

Digital leisure for development: Reframing new media practice in the global south

Introduction

Photoshopping of newlyweds, downloading the latest movies, teens flirting on social network sites and virtual gaming may seem like typical behavior in the West; yet in the context of a village in Mali or a slum in Mumbai, it is seen as unusual and perhaps an anomaly in their new media practice. In recent years, some studies (Ganesh, 2010; Mitra, 2005; Arora, 2010; 2012; Rangaswamy & Nair, 2012; Kavoori, Chadha & Arceneaux, 2006) have documented these leisure-oriented behaviors in the global south and argued for the need to emphasize and reposition these user practices within larger and contemporary discourses on new media consumption. Yet, for the most part, studies in the field of Information and Communication Technologies for Development (ICT4D) have duly relegated such enactments as anecdotal. This is partly due to the fact that much of this research is driven by development agendas with a strong historical bias towards the socio-economic focus (Burrell & Anderson, 2009). Data that is not directly addressing project-based outcomes is sidelined. However, as emerging economies globalize and urbanize exponentially, and their users become more critical consumers and creative contributors of digital content or ‘prosumers’ (Bruns, 2008) and arguably free laborers (Scholz, 2012) instead of classic development beneficiaries, a paradigm shift is needed in approaching this new media audience with a more open-ended, explorative and pluralistic perspective.

Thereby, this commentary piece serves as a call to rethink new media practices in the global south by looking at the implications and impacts of ICTs as leisure (entertainment/pleasure/ play) artifacts in the context of developing economies and emerging markets. We believe this line of inquiry is timely and enables a strategic bridging of the new media studies and development

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communication domain. Despite studies yielding insightful commentaries on ICTs in this arena, we believe resource constrained environments generating rich usages that are not overtly utilitarian have remained hitherto unexplored. A critical movement is needed among scholars focusing on emerging economies to re-conceptualize the mobilization and serviceability of ICTs to extend beyond a conservative understanding of developmental value. This will help in focusing on the heterogeneous and life enhancing aspects of technological use encompassing both experiential and purposive elements of ICT adoption: their interplay with systematic/systemic ecological constraints to provide an analytical and descriptive study of the technology spectrum and use in these contexts.

To illustrate our argument, we offer some critical points of contention that need addressing and new avenues for research if we are to rethink, reframe and refresh our thinking on Web 2.0 enactments in the global south.

1. Broaden the development lens of technology adoption

It is essential to see how information about everyday ICT use may be relevant for development research even if it is largely driven by the quest for leisure. To understand how ICT tools are used in these marginalized and largely unexplored contexts, there is a need to study the spaces users inhabit and situate learnings within an understanding of what drives a specific user population to adopt technologies in particular ways. Clearly there is a link between context and use, and understanding this is invaluable for development research (Wise, 1997). Adopting a narrow development lens of technology use may miss the actual engagements and ingenious strategies marginal populations use to instate technologies into their everyday. It is purported that “ICT can enable solutions towards human progress when applied with a broad understanding and a multidisciplinary approach” (Brewer et al, 2005, p.25). Despite the broad and liberal definition, the

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ICT for development community tends to privilege what are and what are not desired/legitimate developmental impacts of technology. For example, it is fair to assume that most of the ICT4D community would agree that mobile phones are clearly development artifacts when they are associated with a rise in livelihood opportunities. However, if mobile phones simply fulfill entertainment needs, many in this community will question the relevance for development. This leads to the argument that the phone contributes to development goals only if it transfers micro-credit and not a ring tone to a client and that mobile money is an ICTD tool only because it aids migrant urban labour to transfer money back to their native village and not to buy a ticket for a cricket match (Rangaswamy, 2009). Hence, a concerted effort is needed to shift focus from the ‘event-based’ to the ‘everyday’ practice if we are to capture the complexities of ICT adoption in these new economies.

2. ICTs are social artifacts before they become tools for development

For ICTs to become tools of utility and the norm, they often undergo a process of sustained exploration through leisure avenues. For instance, newbies are initially motivated to go online to skype with their loved one, check photos of friends on Orkut and search for matrimonial prospects online rather than for socio-economic ends (Heeks, 2008). By paying attention to such drives, insight can be gained into new technology adoption and appropriation in the global south. We see this pattern recurring with every new technology of the time from the radio, the television to the computer in our day and age. Take for instance the radio and its early dissemination strategies within rural India in the 1930s and eventual adoption; it started as a mass communicative effort to educate the public and serve as an object “to be used as a weapon against illiteracy and ignorance” (Zivin, 1998). In practice, the radio became part of everyday use only after it began to cater to the

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entertainment demands of the rural masses. In fact, the edutainment movement is built on the foundation of mass communication and participation in leisure through broadcasting mediums such as the television and the radio (Singhal & Rogers, 2003). Indeed, for decades there has been recognition of the power of leisure to facilitate social change in so-called developing countries. However, there is a nuanced but critical difference between this movement and what we are proposing here; while edutainment fosters the embedding of prosocial messages within entertainment content as a strategy to address different socio-cultural issues, we advocate looking at the raw engagements with entertainment-oriented and social content to deeply understand motivation and appropriation behaviors and needs of users with these mediums. So for example, while there are interesting studies capitalizing on skype to build capacity of sub-Saharan African healthcare systems as part of the development plan (Mars, 2012), few studies focus on the usage of skype by such populations as an open-ended agenda. Hence, while history time and again exposes the ‘irrationality’ of user adoption through their enacted social preferences, new ICTs continue to be situated as ahistorical instruments designed to serve predominantly needs and not wants.

3. Privilege individual aspirations/mannerisms over communal development

Most ICT4D research is tightly linked to clear socio-economic outcomes and subscribes to an ideology that is biased towards community development over individual aspirations and their socio-cultural mannerisms. The unit of focus is traditionally broadscale given the cost-intensive projects that pervade the development terrain, demanding sweeping generalizations on behavior and outcomes for policy and practice (Hart, 2011). In recent decades the unit of study has evolved from an indiscriminate ‘rural’ and ‘third world population’ to a pluralistic and multidimensional view of such groups and cultures (Narayan et al., 2000), transpiring into participatory frameworks for socio-

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economic action. The Web 2.0 is looked upon as a natural extension of this current ideology, wherein online crowdsourcing and crowdfunding have validated these co-creative and collaborative development initiatives (Heeks, 2009). While several studies in new media (Fuchs, 2009; Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010; Comor, 2011) are now debunking and critiquing the much celebrated ‘prosumer’ (Bruns, 2008) and digital crowd wisdom (Surowiecki, 2005), the world of ICT4D seem to be entrenched in an uncritical romance with this co-creative collective. There seems to be a seamless flow between the paradigm changing perspective of the ‘bottom of the pyramid’ - an emphasis on the ingenuities of the empowered collective with that of the Web 2.0 creative public. However, what is needed is paying heed to ongoing practice and critique emerging within new media studies on the political economy of the masses online, the deeply generating and reproducing hierarchies amongst the gatekeepers of information and the extent and range of exploitation through free labor to enforce existing market monopolies. To strengthen this transference of perspective from new media to the development communication realm, the anthropology of the digital collective/crowd/public is essential. This allows us to attend to network formations and hierarchies within this mythical mass, individual needs and means of expression that foster meaningful communication and their aspirational use.

4. Sideline morality and virtuosity of the poor for pluralistic possibilities

“Do farmers surf for pornography when they are supposed to be comparing crop prices?” asks Indira Ganesh (2010, p.3) as she advances on a development project on mobiles and healthcare. Often, such questions remain unanswered as the framing of ICTs in the global south are deeply ingrained as tools of poverty alleviation and empowerment, leaving little room for alternative possibilities of such promising platforms. While porn is undeniably the top Net practice in the West

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(Jacob, 2007), there seems to be a driving assumption that the poor in emerging markets would capitalize on these platforms for more virtuous and pragmatic ends. This leaves a gaping hole in our understanding of the spectrum of practices that engage these newbies, ignoring “the diverse ways in which the poor and the marginalized use media technologies in their everyday lives for social networking, entertainment, to produce and participate in intimate and erotic economies, and to express and experience their sexuality, relationships, pleasure and intimacy in ways that could also be considered empowering” (Ganesh, 2010, p.3). By putting our morality aside and our naive and paternalistic belief in the global south population as productive and utilitarian beings, we can do better service on building our knowledge of these novel digital economies, for the better or worse. Besides sexual expression and prosumption, the Net has been used for creating a significant informal economy based on the hacker culture. There are some rich perspectives on situating the ‘hacker’ through different lens from agency to violation of systemic trust (Thomas, 2003). However, few studies in the emerging markets give much attention to these domains of disobedience, resistance or possible violence of trust networks and its transnational and local consequences. We need to look at the global south users as *typical* users and not virtuous beings awaiting and capitalizing on opportunities for socio-economic liberation. This may facilitate a nuanced view of the nature of digital economies that are being enabled through new media technologies, that embrace all aspects including the ‘darker’ side of leveling the playing field through ICTs.

To summarize, despite the diversity of communication ecologies and infrastructural resources across the globe and the diverse range of disciplines in ICT4D involved in studying them, we rarely see theorists or practitioners go beyond a deterministic utilitarian view of how information technology can lead to socio-economic development. In this essay we attempt to revisit

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and open up critical spaces in development communication related to perceptions of poverty, the needs of the poor and use of technology for development goals. Poverty is not a homogeneous terrain open to uniform ICT4D interventions. It comprises people of varied material status, economic aspirations and social dynamism. Similarly the poor as subjects for ICT interventions need fine-grained understandings of their internal distinctions, capabilities and limitations. This means the ability to view the poor as a dynamic social category with active agency to adopt technologies rather than inert recipients of developmental action. Further, geographies of development are often architected around classic domains such as agriculture, healthcare, education and livelihood and the ICT realm is seen as a virtual extension of such arenas. While indeed these are important contexts, we argue that digital leisure of emerging market users occur in uncharted terrains of inhabitation, carving new possibilities and modernities of practice. Here, locality under the development paradigm is revisited critically, as sites of digital participation can be cosmopolitan, transnational and cross-cultural, possibly challenging traditional boundaries of practice.

Final thoughts

We suggest more research directed to examine the mutual shaping of ICT use in everyday life and users' self-understanding of these tools. These can be situated within a framework investigating issues of identity, expression and agency and not necessarily in the language of development providing an alternate lens to view digital artifacts transcending their literal or functional meaning. Cultural theorists (e.g. Latour; Pinch & Bijker) provide a framework against which we can examine technological artifacts "not for what they are but for what they enable" (Latour, 1987, p. 34). More importantly, we generate a discussion on viewing such an adoption as critical to an understanding

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of or intervention in the domains of human development and social progress. Following Appadurai (1996, 2000) on how electronic mass media fuels aspiration and agency, ICTs are viewed not simply as a resource to be acted upon but one with consequences for everyday behaviours. This essay builds on other scholars of ethnography and historiography (e.g. Bijker, Burrell, Fischer, Horst & Miller, May & Hearn) by taking a view of conceiving ICTs as meaningful tools bearing social value through “conscious acts of configuration, mediation, and active interpretation by social actors” (Pinch & Bijker 1984). This focus paves way to a discussion on the rise of informal actors in emerging markets and the nature of their multiple, complex and carefully cultivated business relationships, what the authors call a ‘mosaic of economic relations.’ A case is made to coalesce practices in access and usage when examining ICTs in the global south and create an urgency to extend our framings on knowledge creation, circulation, and circumvention that have become of paramount concern in this information and digital age. By bringing to the fore ways of knowing through these underexamined technosocial ecologies, we can genuinely embed the ‘global’ within the new mediascape and create a bridge between new media and development communication studies.

A full analysis of the ways in which technology is used requires a deep understanding of the social, political and interpersonal circumstances in which technologies exist, and through which they attain their meaning. Institutional and legal infrastructures and networks influence and shape online enactments of work and play/ labor and leisure. Our aim is to identify the specificity and connectivity of such embedded politics in the realm of ICTs in the global south and position these understandings in the larger mediascape. This stress on the environment, or the ecology of development, allows for explorations in the differences between individuals depending on the circumstances in which they develop. If the individual is an agent in his/her own development, there

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can be no pre-determined outcome to the development and implementation of technologies. Instead technologies are subjected continually to a series of complex interactions and negotiations with the social, economic, political and cultural contexts. This provides an opportunity to reframe staid discourses on participation and empowerment within the ICT4D sphere.

Development communication has evolved to include a range of technology artifacts, their affordances and services and a variety of context specific geo-spaces of usage. The community has encompassed focused, exploratory and evaluatory building and assessment of technology, collaborating with scientists across disciplines from computer science, interface design to anthropology. However, we aim to re-focus the gaze on the so-called non-instrumental, non-utilitarian usages and impacts thereof on communities, groups and individuals from specific socio-economic backgrounds not yet a subject of singular and sustained investigative intentions. With such a focus, we hope to establish the relationship between, until now, discreet technology practices such as those for livelihoods and those for leisure (entertainment, pleasure, play) as legitimate components of an integrated technology experience. In a sense, we explore how such an experience could potentially contribute to ‘development-friendly’ skills sets, life chances and opportunities. In a broader sense, we hope that a renewed examination of the premises of ICT usage in resource constrained environments, particularly, those which valorize and equate development as utilitarian, can provoke a re-imagination of the ICT4D community so as to problematize the notion of developmental well-being. In addition, we intend to identify and initiate a discussion on what we mean by ICT for leisure in the lived reality of specific geo-spatial spaces united by their common relationship with broken and strapped infrastructures. Adopting a narrow development lens can miss the actual engagements and ingenious strategies marginal populations use to instate technologies into their everyday. Here, seeking entertainment becomes a key behavioral tool to

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strategize technology use, pleasure to emotively connect and play to sustain engagement. Indeed, this may require us to broaden our view of how we think about what underlies a good development communication research project and how we view a range of human behaviors as incremental to development. For example rather than using the internet to search for educational material, low-income youth in India search for Bollywood music and movie teasers. These are hardly developmental in any conventional sense, but more akin to behaviours of youth in any part of the globe. It's indeed astounding to find relative affluence in the uptake of ICTs by user populations least likely to afford and access this technology.

Leisure, we argue, is a critical area of technology infusion leading to discovery and magnification of use and digital literacies. Moreover it offers an experimental space to informally diffuse learnings and impart invaluable social impacts of binding people and technologies. This essay purports to bring together stories about crafting technologies anchored in a low cost but ubiquitous access channel in the 'developing' world. As mobile technologies move beyond urban areas and the upper class who can afford them, it will be critical to see how the use of these transforms to include a spectrum of behaviors. The ICT4D community at large is poised at a juncture where interdisciplinary crossings are pushing boundaries of established themes and subject matters. This confluence of researchers and the researched provides an opportunity to question, discuss and modify some of the basic premises of technology use in development contexts.

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