

Book Review

Reimagining Terms, Rethinking Expertise

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Don Slater, *New Media, Development and Globalization: Making Connections in the Global South*, Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2013, 242 pp., \$24.95 (paperback)/\$69.95 (hardcover).



Don Slater has been involved for years now with theorizing material cultures and communication. He brings these theories and his experience with communications technology-based development initiatives to *New Media, Development and Globalization*. The result is a volume that is both empirically rich, drawing on cases from across the globe and concerning a variety of technologies, and theoretically innovative, weaving together viewpoints from material culture, development studies, information studies, and the Science, Technology and Society (STS) literatures.

New Media, Development and Globalization begins with an ambitious goal: to reposition three terms—new media, development, globalization—and the narratives linking these terms. Slater seeks to present these as “just one kind of story about the future, told by certain kinds of people, and therefore performatively part of the construction of the future that will actually eventuate” (p. 2). Accordingly, the book attempts throughout to demote these terms from what Slater calls their “universalistic thrones,” looking instead to their meanings in “grounded, diverse everyday street lives” (p. 26). In particular, he challenges the “North provides theory, South, the data” basis that he argues underlies how these terms currently operate. The rest of the book takes on these terms one by one, drawing on examples from Slater’s own ethnographic fieldwork to examine how people’s lived experiences can be used to broaden ideas about media, development, and globalization. Instead of examining media as an object with a set of fixed properties that can be specified outside of a particular social context, Slater studies the diverse resources that people may leverage to communicate and connect with others (including “technologies, institutions, aesthetic forms, practices, interactional rules and material properties,” p. 6). Similarly, rather than emphasizing expert theories and definitions of development, Slater pays attention to ideas about the future and social change from those targeted by development initiatives. Finally, he replaces a study of globalization with a study of how people map distances and connections in their lives. Slater argues that researchers and practitioners can be more inclusive. They can also better achieve analytical and ethical symmetry between the theories of experts and those of the communities they describe. For Slater, the first step in the process is to look beyond homogenous categories such as media, development, and globalization, and this is what he attempts in chapters 2–6.

Chapters 2 and 3, “Communicative Ecologies and Communicative Assemblages” and “Media Forms and Practices,” are closely related. They focus on the differences between what is categorized as communication media in development discourse and how communication works in practice. Using examples from his involvement in a Sri Lankan community radio project, Slater examines how project beneficiaries use a variety of mechanisms to communicate with each other, including public transit, loudspeakers, and face-to-face interactions, none of which would have been categorized as media by the project. Elsewhere, he emphasizes how media is reconfigured in practice to such an extent that talking about the properties of media makes little sense. Slater points out, for example, that the “Trinidadian internet,”¹ (p. 29) has distinct properties from the internet elsewhere. Thus, instead of relying on the standard, Western definitions of media with which he entered his field

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1. Slater does not capitalize ‘internet’ and, thus, this convention is maintained throughout. This book challenges the idea of a single internet and proposes that there are many internets around the world that work differently from each other.

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sites, Slater pays attention to how people skillfully engineer heterogeneous “stable or routinized systems for establishing communication” (p. 47). Where the second chapter focuses on understanding the workings of such systems in different places, the third is an attempt to understand the *origin* of these differences (which is also what makes these differences interesting, according to Slater). The chapter argues that differences in systems originate in the different structures of feeling that organize connections and communication in each case. Slater uses the examples of mobile phone and internet use at his field sites in Ghana to illustrate how phones, for example, were used to discharge family obligations and to further *embed* people in family networks (through the mechanism of placing daily missed calls to specific members of one’s family, for instance). The internet, on the other hand, was seen as a way to potentially *escape* these obligations and to “collect” foreign friends (p. 81). Slater argues that these different uses cannot be fully understood in terms of the different affordances offered by mobile phones and internet cafés. If we are to make sense of the different ways they are used, we have to examine instead how the two are associated with different feelings—one with “embeddedness” and the other with “escape.” Together, chapters 2 and 3 illustrate how a focus on predefined and largely Northern definitions of media risks excluding the most important questions about how people structure their communication in different places.

If chapters 2 and 3 are concerned with media, chapters 4 and 5 examine the assumptions and consequences of the terms *development* and *globalization* in a similar way. I found the chapter examining development, “Making Up the Future: New Media as the Material Culture of Development,” particularly interesting. Slater’s examples in this chapter will resonate with anybody who has struggled to make sense of the many (and often conflicting) definitions of development they encounter in studying the workings of a development initiative. Overall, Slater uses chapters 2–5 to argue that since everybody is involved in engineering systems to undertake communication to predict their own future and social change and to map distance and proximity in their own lives, there is a need for terms that are more inclusive of their varied experiences than current definitions of media, development, and globalization. Such alternatives, Slater argues, can begin to reimagine the asymmetric relations between experts and beneficiaries, the Global North and the Global South.

Slater acknowledges that symmetry is hard to achieve in practice. Nowhere is this more evident than in discussions about the “knowledge” that development experts bring to the targets of development initiatives. In a brilliant wrap-up chapter 6, “Politics of Research: Forms of Knowledge, Participation and Generalization,” Slater turns to this question of the asymmetry between academic and development knowledge. Slater draws on examples from his own work with UNESCO’s ICTs for Poverty Reduction initiative to examine the politics of participation and knowledge creation in development initiatives. He notes that the active involvement of beneficiaries has been recognized as desirable for the better part of two decades now, with ideas that include participative research and development. However, such participation has mostly devolved into development management as a way to better “deposit” information with beneficiaries, rather than as a basis for learning and genuine, social transformation. Moreover, despite the focus on participation and an emphasis on local realities, development bureaucracies and academic communities continue to value generalizability and the creation of universal explanations and models. Slater argues that this emphasis profoundly affects what counts as legitimate knowledge in the workings of development endeavors and who can produce such knowledge (development professionals, not beneficiaries).

While this hierarchy between expert and lay knowledge is already much debated, Slater makes the additional point that it is not only instrumental accounts that reinforce this hierarchy, but also critical accounts. Instrumental accounts believe “technically correct knowledge will secure development” (p. 172), conceive of knowledge as objective and universal, and focus on transferring this knowledge in a linear manner from person to person. Once such knowledge is identified correctly by experts, it can then be “applied” to local places. But Slater argues that even critical (and largely Foucauldian) accounts of the relationship between policy and practice (Ferguson, 1994; Escobar, 1995)—which posit that development policy actually extends state power under the guise of securing development—hold that only academic experts and knowledge can tell us “what is *really* going on” (emphasis in original) (p. 173). In this way, they equally value expert knowledge over participant experiences and the learning that happens over the course of implementing a development initiative. Slater argues that, in effect and despite their different stances, both instrumental and critical accounts

dehumanize and take away the agency of beneficiaries. He sees his analysis as a critique, therefore, “not of instrumentally ineffective development theory but an ethical critique of de-humanizing, of taking away agency” (p. 186) from the targets of development.

Slater ends the book on a hopeful note and offers Freire’s (2000) radical reimagining of teacher-student relations as an alternative way to remodel the relations of knowledge and truth between the North and the South. Following Freire, each teaches the other in this framing, and “the naming and making of the world is carried out under symmetrical relations” (p. 187). Slater is the first to admit that this is a utopian vision, but he points to it as one worth striving for.

New Media, Development and Globalization is an important book for several reasons. Slater states at the outset that he does not seek to offer suggestions on how better to “do” development or globalization as a primary goal, but I believe what he sets out to do is equally important. Slater refuses to work within the binaries and frames offered to him by development professionals as legitimate research questions: Do ICTs alleviate poverty or not? Do they or do they not empower? Are they being used for good, developmental purposes or are they being resisted? In the process, he situates ICT use within power structures. He also repositions the agency of users at the forefront, highlighting how the targets of development initiatives transform technologies, and not merely adopt or resist them.

I found Slater’s analysis especially useful for its focus on symmetry, while not arguing away power. Instead, he leverages the symmetry he sets up to illustrate the politics of popular terms and examines whose definitions are made to count in the world of development. Ascribing agency to ICT users is not new in itself. But Slater’s account is important because he frames the question of agency differently, asking whose agency is seen as important and whose is never analyzed in the world of development initiatives, including ICTD projects. His accounts pay attention to how power structures shape this hierarchy of agency (north-south, expert-beneficiary), whose agency to appropriate technology use is celebrated, and whose technology use is conceived of solely in instrumental terms.

Slater’s work is in dialogue with several disciplines (material culture, STS, development studies) and theorists, including those who have not been commonly invoked in the ICTD literature, such as Antonio Gramsci, David Mosse (2005), and Paulo Freire (2000). I found this breadth useful and believe it will make this a book of interest to several communities of academic readers as well as to development professionals. Finally, I appreciated that Slater’s discussion does not focus solely on ICTs, instead, digging deeper into the concepts of information and knowledge upon which ICT deployment and use draw.

I did leave Slater’s book and its utopian vision asking what skills his ideal development professional would possess and what her contribution would be in the Freirian model of learning (given that Slater argues against this professional being the repository of expert knowledge). Pragmatically (and perhaps cynically), I wonder what incentive development professionals would have to support such a model if they feared they might become dispensable. Operationalizing learning and knowledge as Slater suggests require that we think through this question.

A word of caution: Slater’s book is dense and may take several readings to fully grasp its many interwoven themes. His empirical examples originate in many countries, which also contributes to the book’s complexity. But given Slater’s goals, this is perhaps to be expected, with the structure of the book supporting his arguments against top-down simplification and reductionism. ■

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