Book Review

Ethnographic Perspectives on the Information Society:
A Review Essay

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In the first decade of the 21st century, the idea of the "information society" captured the imagination of a range of governments and other organizations around the world. Computers, and the various centers and programs constructed to house them in communities, were viewed as key objects and spaces through which people could begin to "bridge the digital divide." Through access to educational resources, price information, government documents, and generalized information about the world, the "information society" promised to enhance and even facilitate the mobility of individuals and nations in their quest for social and economic development. This essay reviews two ethnographic monographs that describe and reflect upon the notion of "the information society" through the experience of everyday "users" living in two culturally and geographically distinctive areas of the developing world. Taken together, the monographs enable scholars and others to consider whether the increase in use of digital technologies around the world has delivered the vision of the information society, whether its "ideals have actually come into being, whether the material terms of online participation indeed communicate and support such ideals, and whether such ideals are shared or ultimately adopted by these newcomers" (Burrell, 2012, p. 183).

Payal Arora's *Dot Com Mantra* takes up this challenge through an examination of the interactions between computers and other technologies in rural India. Drawing upon the critical studies of development and sociocultural learning theory, she focuses upon the interrelationship between contexts, communities, and conducts. Arora begins her analysis by attending to the historical imaginations of technology development in Almora, located in Uttarakhand, North India, including the implications of this experience for such contemporary development initiatives as computers in agricultural development. She then turns to the specific programs built around the arrival of the computer in Almora: the e-Agriculture program and the widely celebrated Hole-in-the-Wall initiative. The book concludes by delving into the mundane computing practices in local

cybercafés, paying particular attention to the role that cybercafés play in leisure and educational activities and illustrating the value of leisure pursuits among populations that, at least in development discourse, are relegated to proving their significance through economic benefits. While the focus on capturing contexts, communities, and conduct is conceptually useful, Arora's journey from everyday practices and social learning theory to the broader implications and consequences of these social practices for development discourse and ICTs can be circuitous. At times it bears the burdens of legitimation and expertise evident in a PhD thesis; however, there are also benefits, such as the rare opportunity to read and review extensive quotes from participants transcribed in Hindi and English.

Jenna Burrell's *Invisible Users* explores how young, urban Ghanaians relate to and engage with the Internet(s). Situating the ethnography within and between the place-based neighborhoods in Accra, Internet cafés, and the vast space of "the Internet," Burrell introduces a theoretical framework—materiality—for understanding how the Internet and other material forms emerge in specific situations and, in turn, change, adapt, and become socially consequential in the lives of various "users." Bringing together approaches from STS, material culture studies, and African studies, Burrell illustrates her framework by focusing on the moral universe of the online and Internet world through discussions of 419 scams, rumors, and metaphysics, including a discussion of religious movements in Christian and Muslim Ghana. The second section explores the political economy of technology and information, beginning with Burrell's attendance at the World Summit of the Information Society held in Accra in 2006. The final ethnographic chapter focuses on the emergence of secondhand computer and e-waste industries among young Ghanaian men, illustrating the sometimes radical disjuncture between the discourse of WSIS attendees about the future of ICTs and information, and the local economic and social development practices which are defining and refining the meaning of the Internet among Ghanaian users, yet still do not figure into the planning and design of ICT devices and programs.

Arora and Burrell paint a rich and complex picture of the information society by highlighting how problematic generalized treatises about the liberatory potential of information can be when they are decontextualized from the information's actual use. This comes into focus most effectively in the discussions of the unintended uses. Burrell, for example, devotes multiple chapters to the ways in which aspirational young men and women view the Internet as a foreign commodity, but also as a connection to information and the wider world outside of Ghana. While a number of Internet café users sought to extend the tradition of pen pals by developing relationships with foreigners, the practice of exchanging money (common among individuals in the same age set in Ghana) did not translate well into online interactions with foreigners. Others sought to develop relationships by engaging in come-and-marry scams and engaging in gender swapping. Combined with the stigma concerning Internet scams associated with Africa generally, the Internet became an ambivalent space for transnational engagement, as well as "immobile mobility" (see Wallis, 2013).

In rural north India, education represents the primary modality of mobility, and the Internet's value is tied to its ability to facilitate learning. One of the most poignant examples of this emerges in Arora's discussion of two girls using an Internet café to search for information to write a school report on the difference between Western and Indian Art. Arora describes a practice that is probably not uncommon to others who work in the Global South: standing or sitting next to an "expert" who searches on key words and then copies and pastes pictures and content into a word document. Often, the documents produced through this process are original texts strung together in a narrative. Arora is careful to note that what is produced is valued by teachers for its high production quality, which, in turn, catapults students who can access the café to the top of the class. In this model, aside from the perspective of the Internet café worker (the "expert"), training and developing expertise or a critical perspective around searching for information remains absent from the conversation about technology, learning, and development. Arora further suggests that computers have become both the symbol of the Indian nation, as well as the new middlemen, who operate like the intermediaries (e.g., the state, NGOs, traders, farmers, and so on) who have traditionally enabled decision-making in rural India.

At the level of political economy, one of the dis-

tinct comparative contributions of the two monographs involves the shifting negotiations between market- and state-driven approaches to information and communication technology and development. In India, for example, the state and NGOs play a strong role in the design and implementation of initiatives in the agricultural sector by supporting information kiosks, helping to computerize agricultural land records, and allowing access to administrative forms and other information. At the same time, a number of market- or corporate-driven initiatives have also emerged through India's IT industry that often exhibit different logics and practices. While influenced by international and national regulations, Ghana's more market-driven model of development involves a raft of Ghanaian transnational families who established Internet cafés and helped to foster a secondhand trade, repair, and disposal system. In both instances, the attention to the materiality of the technical networks, wires, casings, and spaces that house computers and related technologies matter. For example's India's "Hole in the Wall" Learning stations were vandalized and left in a state of disrepair in Almora due, in part, to their decidedly Western style of education and learning. Such illustrations of the deterioration and death of these objects remains a poignant reminder of the relational materiality of these objects, as well as the very real infrastructures of the information society.

To conclude, Jenna Burrell's *Invisible Users* is a highly readable and empathetic account of the desires, anxieties, and struggles of young men and women in Accra. Yet Burrell also delivers a compelling conceptual framework around the materialization of technologies in global peripheries that ties together the everyday human-machine interface, the "second order sense-making" (Burrell, 2012, p. 21), and the broader political economy. This framework will undoubtedly shape the work of scholars in STS, ICTD, communication, material culture studies, and other arenas that grapple with the challenge of marrying meaning making and materialist approaches. Payal Arora's *Dot Com Mantra* represents one of the few studies that integrates critical development studies and ICTD with a sociocultural learning perspective, and thus offers a unique vantage point for understanding the development of knowledge and expertise. Taken together, *Dot Com Mantra* and *Invisible Users* offer fascinating insights into some of the commonalities of the respective developing countries at this particular moment in time by highlighting some of the distinctive, situated, and unintended ways in which the information society has become realized in practice. At the same time, the authors contribute new theoretical insights and models, paving a way forward for scholars of ICTD to research and understand the complexities of ICTs and development in the future. ■

Reference

Wallis, C. (2013). *Technomobility in China: Young migrant women and mobile phones.* New York, NY: NYU Press.