

## BOOK REVIEW

**Raul Pertierra. (2010). *The Anthropology of New Media in the Philippines*. Quezon City: Institute of Philippine Culture, Ateneo de Manila University**

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Revolutions in communication media do not come along often. Written script, the printing press, the telephone—each in their time introduced new modalities of interpersonal communion. Each brought human beings into new forms of contact with one another. But each technology was also eventually integrated into existing patterns of culture. Now we have what anthropologist Raul Pertierra, in his book *The Anthropology of New Media in the Philippines* (2010, Institute of Philippine Culture) refers to as computer-mediated-interactive-communication technologies, or CMICT. These technologies are embodied in a broad range of devices and platforms with which most of us are likely quite familiar: e-mail, Facebook, text messaging, etc. *The Anthropology of New Media* poses the question: How do ordinary Filipinos use CMICT in their everyday lives?

To answer this question, Professor Pertierra blends together theory and evidence in a most impressive manner. On one hand, the book presents easily digestible summaries of current theories of globalization, post-modernity, and virtuality. For this reason alone, I would recommend assigning this book (especially the introductory chapter) to an undergraduate course. Students new to the field will learn a great deal about current theories and debates.

But *The Anthropology of New Media* does not remain on the level of pure theory and speculation. On the contrary, it contains a wealth of empirical data collected by Dr. Pertierra himself as part of a research program that spans decades. Interviews, case studies, field observations, and surveys are all mobilized to explore the contours of CMICT in the Philippines. Perhaps the most important finding in the book (though not one that will surprise anyone who has lived in the country for any length of time), is that text-messaging via cell phone is by far the dominant form of CMICT among Filipinos.

As a cultural anthropologist, Dr. Pertierra assumes that there are a handful of basic principles explaining the diversity of observed behaviors within a

given population. And furthermore, that these foundational cultural facts can be studied as binary oppositions. I will here summarize the two that seem most relevant for understanding CMICT in the Philippines. First, is the dominance of community over society. Even though the country (especially the National Capital Region) has achieved a degree of development and modernization, it retains many features of a traditional village culture. Private relations are valued over the public good. Entitlements are rare and state authority is weak. Valued things are distributed via kin networks or gift exchange. According to Pertierra, this explains why Filipinos exchange so many text messages the contents of which often strike the outside observer as banal:

“[A]pparently banal messages provide the ontological security in stressful and unfamiliar situations. Their forms are highly ritualized, and while seemingly trivial, they set the stage for further interaction.” (139).

Texts function like small tokens—virtual *pasalubong* if you will—that allow the individual to build up and sustain social capital.

A second relevant binary is that of intimate/stranger. Those who were raised in advanced industrial societies are generally comfortable with having many relationships characterized by a respectful distance. One knows the names of co-workers and neighbors, but doesn't care to pry too much into their affairs. But opposite patterns of thought characterize traditional cultures. And it is the survival of such cultural patterns that lead Filipinos to be uncomfortable with strangers. The natural response is to turn even casual acquaintances into trusted family members. “Just as nature abhors a vacuum, Filipino culture abhors the stranger and attempts to rapidly convert them into intimates” (10). This explains patterns of CMICT use, with participants in text exchanges quickly revealing personal details about themselves to the other party. Chapter five elaborates upon this idea, through a series of case studies of how individual Filipinos use CMICT in their personal lives and relationships. For example, the informant ‘Kristina’ used Facebook and texting to maintain close friendships even though she was confined to her house by a medical condition. But for ‘Arnold’ and ‘Miguel’, who had been in a relationship, new technologies opened up channels for temptation and infidelity.

CMICT also interacts with existing patterns of migration and class. Millions of Filipinos work abroad, a situation that puts great strain on family life as spouses and children are often left behind. Chapter 6 documents how text messaging, e-mail, and Facebook allow overseas workers (and even those who have permanently migrated, such as Ilocano communities in Canada) to stay in contact with relatives and home communities in the Philippines. Again,

however, Pertierra describes a complex situation that has its benefits but also its pitfalls. A mother abroad may be able to Skype with her son on his birthday; but in the other room, the husband may be using an online dating site to organize an illicit rendezvous. Not all Filipinos, however, are this integrated into the virtual diaspora. In Chapter 4, we learn about Dr. Pertierra's fieldwork in the provincial community of Buenavista. Here youths venture into internet cafes but seem to do not much more than play video games or read about the latest celebrity sex scandal. Rather than empower the masses (as some of its proponents claim), CMICT may only deepen existing inequalities as these children fall further behind their peers living in Manila or Cebu.

The greatest strength of *The Anthropology of New Media* is the way it explains CMICT through reference to Filipino culture. But in this reviewer's opinion, the focus on culture also introduces blinders to the analysis. In particular, I was concerned that not enough attention was given to how basic consumer economics may contribute to observed patterns of technology use. Dr. Pertierra argues that "[N]ew communication media mirror and reproduce existing cultural orientations. This explains why Filipinos took to texting so naturally" (9). For the sake of disclosure, I will mention that I am an American who, before moving to the Philippines, despised texting. I called (or e-mailed) my colleagues exclusively. But as I sit here writing this review, my cell phone constantly buzzes with notifications of text messages received. With hardly any thought, I click-click my reply and hit send. Texting (at 20 pesos for unlimited messages over a 24-hour period) is quite cheap compared to calling (which can cost several pesos per minute). Hence, I was able to adjust my "cultural orientation" very quickly! (We could also consider Dr. Pertierra's case study of 'Rogie', an OFW in Saudi Arabia, who, upon arrival in the Middle East, ceased texting and began making phone calls because of different phone-plan pricing structures.) Culture matters, but so do economic incentives and price differentials. This is no excuse for the interested reader, however, as this excellent and informative book has been made free to download at the website of the Institute of Philippine Culture ([www.ipc-ateneo.org](http://www.ipc-ateneo.org)).

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