

Engaged Scholars and Thoughtful Practitioners: Enhancing Their Dialogue in the Knowledge Society

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Introduction

An irony of the current stage of the global information revolution is the contradiction we observe between the rhetoric of cooperation and the realities of conflict among the stakeholders. Everywhere information and communication technologies (ICT)—especially the Internet—are described as bottom up, distributed, and networked, provoking consultative and distributed social interactions across traditional institutions, sectors, and even national borders. Certainly, there is considerable evidence that such social networks are being created and working effectively. At the same time, the failure of communities to create genuinely consultative social networks to empower people to employ ICT networks is at least as important—and interesting—as the successes.

Two professional communities involved in information and communication for development (ICT4D) are especially noteworthy in this respect—the thoughtful practitioners and the engaged scholars. When they work cooperatively they can greatly amplify their separate contributions and create something qualitatively new in the process. But each community has its own language, its own norms and resources, and its own jealousies and insularity. Each could contribute more to the work of the other in ICT4D. A first question, often overlooked, is what do these two communities—practitioners and scholars—want from each other?

Frames, Concepts, Cause and Effect, Details, Dynamics, Linkages, and Freedom of Choice

What can scholars contribute to practical, applied work on the ground in developing countries, and in the halls and fora of international negotiations? The following conclusions are drawn from several projects over several years deliberately designed to im-

prove our understanding of scholar-practitioner relations in IT (see Drake and Willson Forthcoming).

Let me begin by “translating” the requests of the practitioners into terms of art more familiar to scholars. These I would characterize as Frames, Concepts, Causes, Details, Dynamics, Linkages, and Freedom of Choice.

Frames

Again and again practitioners around the world explicitly ask scholars for help in putting the issues in context. Contextualization means, in part, situating the particular issue at hand into its most relevant societal setting. Of what broader whole is this ICT a component part? What is it related to? This means pointing to obvious as well as non-obvious linkages between the particular ICT issue at hand (broadband, digital divide) and broader issues of society, culture, or economy. Take the question of how to frame Internet governance. At the most fundamental level, is Internet governance best understood as a matter of neutral, nonpartisan experts cooperatively setting global technical standards in everyone’s interest? Or are stakeholders actually engaged in pursuing narrow agendas, best understood as a matter of high politics and power struggles among competing interests? If the Internet is political, is it a global struggle among states, among companies, or between both with the involvement of civil society organizations and interstate institutions?

One recent example of creating a new frame to discuss ICTs is the way in which some scholars have reframed what are typically seen as separate and distinct technical issues into a broad new category of public policy. Bollier (2003) and others have seized upon rather dry communications and information issues like spectrum allocation, patents, and copyright and bundled them together under the overarching frame of “information commons.” Under this rubric these heretofore technical issues are redefined as single manifestations of a larger issue, scarce valuable publicly-held resources, and revealed to share a collective importance to citizens, analogous to the way common pasture land was important to herders and other citizens of an earlier age. The title of a book by Lessig (2002) reveals the thrust of the reframing: *The Future of Ideas—The Fate of the Commons in a Connected World*.

Note: This essay is taken from a longer essay to appear in William J. Drake and Ernest J. Willson III, *Governance of Global Electronic Networks*, MIT Press, 2006.

Concepts

During this tumultuous period of deep and far-reaching changes in the ICT sector, new terms are introduced in cascading numbers and old terms quickly lose their meaning, sometimes to numbing effect. This occurred with concepts like universal service and digital divide. Under simultaneous pressures from rapid technological change and growing standards of living in many countries, the meaning of universal service began to change, and the concept of universal access grew in popularity. Universal access came to mean that Internet connectivity was available to citizens although not necessarily in their homes, as with telephones, but within a reasonable proximity to their homes. While admitting the huge challenge of defining reasonable proximity, there arose the challenge of distinguishing between formal access and effective access. Should access be conceptualized mainly as access to basic communications infrastructures? Or did it also include access to the training, cognitive skills, financing, or relevant content that would transform formal into effective access? The concept of digital divide was also defined differently by different actors. For some, it was interpreted as a growing gap between information haves and have nots, a definition promulgated by some international bodies like the United Nations. For others, especially international business groups, the most appropriate conceptualization was digital opportunity. Digital have-nots were defined positively as a potential business opportunity. The ways in which these and other institutions acted on the digital divide substantially reflected the priorities and perspectives of the different stakeholders, as codified in competing conceptualizations. Reaching a commonly accepted conception proved impossible.

Cause and Effect

Practitioners also want to know about what works and what doesn't, and under what particular circumstances. In other words, they want to know about cause and effect in the ICT sector. *ITID* has also sought to bring best practices or models to its readers. Such statements that point out relations among cause and effect are theories; a wise man once pointed out that nothing is as practical as a good theory. If this condition occurs, then this thing will happen. Will ICT cause development? No. Does development cause ICT diffusion? Sort of. Is the

Internet reducing hierarchy inside formal organizations? Yes, under some circumstances. The biggest challenge is that practitioners demand what scholars are hard-pressed to give—an unambiguous cause and effect rule, a best practice that is universally true and universally applicable with the same outcome all the time. It is the scholar's job however to resist over-easy generalizations and to point out these theories only work when the conditions are specified. Then the question becomes "*Under what circumstance* is this or that a best practice?" Under what conditions of supply and demand will this best practice actually work? Under what institutional conditions? A lesson learned or best practice in the presence of an effective telecom regulator may not be a best practice in the absence of one. Scholars appropriately distinguish between correlation and causality.

As several multilaterals have discovered recently (infoDEV, housed at the World Bank), as well as bilateral agencies (International Development Research Centre), capturing best practices is both difficult and expensive. It cannot be done post hoc but must be built into the front end of projects.

Details

Scholars are also frequently asked to contribute empirical details about ICT4D. How are mobile phones used in East Africa, relative to their use in China? What has been the experience of chopals in Indian villages? Free-standing case studies of different aspects of ICT4D should not be underestimated during periods of great change. The accumulation of concrete facts about the world, facts which then can be agreed upon by the relevant actors, is important.

Dynamics

There is a great temptation in studies of ICTs, to capture details analytically by holding everything else constant, providing a kind of static analytic snapshot. A tremendous contribution to the field by scholars has been, and will remain, identifying dynamic regularities in ICT4D and in constructing plausible stories out of them. Constructing good ICT policy is hard, absent a sure sense of the dynamic trends of the relevant technology, demand and supply, and political timing.

Several years ago a group of ICT practitioners and analysts in a dozen African countries met and insisted that what they really needed to do their

jobs well was to have descriptions of best practices from other countries, especially descriptions of the political and institutional dynamics that surround technology diffusion in sometimes hostile territories. Concretely, they needed stories, specifically war stories. That is, they needed nuanced narratives about how stakeholders maneuvered and negotiated, won and lost, in other settings. They knew that ICT successes and failures hinged as much *on timing and sequencing as technology*. Successes require *early* backing by political figures, the *timely* mobilization of resources and manpower, and *on-time* implementation. To respond to their injunctions we developed a dynamic negotiation framework focused on a dozen “critical negotiating issues” that appear sequentially in the dynamic process of ICT diffusion, (Wilson and Wong Forthcoming).

We came to understand that these practitioners were asking for two distinct things. One was a simple list of best practices and lessons learned. But they were also making a very human request—give us a story with a beginning, a middle, and an end that we can recognize; a story that corresponds roughly to our own realities; a generic story line onto which we can then hang our own local experiences. Good analytic stories also provide milestones of what to expect next. Having a story line of how things unfolded in other settings provides one with expectations of how things might unfold at home. If Internet diffusion has four stages in most countries, then maybe it will still have four in this country. When these things happen, and one arrives at the threshold of Phase 2, then one knows what to look for and perhaps even some things to do.

Downstream Linkages

How do these technologies link to downstream applications like health or tax collection where most practitioners work and most citizens and customers seek services? Scholars can indeed provide great insights into the specific linkages between this particular ICT domain of practice on the one hand, and other substantive areas, like health, education, or ports administration, on the other. This is especially important for more senior ICT policy makers, since the higher up the chain of command, the more important it is for executives to anticipate and recognize cross-issue linkages, as with ICT and trade or tax collection. This is where their responsibilities intersect with those in other sectors, markets, and institutions.

Freedom

Finally, at the end of the day, all practitioners—whether policy makers, bureaucrats, entrepreneurs, or grassroots nongovernmental organization (NGO) managers—want to know how much freedom of action they really have to pursue their interests.

In scholarly terms, this is a *structure–agency* problem. That is, what percentage of our possible action is already determined unalterably by the situational givens like income per capita or educational levels? Is our freedom of action illusory in the face of poverty, ignorance, and globalization? What can actually be done inside the constraints, taking them as given in the short to medium term, yet hoping to change them over time?

One hears especially from NGO leaders who insist that the biggest contribution scholars could make to their practical work would be to help them divine the political from the technical. They are often told when seeking to solve some immediate practical problem, certain institutional and authority arrangements are absolutely required by the imperatives of the technology. (“If you want to use *this* application, then you *must* structure your organization this way.”) NGO practitioners want to know how they could do a better job of recognizing what the technology actually requires on the one hand, and what is said to be required but is in reality much more flexible and experimental. They want to know where politics and power enter the equation.

The matter of personal autonomy and the practitioner’s scope for action leads back to our first issue of *framing*. Our ambitions for *ITID* began in earnest when we noted, in one international meeting after another, that the options for action of nondominant actors seemed to be grossly underspecified. Less-developed countries’ (LDC) options were presented in ways that made nondominant stakeholders either thoroughly choiceless or, equally unrealistic to us, as perfect masters of their fate. The alleged options were stated so narrowly as to rob most actors (especially nondominant actors) of much scope for independent movement that could be judged realistic and achievable. The recommendations said that ICT diffusion was entirely the consequence of technological and economic imperatives, so that LDC managers needn’t worry much. Alternatively, the global IT optimists insisted that since ICTs automatically brought the capacity to leapfrog into the future, choices were nearly infinite for leaders who would

simply seize the time. Both approaches are wrong: thoughtful practitioners and engaged scholars need to cooperate more effectively to reframe the issues to introduce more realistic options—and greater freedom—for the majority of the world that lives in the global South. ■

References

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