Editorial Introduction

Reflections at the Nexus of Theory and Practice: Selected Papers from ICTD2012

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Special Issue Editors

This Special Issue of *ITID* contains six articles, each drawn from the plenary papers presented at the Fifth International Conference on Information and Communication Technologies and Development hosted at the Georgia Institute of Technology in Atlanta, March 12–15, 2012. In total, 38 papers were presented at ICTD2012, 18 as plenary talks and 20 as poster presentations, all drawn from a field of 94 double-blind peer-reviewed submissions. The proceedings are available at the ACM Digital Library (http://dl.acm.org/citation.cfm?id=2160673*).*

As editors, we selected papers for this special issue which had been particularly well-reviewed during the conference process, and that had engaged a diversity of current issues in the ICTD field. The invited[1] authors extended and modified their papers based on feedback from ICTD2012, and then participated in an additional single-blind peer review cycle with experts in the field. The six revised individual ICTD2012 papers, as well as Bailur's review of Dutta's *Communicating Social Change: Structure, Culture and Agency,* each make new stand-alone contributions to the field. However, to introduce the issue, it is worth reflecting on the papers as a set, and on the 2012 conference from which they have been drawn.

One notable attribute of this year's selections may be that a preponderance of the articles engage with the structure and trajectory of the field. The two clearest examples of this style are Dearden's "See No Evil? Ethics in an Interventionist ICTD" and Dodson, Sterling, and Bennett's "Considering Failure: Eight Years of *ITID* Research." Each uses a review of the existing ICTD literature to explore implications and difficulties of conducting research with and among actual people and complex communities. By placing the intervention and the project near the center of ICTD practice, the two pieces support a perspective that "success" in ICTD (or perhaps at least in ICT4D) cannot be framed in terms of advances in abstract theory, but rather, in terms of an interplay of theoretical progress and positive practical impact.

Two of the other articles also engage directly with the trajectory of the field, albeit in manners which depart from the interventionist frame shared by the two discussed above. In "Cell Phone Analytics:

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1. One of the ICTD2012 papers chairs is an author of one of the contributions; he recused himself from the editorial process for that article.

Scaling Human Behavior Studies into the Millions," Frias-Martinez and Virseda suggest a promising new methodology, rooted in the systematic analysis of large data sets, that may improve researchers' abilities to associate estimated socioeconomic and demographic characteristics of populations with different levels and patterns of mobile phone behaviors, without drawing on often-costly or scarce individual or household-level interview data. Meanwhile, in "Anthropology, Development, and ICTs: Slums, Youth, and the Mobile Internet in Urban India," Rangaswamy and Cutrell draw on the results of an ethnographic study to highlight the centrality of "mundane, non-instrumental, and entertainment-driven needs" among resource-constrained teenagers in Hyderabad. In so doing, the authors call specifically for an integration of ICTD and anthropological perspectives, and for the broadening of an analytical frame inside ICTD to accommodate such uses.

Finally there are two articles which represent recent instances of the tradition of interventionist field research in ICTD. In "Emergent Practices Around CGNet Swara: A Voice Forum for Citizen Journalism in Rural India," Mudliar, Donner, and Thies report on the development, deployment, and appropriation of a citizen journalism platform in India. Their work is multidisciplinary, combining details of an original technical component (an interactive voice response system) with an evaluation of a specific instance of its uptake and impact (as the citizen journalism portal CGNet Swara). Patel, Savani, Dave, Shah, Klemmer, and Parikh also take a close look at an original voice-based system in "Power to the Peers: Authority of Source Effects for a Voice-Based Agricultural Information Service in Rural India." Where Mudliar et al.'s approach is wide-ranging, integrative, and exploratory, Patel et al.'s analysis of Avaaj Otalo is a focused experimental design engaging specifically with established information processing theory. Their findings—detailing an instance in which farmers found audio tips from peers to be more compelling than the same tips coming from experts—will further fuel the growing interest in peer-to-peer forms of information provision and sharing in development. It is our belief that both types of evidence and inquiry will continue to be important for the field as it moves forward; both inform better practice and design at scale for ICTD interventions, and both have implications beyond the specific instances of citizen journalism and agricultural extension explored in the articles.

In a recent piece in this journal, Geoff Walsham (2013) offered some reflections on ICTD2012, noting (among other points) a relative lack of "Explicit Focus on the D for Development" concerning engagement with both policy and with the political economy of global ICTs. We would agree that these six papers do little to directly assuage Walsham's important concerns. Matters of policy and political economy are only tangentially addressed by these selections. The engagement with specific definitions of development is also not universal, with perhaps only Dodson et al. and Rangaswamy and Cutrell explicitly drawing on existing conceptualizations of development, and the latter doing so largely in order to help push their inquiry beyond those conceptualizations.

In contrast, the strength of these papers as a set may, instead, be that each one is involved some way with "the nexus of theory and practice" in the multidisciplinary community that is ICTD (Heffernan, Lin, & Thomson, 2012). Frias-Martinez and Virseda outline a new method; Rangaswamy and Cutrell encourage a broader scope; Dearden offers a framework for better engagement with research participants; Dodson et al. raise important questions about the relationship between framing and evaluation. Mudliar et al. describe one promising new platform with many possible new uses, while Patel et al. build the evidence around specific best-practices for using peer-to-peer voice in development.

As noted earlier, this iteration of the ICTD conference featured review and methods articles which are helpful in facilitating reflection on wider aspects of an increasingly multidisciplinary field. These are accompanied by the continued presence of papers that focus on addressing specific development

practices and do so at a level of detail that enriches our knowledge of what, precisely, it is to "do development." As a set, they reflect a field engaged in a robust dialogue around methods and practice. While Walsham's critique should be taken as a further charge for the field of ICTD, the continued production of scholarship, like the pieces represented in this special issue, helps to raise the bar on our practice. It will guide the field toward generating results to inform policy, innovation, and intervention—based not just on isolated cases, but across the accumulated evidence of multiple initiatives.

References

Heffernan, C., Lin, Y., & Thomson, K. (2012). Drawing from development: Towards unifying theory and practice of ICT4D. *Journal of International Development*. doi:10.1002/jid.2882

Walsham, G. (2013). Development informatics in a changing world: Reflections from ICTD2010/2012. *Information Technologies & International Development*, *9*(1), 49–54.