growth discourse. Within such a context, Kleine wants to provide a model or means to map the development process. At one end of the framework is structure and agency. Structure includes institutions, discourses, policies, and ICTs. Agency comprises 11 types of resources, including educational, financial, cultural, social, natural, and material resources. How structure and agency interact can produce choices, and such choices can lead to development outcomes. For development outcomes to be achieved, there must exist choice (e.g., the Internet is available), the sense of choice (I consider the Internet is something I can access and use), the use of choice (I choose to act), and the achievement of choice (I was able to make the choice I had reason to value).

What Kleine does is develop a relatively simple analytical tool for assessing ICTs’ role in development, which is a highly complex process. The acknowledged challenge here is the development imperative to simplify what is complicated, but the author does not refer to some of the interesting literature on the use of a “simple, complicated, complex” typology (Patton, 2011; Rogers, 2011), which might extend this challenge in useful ways. This typology provides a way to identify different aspects of development interventions that require different evaluation approaches. It is important to present simple models, but also to understand that no ICTD intervention can be completely simple with a single causal path unaffected by context. Both complicated and complex aspects of development and development contexts present challenges for traditional linear approaches to the evaluation of development and the results-based agenda currently dominant.

Applications of Ethnography

For Kleine, the choice framework is a bridge between ethnographic insights on the one hand, and policy makers and ICTD practitioners on the other. This brings me to the ethnographic aspects of the book. I would more comfortably describe Kleine's work as qualitative rather than ethnographic, because while it does include key ethnographic methods such as participant observation and in-depth interviews—often considered enough within ICTD studies to give work the “ethnographic” label—the work is not positioned within an emerging ethnographic tradition of studying media and digital technologies (for two recent overviews of such work, see Coleman, 2010 and Horst, Hjorth, & Tacchi, 2012). Jenna Burrell's (2012) ethnographic study of youth in Internet cafés in Ghana, for example, is unconstrained by the requirement of speaking to a development agenda. Burrell's ethnographic description is richer than Kleine's. This raises questions of how to think about Kleine's book in relation to digital and media ethnography, and also to ICTD research.

While the book lacks ethnographic description beyond the four case studies in chapter 5, its value nevertheless lies in its attempt to present an analytical tool for measuring and assessing ICTD that is based on rich and contextualized understanding. A key concept used and often repeated by Kleine is *systemic*—her concern is not only to understand holistically the use and experiences of ICT, but to develop an ICTD approach that can be systemically implemented. This is where Kleine's work differs from many media and digital ethnographies, since she has a pragmatic and practical application in mind.

Early in the book, Kleine signals the decades of scholarly work on media and communication for development, but does not return to it. There is much that ICTD can learn from communication for development (C4D), in particular its struggles with major tensions, challenges, and contradictions in assessing the impacts of C4D, including the complexity of social change, problems with attribution, and pressure from development agencies to demonstrate impacts using inappropriate methods or strictly economic or quantifiable methods. Readers wanting to apply Kleine's choice framework might

usefully dip into such literature, especially work that deals with notions of digital media and social change, and the growing tensions between the results-based (accountability) approaches and the emerging learning-based (improvement and effectiveness) approaches to evaluating development interventions.

Why Read This Book?

The book highlights the often-implicit models and frameworks that underpin both development programs and research about development. Whether or not you appreciate or want to apply Kleine's choice framework to ICTD, reading this book will alert you to the need to at least question the frameworks and approaches that you do follow and to justify them. Rarely are approaches that assume economic growth as the goal of development held to account. It is important in the relatively new field of ICTD, with the inherent danger of technological overdetermination, that reflexivity is displayed and underlying development paradigms are clearly identified. Applying Sen's capabilities approach, operationalized through Kleine's choice framework, reveals a pervasive tension between ideas of reason and choice. For pragmatically oriented readers who want to follow a capabilities approach and demonstrate development outcomes, Kleine's framework provides a tool that can be adapted and appropriated. Certainly frameworks are always best understood as models with which to think and act, so the proof of the usefulness of this particular framework will be in its various and multiple future applications. ■

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