From the Guest Editors

Diverse Methods, Complementary Perspectives: Selected Papers from ICTD2013

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This special issue of *ITID* consists of five articles, which are revised and refined versions of full papers included in the plenary session at ICTD2013, hosted in South Africa by the University of Cape Town and the University of the Western Cape from December 7–10, 2013. In total, 27 full papers were presented at ICTD2013, selected from 112 double-blind, peer-reviewed submissions. Forty-eight shorter notes were also offered at the conference, drawn from 104 reviewed submissions. Two volumes of proceedings are available at the ACM Digital Library at http://dl.acm.org/citation.cfm?id=2516604 and http://dl.acm.org/citation.cfm?id=2517899.

As editors, we strived to include articles that were not only of the highest quality, but also those that reflected the extraordinary breadth of methods and disciplines that has come to be one of the hallmarks of the ICTD community. As a result, we have articles that include perspectives from policy, anthropology, computer science, human-computer interaction, and information studies. These articles also reflect a variety of methodological approaches, including extended field deployments, ethnographic inquiries, user studies, literature reviews, and large-scale surveys.

Yet all the articles have remarkably similar high-level goals: improving our understanding of "information" access in the developing world and how current notions of access directly impact people's lives in these countries. Heimerl et al.'s "A Longitudinal Study of Local, Sustainable, Small-Scale Cellular Networks" investigates the design space for bottom-up cellular infrastructure that has the potential to increase the reach of information and communication technologies to the ~1.5 billion people living beyond the reach of cellular signals. It also reports on the impact of one specific deployment of this approach on people's lives in a remote Indonesian locale.

Access is only one aspect of sustainable information access; cost also plays an enormous role in people's use and appreciation of ICTs. "SmartBrowse: Design and Evaluation of a Price Transparency Tool for Mobile Web Use" by Sambasivan et al. demonstrates how providing more transparent information to the user about costs and pricing can increase online engagement among mobile phone users while reducing their costs, including people who had previously not been using data services.

Even cost is not a deterrent to the great value that people place on new technology. In Heimerl et al.'s article, we find that many people in the remote Indonesian hamlet they studied had mobile phones even before

the existence of any local cellular infrastructure. People use phones as media players and also on visits to the nearby town—but beyond that, phones and digital technology more generally are perceived as status symbols and collectively as aspirational items that reflect society's most optimistic perspectives on its own future. Such perspectives are reflected in Mudliar and Pal's article "ICTD in the Popular Press: Media Discourse Around Aakash, the 'World's Cheapest Tablet,'" which finds that this low-cost computer represents many things to many people, but most importantly, reflects the aspirations of India both as a country to join the elites of the technologically innovating countries as well as poor individual Indian students who can use the computer to become active participants in the global knowledge workforce.

As we all know, that reality is often far more complicated than our dreams and aspirations. One such dream is that ICTs will serve as the great leveler, improving the efficiency of markets and public services so that they can become more fair, equal, and inclusive. Jensen's famous article showed how the availability of mobile phones improved the efficiency of fish markets in coastal Kerala and, on average, increased the price obtained by local fishermen (Jensen, 2007). Srinivasan and Burrell, in their article "On the Importance of Price Information to Fishers and to Economists: Revisiting Mobile Phone Use Among Fishers in Kerala" show how this view is applicable only in certain, specialized contexts—for example, to fishermen who have the luxury of choosing which market they travel to by boat—and overlook other uses and impacts of the technology—for example, for maintaining trading relationships with existing buyers and suppliers.

This article shows that not all existing disparities are resolved by "market forces" and their ICT-mediated enablers and that the only way to fully understand the relevance of these technologies is to study their actual use and impacts. Sey et al. use a mixed-methods approach in their article, "There When You Need It: The Multiple Dimensions of Public Access ICT Uses and Impacts," finding that public access did in fact significantly improve digital skills among users of these services, and when needed, these people were able to use ICTs to access various important public and private services. These findings illustrate that ICT access and impact are not simply a market efficiency waiting to be achieved and that public access can impact people's ability to access and benefit from digital technologies.

The final essay is a timely and reflective review by Srinivasan of Don Slater's book, *New Media, Development and Globalization.* As Srinivasan notes, the book is empirically rich and expansive, drawing on cases from Slater's work across the globe, weaving together viewpoints from material culture, development studies, information studies, and the science, technology and society (STS) literatures. The review describes how the book grapples with foundational questions of framing, power, and information within the ICTD community, and how it serves as both an integration of and important challenge to many of the perspectives evident at the ICTD2013 conference and in the pages of this journal.

Taking these articles together, we gain a fuller picture of the roles and impacts of information access on ongoing development processes, including not only the design and use of specific technological solutions, but also their relationships to specific user, social, and policy contexts. As digital access grows in developing countries, we can imagine that these findings will be relevant to a broad range of both public and private actors seeking to better understand the design, uses, and impacts of ICTs in developing countries.

Finally, it is with great affection that we close this introduction by remembering and celebrating the unique and extensive contributions of Gary Marsden, general co-chair for ICTD2013, and leader and moral force within the ICTD community. Gary passed away suddenly, shortly after the conference concluded. As a designer, teacher, mentor, researcher, and most of all, as a person, he truly represented the best that our field has to offer. We will all miss his work and influence. An upcoming Fall 2015 issue of *ITID* will commemorate his many contributions. ∎

References

Jensen, R. (2007). The digital provide: Information (technology), market performance, and welfare in the South Indian fisheries sector. *The Quarterly Journal of Economics, 122*(3), 879–924.