

Forum

The Importance of Intent: Reflecting on Open Development for Women's Empowerment

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Introduction¹

In their article, "Open ICT Ecosystems Transforming the Developing World," Matthew L. Smith and Laurent Elder (2010) pose the hypothesis that open social arrangements, enabled by ICTs, can help to catalyze the development impacts of ICTs. An ICT ecosystem is understood to be a social system within which ICTs are embedded, and an open social arrangement consists of social relationships that favor:

- (a) Universal over restricted access;
- (b) Universal over restricted participation in informal and formal groups or institutions; and
- (c) Collaborative over centralized production.

"In other words, open ICT ecosystems provide the space for the amplification and transformation of social activities that can be powerful drivers of development" (Smith & Elder, 2010, pp. 65–66).

I subscribe to the idea that more sharing, connecting, and collaborating among people in free, unbound, and uncontrolled ways through the use of ICTs will have developmental benefits because of the acceleration of learning opportunities that such openness provides. The open development hypothesis suggests that positive development ends can emerge through new models of engagement and innovation that are more participatory, collaborative, and driven by the beneficiaries (Elder, Emdon, Petrazzini, & Smith, 2011).

My hesitation to embrace these perspectives on open development without reservation comes from two concerns, which are related. The first is that open ICT ecosystems do not exist in a power vacuum; neither does our (nor anybody else's) thinking about open development. The practice of naming phenomena and assigning meaning to them from an "outsider perspective" without taking the "insider perspective" into the conceptual equation has to be problematized as an act of power, especially in the context of human development and women's empowerment.

My second concern is the conceptual neglect of human intent in the efforts to understand human initiatives in general, and in this context of open development in particular. Moddel (2009) frames intent as "the impetus to form meaning or to perform a specific act."

He asserts that while "intent" is:

ignored in classical science and without a place in cybernetic emitter/receptor descriptions of communication, the ubiquity of intent has been

1. The author wishes to express her sincere appreciation for the reviewers' comments and suggestions; they prompted further reflection and critical analysis of my thinking.

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left unacknowledged and yet without it no unit of meaning would enter our minds and we would be zombies in a world totally out of reach. (ibid.)

It can be argued that the motivation for the emergence of certain measures and aspects can be framed as open development have come from a human intent which has nothing to do with openness or open development. For instance, a university's decision to open up its academics' publications through unrestricted Web publishing probably originates from a desire to position itself well—which, in turn, will benefit its academics. To categorize such initiatives as "openness" is thus an act of giving meaning from an outsider perspective while neglecting the insider intent that instigated the initiative. This is problematic for two reasons. Neglecting "insider intent" makes part of the rationality of the initiatives invisible. This, then, represents a missed opportunity in furthering an understanding of human behavior, which is particularly regrettable from a policy development perspective. Furthermore, the nexus between power and knowledge construction has to be taken into account here, also: "Outsider conceptualizations" would not interfere with the university's intent for their so-called "openness" initiatives. Even when the respective actors would describe their own measures and behaviors as "open"—perhaps to make themselves and their actions recognizable to significant outsiders, the original intent that sparked their actions would not be lost. But when there is a power differential between the ones "giving meaning" and the ones "whose measures and behaviors are given meaning to," the potential impact of outsider perspective on insider intent has to be problematized. While this would be relevant in any situation of power differentials, in situations where women are involved, it is pivotal.

Our experiences in GRACE (Gender Research in Africa and Arab Countries into ICTs for Empowerment [grace-network.net]) have shown that power dynamics in the environment may corrupt "the quality of openness" of open ICT ecosystems, despite the intentions of stakeholders and role players. There is even the real danger that an open ICT ecosystem could exacerbate existing gender injustices and inequalities. When openness translates itself into gender-blindness—and thus, power-blindness—openness can become a threat not only

to women's empowerment, but also to the project of open development itself. The nature of social reality is gendered, and the power dynamics that create and maintain the inequities between women and men pervade human thinking, being, knowing, and relating. Implementing ICT programs without gender awareness will reinforce this inequality. While Sutton and Pollock speak to the Canadian situation, their insight might be even more pertinent for the developing world:

Distributing ICT without looking at inequality is a way to reinforce that inequality. ICT has such potential to empower its users that this uneven distribution of resources to get connected is very likely to increase inequality and to embed itself in the future. (2004, p. 704)

Understanding the nature of the threat of (gender) power dynamics to the dream of openness does, however, also point to a possible solution: Openly acknowledging and empowering the "insider" intent that can give rise to and maintain the so called "openness measures" will enable practitioners, researchers, and policy makers to support this intent, thus keeping the dream of openness that these measures represent alive and preventing them from becoming corrupted in and through the (gendered) environments in which they exist and acquire their meanings.

To illustrate this, I would like to share some of the insights gleaned from the research and management experiences within the GRACE network that speak to the three aspects that Smith and Elder (2010) suggest for their definition of openness in open ICT ecosystems: access, participation, and collaborative production.

Case 1: Restricted Access Because of an Open-Access Rule

The Library Computers at the University of Zimbabwe in Harare

At the University of Zimbabwe in Harare, access to the free library computers was governed on the basis of the rule of first-come, first-served. However, the librarians noticed that the overwhelming majority of the students using the computers were male. When asked about their perspectives and experiences around access, the female students spoke about their duties as wives and mothers at home—

which they had to fulfil exactly during the time at which the computers were free—and about the fact that, when they lined up, they ran the risk of being pushed out of the line by the male students. While they acknowledged the first-come, first-served rule as democratic, fair, and even empowering, at the same time, they lamented that they had to put in extra effort to gain access to computers in other ways. These female students did not have a concept—a way of thinking about this access rule that really matched their experience of this rule—just the lived reality that was a consequence of this rule. When the researchers subsequently deepened their research efforts and created opportunities for these women to face their experiences, emotions, reflections, and dreams, these female students were able to bring more coherence to their thinking, and to acknowledge their lack of access as inconvenient and disempowering. Without the researchers' interventions, the female students would not have been able to do the conceptual work that gave them a position from which to question the fairness of this rule (Mbambo-Thata, Mlambo, & Mwatsyia, 2009).

The first-come, first-served rule, which was undoubtedly established by the university management with the intent to guarantee as much “universal access” to both genders as possible, became a tool of gender discrimination in a patriarchal environment. Even more problematic was the fact that the rule itself had become a corruptive force: It provided a “logical” frame for the students' experiences and thus functioned as a conceptual smoke-screen, making it more difficult for them to realize what was really going on. As such, the first-come, first-served rule was very effective in removing female competition from the computer access arena. It also kept in place the stereotypes about women and their non-use of ICTs.

The Zimbabwe case study shows how the social and individual gender dimensions create and maintain each other through the dynamic of disempowered people accepting the concepts of the powerful to give meaning to their experiences. Women may not even be aware of the ways in which they are agents of their own disempowerment—not only because of the way they give meaning to their experiences in patriarchal environments, but because they may give up their alignment with their own intent in the face of outside pressure without being totally aware of this. It

is a fact well known to feminist researchers “that the viewpoint of the dominant groups, which permeates the common knowledge of how society should function, has obscured the true interests of other groups” (Hill, p. 130).

Case 2: Restricted Participation Because of the Open Market Mechanism

The Use of Mobiles for Social Advocacy in Zambia

The use of mobile phones enhances the possibility for connection, mobilization, and social advocacy, especially in environments where, due to lack of landlines, human messengers and face-to-face contact have to do much of this work. In such a context, the innovative use of mobiles, such as paging through missed calls, seems to make more participation possible for people who cannot afford to use a mobile because of the prohibitive costs of mobile telephony. However, Abraham (2009) found in his research “The names in your address book: Are mobile phone networks effective in advocating women's rights in Zambia?” that it was exactly this innovative use of exercising the missed calls option of mobile phone use that created a divisive effect within a group of women using their phones for the explicit purposes of connection, mobilization, and social advocacy. The women users started speaking of “callers” and “beepers,” and a “virtual class system” was created (Abraham, 2009, p. 102). Because the use of ICTs takes place within a monetary system that is divisive, ICTs can become the handmaidens of this system, and ICT users can perpetuate these divisive dynamics (Gurumurthy, 2010, p. 60). In this case, where the purpose of the mobile phone use was connection, mobilization, and advocacy, this divisive aspect of mobile phone use is more than ironic; it is painful and jarring. When this insight is juxtaposed against the fact that the majority of the poor are women, and that women, more than men, would take care of immediate household needs before buying air time, the restrictions to participation that are caused by mobile phone costs should not be underestimated (Comfort & Dada, pp. 44–45).

In Zambia, the women's organizations' motivation to enhance the effectiveness of their connection and make their participation more inclusive

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through the use of mobile phones was thwarted through the monetary aspects of the financial economic environment that, ironically enough, is called a free market or open market system.

Case 3: Collaborative and Decentralized Production in and Through an ICT Gender Research Network: The Rhythms of Openings and Closures in GRACE

GRACE, an IDRC-funded collaborative ICT gender research network, has produced its first book, and it is in the process of developing a second book, with many researchers having done individual presentations, book launches, interviews, and consultations (grace-network.net). The original network was comprised of 14 teams in 12 countries in 2005, and it was expanded in 2008 to 22 teams in 17 countries. Across the continent, policy makers are paying attention to the findings, and the book attracts attention internationally because of the way in which innovative research and capacity-building methodology are combined within a research network approach.

At the July 2005 inception workshop, the initial Africa group set out the following values for the network as an expression of how they wanted to experience themselves and each other in order to accomplish what they desired to do: "Discovery, Warm Space, Exploration, Sharing, Empowerment, Learning, Innovation, Voice (giving), Transformation, Change, Interaction, Team Work, Visual Space, Hard Work, Challenging, Direction, Wish, Adventure, Growth, Reflection, Network, Friendship, Social Change, Relaxation" (internal project documentation).

No mention was made of openness as a value amid these 26 others. However, from a network management perspective, openness was understood as an important strategy for stimulating research competence and enhanced group learning: The network members would need to open up and feel free to share, so that they could give and receive support from each other and produce the research findings that their countries needed. The following quotation from one of the network members illustrates this:

Since the first meetings, I realized that I was discovering a beautiful family, marked by the open-

ing to each other, friendliness, complicity, respect, I realized that GRACE is a space of discussion, exchange of information, sharing of knowledge, know-how, soft skills.

Since this first workshop in July 2005, a shared understanding about the purpose and scope of the network has emerged through ongoing debate and questioning. Openness was embraced as a strategy, as a means to the ends of research collaboration and research capacity development: In order to do their often path-breaking gender research in their respective countries, the GRACE researchers needed a safe space to grow and connect with each other. This referred to the female as well as the male researchers, although their challenges were different. One of the main drivers in the network was, therefore, trust. Trust in oneself grew through expanding research competence and gender awareness that brought with it a growing confidence in one's own position within one's own social environments. Trust in one another within the network grew through allowing and appreciating the diversity in theoretical, methodological, gender, and spiritual perspectives that stimulated growth on an individual and group level.

Yet even within this network space, open sharing between the researchers had to be mediated by their need for safety. Women are being killed for being known to be feminist in this world, for speaking up for their own and other women's human rights. GRACE researchers are never only GRACE researchers—they play a lot of other roles, and they are members of many social systems in their countries of origin, as well as regionally and internationally. These forums are very diverse, and not all share enlightened perspectives on women's empowerment and gender equality. The GRACE social platforms were therefore managed through a rhythm of openings and closures: Research questions that were politically sensitive were not immediately shared with all members of the network, and some of the dialogues among the researchers were conducted via special research mailing lists and not the general GRACE list, to which non-GRACE members had access.

Conceptualization and Coherence

While the power vested in systems of patriarchal and financial control should not be underestimated,

it can be argued that the actors' conceptualizations collaborated with, and contributed to, the corruption of the dreams of openness that seemed embedded in the open ICT ecosystems.

Conceptualizing the unequal access to the library computers in Zimbabwe as fair and empowering would have been "caused" by the democratic connotations attached to the first-come, first-served rule. The students' acceptance of these connotations in their processes of giving meaning to their experiences created a "smokescreen" that prevented them from coming to a clear analysis of the actual outcomes of the open-access rule. In the face of the actual divisive effects, conceptualizing mobile phone use as effective as regards connection would have been "caused" by the connotations of connection attached to mobile phone use.

At the same time, in both of these cases, the dream that was part of, and inspired the measures and practices of, openness and which had become implicit—and therefore, difficult to discuss—was made visible again exactly because it was lost. The lack of coherence between the "promise" that the open ICT ecosystems held, the "official" meaning that was given to these measures and activities, and the actual outcomes or effects in terms of personal experiences and lived realities, created a mental space for reflection and subsequent action, at least in the case of the university students.

It is not always possible to discuss or redress such incoherence. At the University of Zimbabwe, the researchers took it on as part of their research process. The researchers created the space where the research participants could articulate meanings that were more reflective of their actual experiences. The Zambia research diagnosed the inherent divisive nature of the open market system, and though recommendations were made that this would have to be changed for mobiles to contribute to effective social advocacy, within this project, no space could be created to address this incoherence.

Power and Intent

Women's empowerment, human development, the use of ICTs, and even this reflection on the potential

of open ICT ecosystems for women's empowerment and human development do not take place in a power-free conceptual vacuum. Making visible the conceptual chains that link intent (behind activities and measures) with activities, meanings, and outcomes, and questioning these chains in terms of coherence, can serve to keep open development aligned with the actual intent and real meaning of human development. This conceptual chain is constantly challenged by the corruptive influences of (gender) power dynamics in both the environment and the minds of the involved human parties.

It seems to me that the dynamics of institutionalized power, such as those vested in systems of financial and patriarchal control, need to be countered with more power and energy than the dream of openness can muster.

It would thus be good to have the "outsider" conceptualization of openness strengthened by a project-specific normative intent that would resonate with, or originate from, the "insider" intent. This would not only contribute to the acceptability and sustainability of the open development efforts, but it would also diminish the danger that the dream of openness itself would be lost or become a corruptive force itself. While the "outsider" intent of openness may have its rationality in the fora where it originated, the participation of the beneficiaries in these development efforts derives its power and energy from the "insider intent." It is my contention that the success of GRACE as a network can be attributed to the fact that the individual GRACE members are continuously stimulated to deepen their alignment with their own intent—the dream they have for themselves in being a member of the network.

Detecting—or better still, preventing—lack of coherence and maintaining alignment among a development effort's intent, the way it is experienced, and the outcomes it yields require active and in-depth participation from those who are intended to benefit from it. This brings to the fore the importance of research and communication processes within open development efforts that involve or affect women.² Acknowledging, voicing, under-

2. The fact that the incoherence discussed in the Zimbabwe case study only became obvious through and during the research efforts also raises quite a few questions about the validity of meaning given to not only open development efforts, but to ICT4D projects and ICT4D research efforts in general, especially in terms of their claims of development and empowerment: There may be a lot of incoherence "out there" that has not been detected yet.

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standing, and engaging the insider intents that women bring into open development processes are challenging endeavors. Bridging these insider intents with “outsider” intents will add another layer of communication, contextualization, and negotiation. It seems to be likely that new methods would have to be designed, and the methodology of such endeavors would have to be thoroughly thought through. Yet given what is at stake, this seems to be a relatively small and very wise investment to make. ■

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