



From the Editors

Before introducing the papers in this edition, we'd like to share some of the behind-the-scenes discussions at *ITID*. *ITID* is intimately tied to the community of ICT-and-development researchers, so we need your feedback with respect to expectations, concerns, and new ideas.

Over the last few years, our most persistent conversations have focused on just three topics:

Quality—Of papers, of editing, and of the reviewing process. We are reasonably happy with the quality of work in all three areas, and we believe *ITID*'s leadership among ICTD-related publications is evidence of that quality. However, we still fall short of the quality of top journals in other fields.

Visibility—On relevant academic indices, within policy circles, and in the general public. We have been included in several indices, and *ITID* articles do well on citation counts relative to many ICT4D publications. But we could do better on those fronts, and our visibility beyond academia is still minimal.

Revenue—As an open-access journal, we do not charge our authors or our readers. Thanks to the generosity of our financial and institutional sponsors, we can cover our operational costs, but only just. Additional revenue would allow us to try new approaches to increase quality and visibility.

We welcome input from our readers on these topics or anything else pertaining to *ITID*. Feedback, suggestions, your perceptions of *ITID*—all are welcome. We can't guarantee a personal response to every bit of feedback that we receive, but we promise to read all serious communication.

Some of the challenges we face reflect challenges that the field faces as a whole. One trend we have observed informally is authors saving their best papers for other outlets, often in their academically "purer" home fields. A journal's standing, of course, depends primarily on the strength of its papers, so this is a vicious cycle that turns virtuous only with a critical mass of strong papers. Along these lines, we encourage authors to submit their best ICT-and-development research work to *ITID*. In return, we offer quick turnaround, high-quality reviews, and of course, when accepted, publication!

In our ongoing efforts to increase visibility, we are trying something new this issue with the paper introductions. Rather than provide the seemingly objective summary in which we treat all papers in an issue much as parents do their kids (e.g., we love them all equally!), one of us will write the paper introductions and inject some personal editorial commentary. Kentaro will kick things off.

François Bar
Editor-in-Chief

Kentaro Toyama
Editor-in-Chief

Article Introductions (Issue 8.3)

It's my great pleasure to continue my engagement with *ITID* as co-Editor-in-Chief. Though I don't pretend that I will be able to assume Michael Best's unique role with respect to *ITID*, I hope to contribute what I can to the considerable momentum that he, Ernest Wilson, and François Bar have generated. I'm also thankful for François' continuing commitment as I learn the ropes.

Now for the papers in this issue! In the spirit of trying something new, but at the risk of losing friends, I'll reveal my opinions about each paper. I should note that these are my personal thoughts only, and while they may exert some influence on the journal's selection of papers (my prerogative as co-editor), *ITID*'s system of Associate Editors and review by at least three reviewers drawn from a diverse pool of researchers keeps the direct influence of the Editors-in-Chief on paper selection to a minimum. Except for the occasional difficult decision, most decisions on publication are largely handled without our direct involvement. I hope the authors will forgive any critical comments below—in any case, the papers are published. And again, I request feedback from readers on this format, as it will help us determine whether this new approach to introducing an issue's papers is worth continuing.

Volume 8, Issue 3 of *ITID* includes six research papers and a book review.

Pádraig Carmody begins the issue with a provocative question that deserves more attention: How might mobile phones be exacerbating, rather than alleviating, poverty? The paper offers a framework for thinking about such questions and enumerates the possible ways in which development is poorly served by mobile phones. It nicely organizes much of the literature on this question and critiques the prominent discourse, but unfortunately, the existing evidence is thin. Ever since Kathleen Diga's 2007 Master's thesis first brought the possibility of consumption displacement to the ICT literature, what has been lacking is strong, direct evidence of mobiles actually causing harm. There is still a groundbreaking paper waiting to be written on this topic and based on thorough primary research—a paper that could serve as a much-needed antidote to Rob Jensen's "Digital Provide." (Incidentally, another line of research along these lines would look at the development shortcomings of M-PESA.)

Investigations into the dark side of ICT continue in one section of Ricardo Gomez's paper on the impacts perceived by users of Internet public access centers (PACs) in Colombia. That section is worth a close read, as interviewees recapitulate with uncanny precision what is known about the disadvantages of Internet usage in the developed world. Again, it makes one wonder what unintended consequences should be predictable for, say, digital money, by analogy to mainstream banking, money wires, credit cards, and other instruments that tempt consumers to spend. The rest of Gomez's paper is a straightforward study of the positive impacts of PACs with few surprising results.

Staying within Latin America, two papers consider different intersections of smaller businesses with telecommunications. Roxana Barrantes Cáceres and Mireia Fernández-Ardèvol look at patterns of mobile phone use among three categories of market traders in rural Peru. The groups differ with respect to the degree of professionalism they bring to trading as an enterprise, with the most active traders pursuing it full-time with relatively sophisticated processes and networks; at the other end of the spectrum are subsistence farmers who make occasional treks to market to sell a portion of what they produce. In further confirmation of my favorite theory that ICTs amplify underlying human intent and capacity, the authors find that mobile usage more or less reflects the constraints and communication needs of the traders.

In her article, Martha Garcia-Murillo looks at ICT less as tool and more as services sold by small and medium businesses in the Argentinean telecommunications industry. She identifies the main strategies

that these entities use and finds them operating in a reactive mode, buffeted by the uncertainties of Argentina's markets and unstable policies. Though these businesses are clearly struggling and market/political stability is of concern to macroeconomic development, it's not clear to me that the fates of their owners and employees are of great concern to the international development community. The services being sold are conferencing and IT services that appear to cater to well-off businesses, and I suspect the firms are also staffed by middle-class employees. At any rate, the development case was not explicitly made in the paper.

I would also have liked to have seen the tie to development called out in the subsequent paper by Rebecca Walton, Judith Yaaqoubi, and Beth Kolko. Walton et al. investigate the self-reported expectations of users of Internet cafés in Bishkek, the capital of Kyrgyzstan. No context was provided for understanding the study's relationship to development, and the fact that interview subjects were urban students and university graduates didn't make it easy to surmise. At one point, the authors make a curious comment: "Though interviews were conducted solely in Bishkek, an urban area, many interviewees shared both urban and rural perspectives, having lived in a rural area or having close ties with rural relatives." This struck me as a protest-too-much grasp for development relevance. The study is otherwise well-executed, though new insights into Internet café user inclinations are few.

In their respective papers, both Garcia-Murillo and Walton et al. raise the question of whether we are being too liberal in what counts as "development." I believe *ITD* should be open to a wide range of definitions, but are we accepting any activity taking place in a lower-GDP country as development? That seems as misguided as excluding ICT use in North American homeless shelters. Regardless, I appeal to authors to make the development issues clear in their submissions.

The last research paper in this issue is by Øystein Sæbø and Devinder Thapa, and it applies the "Asset Pentagon Model" to attempt an analysis of the Nepal Wireless Networking Project. I'll withhold my direct criticisms of the paper and note that it is carefully written and makes appropriate references to the literature. I'll rant about a larger phenomenon in the ICT4D literature, of which this paper is an example, in a moment.

Jorge Zapico brings the issue to a close with reviews of two books on ICT and environmental sustainability. The books take opposing views on ICT's value to sustainability, and while neither book was written specifically about international development, Zapico finds the lessons apply to ICT4D as well.

Finally, my rant: I'd like to take up the topic of "frameworks" and their place in scholarly research papers. The ICT-and-development community sees no shortage of assessment frameworks because it inherits so many from its constituent disciplines, as attested to by the 161-page "Compendium on Impact Assessment of ICT-for-Development Projects" (Heeks & Molla, 2009).

As far as I understand—because I have never written a paper based on a framework, nor recommended to anyone that they do so—these frameworks are meant to help "ICT4D practitioners, policy-makers and consultants to understand the impact of informatics initiatives in developing countries" by providing "ways of understanding ICT4D projects and organising knowledge about them" (Heeks & Molla, 2009).

I worry that some authors misunderstand these frameworks as formulas for writing research papers, where the framework specifies a checklist of things one should attend to, and a paper is a flat enumeration of the haphazard observations one has made for each item on the checklist. I worry because I have seen more than a few such papers submitted to the various publications for which I review

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papers. These papers are consistently earnest, neatly structured to reflect their frameworks, and unfortunately, empty of the novel insight that a research paper should provide.

A good research paper says much more than whether Project X succeeded or failed along the various dimensions of any given framework; it provides hypotheses regarding cause, strong supporting evidence, support or counterexample to theory, insightful analysis, lessons that expand human knowledge, and so forth. (I refer to a previous *ITID* publication for what constitutes a good ICTD paper: Burrell & Toyama, 2009.) Research, of course, isn't formulaic, and it's worth noting that Heeks and Molla did not include researchers, scholars, and academics in the list of people for whom the frameworks are designed. Personally, even for the recommended audience, I think frameworks provide a false sense of rigor—it's all too easy to cherry pick isolated pieces of data and pretend that organizing them in conceptual bins results in a meaningful analysis.

And having thrown down that gauntlet, I'll sign off with one last request for feedback—on *ITID*, on editorializing editors, and on frameworks!

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