



## Editorial

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### In Celebration of the Gray Zone

Most of us like absolutes. Something either is, or it isn't. It's true or it's false. White or black. Legal or illegal.

Would that the world were always so orderly. In this excellent special issue, our guest editors François Bar and Hernan Galperin argue that the world is a messy place and lots of invention, improvisation, and innovation occurs in the unruly frontier areas of information technology and development. As they put it, "experimentation spaces often exist today in a regulatory gray zone. Neither fully legal nor illegal, they emerge at the margins of existing legal categories which have been designed for previous technologies."

Almost by definition, most of what we do—as scholars and research practitioners in IT and development—lies in the gray areas of uncharted territories. Many of *ITID's* authors have identified and led us through such ambiguous legal, regulatory, and creative settings. Therefore, we all can join Bar and Galperin in celebration of this messiness.

Although this special issue focuses on terrestrial wireless networking, and reveals the occasional gray zone challenge in this domain, we are encouraged by the success of the following other gray areas:

- Broadcast gray zones, such as community "pirate" radio. We know that low-power radio stations are in fact powerful development technologies. Yet in many regulatory regimes these community stations are not precisely legal.
- Cultural innovations often occur in the gray zone, especially in this era of digital music and mash-ups. For example, when American hip-hop artist DJ Danger Mouse mixed the words from Jay-Z's *The Black Album* with the instrumental music from The Beatles' *The White Album* he created a derivative work that is compelling, complex, and plain good fun. His *The Grey Album* is, in our estimation, clearly in the gray zone. But not according to EMI, the owners of The Beatles copyright, who drove Danger Mouse's work underground (though it is still easily found on the Internet).
- More serious than pop culture gray zones are the intellectual property gray zones associated with generic drugs manufactured for use in low-income countries such as India and Brazil. These gray zones, especially for epidemics such as HIV/AIDS, make treatment accessible to those who might be excluded in a more regulated environment.
- Innovative uses of mobile phones also exist within gray zones. An example of this innovation is the creative use of prepaid mobile phone credit as, essentially, a parallel currency. Urban African mobile phone subscribers send phone credits over the network to family members living in their rural village (or to

agents serving as “human” ATMs). These credits are then used for phone calls or converted on an informal market back into the local currency. Certainly any m-commerce “banking” services that might be provided in addition to these prepaid accounts are situated in a gray zone outside of the regulatory purview of the central bank.

Given these examples of successful gray zones, following are some questions related to gray zones in IT and development:

- How do we define the boundaries of particular gray zones?
- What are the institutional dynamics within these zones, and how do they relate to the dynamics of more established domains?
- What are the political dynamics of coalition building, providing resources to supporters of and punishing antagonists inside the gray zone, and the political ties between the gray zone and the black and white zones?
- When are gray zones best transformed into white zones, outlawed into the black, or simply left in the gray?
- Are the boundaries of these zones, in the large, shrinking or expanding?
- What literature can we draw upon, such as writing on the informal and irregular economies, to shed further light on gray zone dynamics?

We urge our readers to seek out the gray zones and continue to apply to them your careful analysis, balanced judgments, and sharp analytic tools. Moreover, we are interested in your reactions to this issue, including your thoughts on the challenges raised by gray zones in terrestrial wireless networking, or to any articles published previously in *ITID*. Please send your comments to us at [itid-ed@mit.edu](mailto:itid-ed@mit.edu).

Sometimes our analysis and discourse will help move ideas from the gray zone into the light. Of course, simultaneously, human ingenuity and creativity along with new technologies and systems will continue to place more things right back into a gray zone. So do not fear the gray, embrace it and celebrate.