The Socialization of ICTs in Ethiopia: Re-Shaping Technology for Nation-Building

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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses how state actors in the developing world have influenced technology adoption and favoured the diffusion of certain uses of ICTs while discouraging others. Drawing upon extensive field research and looking at the evolution of ICTs in Ethiopia, it examines how a semi-authoritarian, yet developmentally oriented regime, has actively sought to mediate the – either real or imagined – destabilising aspects of ICTs while embracing them as a tool for nation-building. A constructivist framework as developed in international relations and history of technology is employed to understand how the introduction of the new ICT framework as promoted by international organizations has been mediated both by the results of the socialization of earlier technologies in Ethiopia and by the national project pursued by the local political elite.

Keywords: Semi-Authoritarian, Sociolization of ICTs, Technopolitics

INTRODUCTION

Not long ago, many of us felt that we were too poor to afford to invest seriously in ICT. We assumed that ICT was a luxury that only the rich could afford. We were convinced, and rightly so, that we should invest every penny we have on securing the next meal for our people, on putting some sort of shelter over their heads, on reducing or, as the experts in the development business would have it, alleviating absolute poverty, absolute poverty which has aptly been defined as poverty that kills. We did not believe that serious investment in ICT had anything to do with facing the challenges of poverty that kills. Now I think we know better. Now we believe we are too poor not save everything we can and invest as much of it as possible on ICT. We recognize that while ICT may be a luxury for the rich, for us - the poor countries - it is a vital and essential tool for fighting poverty, for beating poverty that kills and ensuring our survival. That is why we are fully committed to investing as much of our time, energy, and money as possible on ICT and to its effective use in our war on poverty. Meles Zenawi, Prime Minister of Ethiopia

As the words of Prime Minister Meles Zenawi illustrate, the government of Ethiopia has fully endorsed the idea that ICTs can be a powerful ally in fighting poverty and has invested huge resources for their deployment.
However, the telephone and internet density are still among the lowest in the continent. According to a study conducted by the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa on telephone and internet penetration in six countries, namely Ethiopia, Ghana, Morocco, Mozambique, Senegal and Uganda, Ethiopia scored the lowest on three out of four dimension, average teledensity, number of mobile subscribers and number of internet subscribers, taking third only for the number of fixed lines (United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, 2008). Most would point at corruption, low skills or mismanagement to explain these results, but it is only by moving closer to the ground that it is possible to understand how the money invested in ICTs have been channelled and that corruption or low skills alone explain very little of the Ethiopian path to new technologies.

Since coming to power the ruling party, the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), has been struggling to coalesce Ethiopian citizens around its idea of the nation. For decades the precursor to the EPRDF, the guerrilla movement known as Tigreyan People’s Liberation Front (TPLF) fought for the rights of ethnic groups within the larger Ethiopian state. When they came to power in the early 1990s, the new constitution ambitiously stated that ethnic groups should have the right to secede. In theory, this idea has proposed to be a bold response to providing recognition and equality to disparate parts of an ethnically diverse country. In practice it has been much more difficult to implement this ideal and increasingly the EPRDF has been focusing on developing a strong centre that can coordinate and control the regions. Different measures have been adopted to reach the goal, from the reform of the civil service to the promotion of symbolic events such as flag days and other celebrations of the “unity in diversity” motto, and ICTs have been “bended” to fit into this scheme.

Far from being employed only to fight poverty, ICTs have been re-shaped to serve the ambitious national project pursued by the Ethiopian leadership, which has enhanced some of the features of the new artefacts while resisting their potentially destabilizing effects. One of the most important embodiment of these efforts is the network known as Woredanet – Amharic for the net of district administrations – which links the central government with the eleven regional and 550 district administrations. The system works through IP based satellite communication and provides different services to the local administrations, such as internet connection, email service, and voice over IP. However, the most common use for Woredanet so far has been videoconferencing. Through 42 inch plasma TV screens (as shown in Figure 1.), ministers, high level civil servants and trainers regularly communicate with the peripheries and instruct/train local officials on what they should be doing and how. A similar system, known as Schoolnet, has been created for secondary schools, and now 775 of them can receive broadcasted lessons, including civic education2, through 16686 plasma TV screens3 (Figure 2).

These examples indicate the hazards of generalizing about a singular and linear model of ICTs for development or of technological transfer in general. It also problematizes diffusion of innovations theory, whose idea of progress is mostly that of a movement from the centre to the periphery, along which new objects and techniques can rarely be challenged or modified. As highlighted if Figure 3, for diffusion of innovation scholars the adopters of an innovation or idea are categorized along a scale going from innovators to laggards and both within and among countries the only possible outcome is the adoption of a particular innovation or idea spreading, at different speed, but unchallenged, and finally reaching a saturation point.

Systems such as Woredanet and Schoolnet show that on the way up along the diffusion curve, in the transfer from early to late adopters, technology may undergo processes of re-shaping. The interactivity and decentralization allowed by the internet’s protocols can be employed not to allow a myriad of computers and individual users to communicate among themselves, but to reinforce the capacity of the state to control the information flowing to and
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