

Techno-optimism or Information Imperialism: Paradoxes in Online Networking, Social Media and Development



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ICT4D

Information and Communication Technology for Development

A growing area of practice and research that is concerned with the use of ICT to support development aims and objectives, to help overcome the digital divide and to assist NGOs and governments in development work



Social Media & Online Networking for development

Blogging
**Email groups /
forums**
Facebook
Twitter
Mobile Applications



Information access
Awareness-raising
Sharing
Collaboration
Participation

Techno-optimism



“Now take therefore what modern technology is capable of: the power of our moral sense allied to the power of modern communications and our ability to organize internationally. That in my view gives us the first opportunity as a community to fundamentally change the world.”
-Gordon Brown, TEDglobal, 2009

Social Media & Online Networking for development

- ICT₄D 2.0
- Development 2.0

“not just an assemblage of hardware, software, and user behaviour, but an ‘architecture of participation’”

(Thompson, 2008)



Techno-optimism

- Networks are considered to be characterized by flat, non-hierarchical structures, and voluntary and reciprocal forms of communication and exchange (Henry et al., 2004; Keck & Sikkink, 1998, p. 8).
- Potential to transform the dynamics of group interaction; potentially driving increased calls for a much more plural and collaborative development (Thompson, 2008)
- Ability to connect development actors in different sectors and projects, fostering collaboration among individuals and institutions (Acevedo, 2011)
- Potential for 'enhanced knowledge generation, increased potential for participation of people and entities in concrete activities, and improved productivity for certain joint actions'. (Acevedo, 2011)
- The 'transformational potential' of ICT in development (Heeks, 2010)



Concept	Definition
Disintermediation	The removal of middle-men, intermediaries and gatekeepers. In this context, the idea that social media and online networks are open and flattened structures which allow both the poor and campaigners to reach others without having to depend on intermediaries such as media corporations and other traditional gatekeepers.
Participation	Widely used in development contexts to describe the process by which members of a community are involved in or can contribute to decisions related to development activities. It is argued that the availability and low cost of the Internet and social media can increase participation of the poor, giving a 'voice' to the marginalized and enabling their participation in debates and projects which affect their lives.
Diversity	The plural and collaborative nature of online networks and the potential of the Internet to enable bottom-up collaboration and the breakdown of social divisions.



Information imperialism?

- Information age colonialism (Gross, 2006)
- Computer-mediated colonialism (Ess, 2002)
- 'potentially the site of a new and extremely powerful wave of neo-colonialism' which can exacerbate economic inequalities. (Ward, 2011, p. 148)
 - contains 'the limitations and constraints consistent with the diffusion of ICTs generally', including cultural imperialism and ethnocentrism (Bodle, 2010, p. 10) .
 - earlier critiques of ICT4D highlight the unequal spread of ICT and argue that the simple equating of technology with development recycles conventional modernization thinking and is a resurgence of modernization discourse, possibly even a new form of modernization -- Modernization 2.0. (Shade, 2003, p. 114)
- Critics have pointed out how the uneven spread of ICT can exacerbate the digital divide, and tends to privilege Western content and intellectual property rights, leaving unchanged the unequal division of political space (Warkentin & Mingst, 2000).

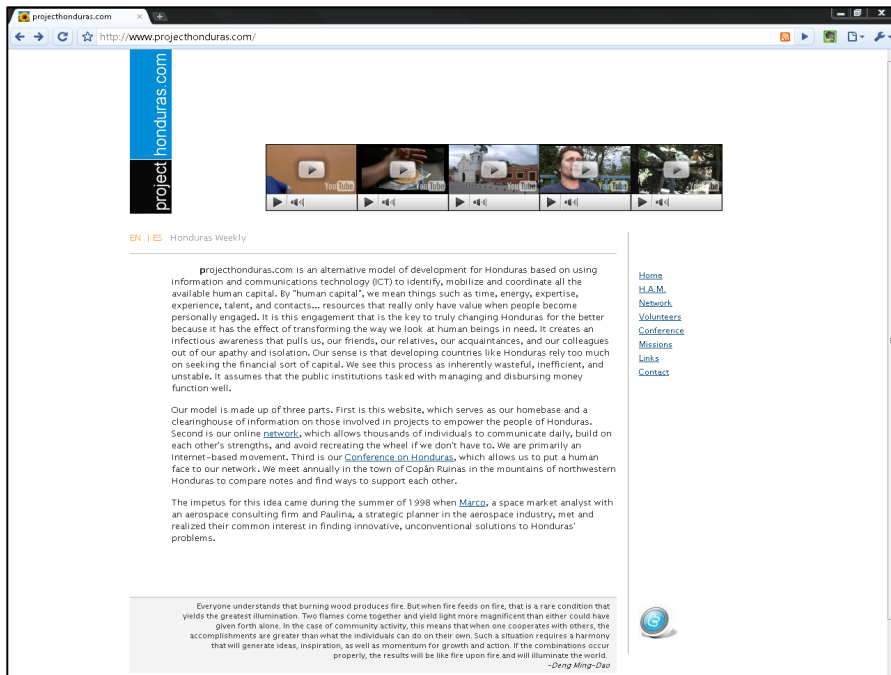


Information imperialism?

- As Morozov (2012, p. xiii) notes, the idea that the internet favors the oppressed rather than the oppressor is therefore marred by... “cyber-utopianism: a naïve belief in the emancipatory nature of online communication that rests on a stubborn refusal to acknowledge its downside”.



projecthonduras.com is...




...an online portal for information on ways to help Honduras. We are also a network of individuals and groups working on innovative, grassroots responses to the country's social and economic needs, leveraging the information and the talent, expertise, and time within our network to serve as a catalyst for change... The vision of projecthonduras.com is to create an alternative model of development for poor countries based on mobilizing and channelling our "human capital" rather than endlessly emphasizing the need for more money. (projecthonduras.com homepage, 2007)

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projecthonduras.com is an alternative model of development for Honduras based on using information and communications technology (ICT) to identify, mobilize and coordinate all the available human capital. By "human capital", we mean things such as time, energy, expertise, experience, talent, and contacts... resources that really only have value when people become personally engaged. It is this engagement that is the key to truly changing Honduras for the better because it has the effect of transforming the way we look at human beings in need. It creates an infectious awareness that pulls us, our friends, our relatives, our acquaintances, and our colleagues out of our apathy and isolation. Our sense is that developing countries like Honduras rely too much on seeking the financial sort of capital. We see this process as inherently wasteful, inefficient, and unstable. It assumes that the public institutions tasked with managing and disbursing money function well.


Our model is made up of three parts. First is this website, which serves as our homebase and a clearinghouse of information on those involved in projects to empower the people of Honduras. Second is our online [network](#), which allows thousands of individuals to communicate daily, build on each other's strengths, and avoid recreating the wheel if we don't have to. We are primarily an Internet-based movement. Third is our [Conference on Honduras](#), which allows us to put a human face to our network. We meet annually in the town of Copán Ruinas in the mountains of northwestern Honduras to compare notes and find ways to support each other.

The impetus for this idea came during the summer of 1998 when [Marco](#), a space market analyst with an aerospace consulting firm and Paulina, a strategic planner in the aerospace industry, met and realized their common interest in finding innovative, unconventional solutions to Honduras' problems.

Everyone understands that burning wood produces fire. But when fire feeds on fire, that is a rare condition that yields the greatest illumination. Two flames come together and yield light more magnificent than either could have given forth alone. In the case of community activity, this means that when one cooperates with others, the accomplishments are greater than what the individuals can do on their own. Such a situation requires a harmony that will generate ideas, inspiration, as well as momentum for growth and action. If the combinations occur properly, the results will be like fire upon fire and will illuminate the world.

-Deng Ming-Dao

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- [honduras-healthcare] Re: USAID workshop at the Conference on Honduras 2009
- [honduras-healthcare] USAID workshop at the Conference on Honduras 2009
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Concept	Findings
Disinter- mediation / new mediators	<p>Centrality of the founder: The reliance on a single founder with connections and influence adds a structural constraint to the emergence of a truly dis-intermediated network</p> <p>New intermediaries: Less reliance on traditional media, government and NGO sources for information and resources, but the network founder and key participants in the network become new intermediaries.</p>



Concept	Findings
Participation / limited participation	<p>Low activity: Falling numbers of posts and online engagement indicate decreasing participation. A significant drop in activity following the transition to Facebook groups is indicative of the challenges inherent in the adoption of new technologies.</p> <p>Limited participation of Hondurans: Structural constraints, the English language dominance and the US-centric nature of the network limit the involvement of Hondurans. This can be seen as a consequence of the homophily of the network.</p>



Concept	Findings
Diversity / Homophily	<p>Diverse yet homophilous: While there is considerable diversity amongst the participants (age, profession, institutional affiliation) from early on the network attracted a core of North American participants and the growth of the network has continued to be amongst organizations with similar backgrounds and values.</p> <p>Politicization: The involvement of US American and Honduran government and military representatives, and the positioning of the network leadership following the 2009 coup deepened the homophily of the network as those with different views felt excluded.</p>

Concept	Findings
Information Colonialism	The influence of the new intermediaries, lack of local participation and homophily of the network has resulted in an online culture with primarily Western, middle-class bias, with a service-oriented, paternalistic understanding of development and an underlying liberal politics and the (unintentional) exclusion of local approaches and solutions.





“...the first opportunity as a community to fundamentally change the world” (Brown 2009)

OR

The recycling of modernization thinking, privileging Western content and Western intellectual property rights (Pieterse 2010), collapsing time but leaving unchanged the unequal division of political space (Warkentin & Mingst, 2000)



- Embedded in Western liberalism and notions of progress and individualism, conventional development approaches have long been criticized for expanding and reinforcing Western hegemony.
- The Internet and social media, with roots in Western nations and ideologies, can exacerbate this, promoting development strategies and approaches that prioritize the agendas of the elite rather than the voices of the marginalized.
- *This is not inevitable* and there is evidence that social media is giving a platform to alternative voices and movements
- More research is desperately needed as the uptake of social media increases globally, as is an honest appraisal of the benefits and pitfalls of web 2.0 and the Internet in development practice.



There is “ a very real need to consider the power dynamics and hierarchies embedded in transnational development networks and global civil society more broadly”

(Baillie-Smith and Jenkins, 2011, p. 175)



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