

Book Reviews

Pertierra, Raul, ed. 2007. *The Social Construction and Usage of Communication Technologies: Asian and European Experiences*. Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press.

The book is a collection of articles exploring, as the title suggests, the experiences of Asians and Europeans with Computer-Mediated-Interactive-Communication-Technology, or CMICT. Specifically, the articles present some aspects of Filipino, Chinese, Vietnamese, Malaysian, and Finnish experiences with the cellphone and the Internet as emergent technologies. Edited by Raul Pertierra, the book is situated in the context of globalization and increasing cosmopolitanism, the two latter concepts themselves opening up spaces for more discourses on emergent technologies. In an age characterized by a continuously expanding blanket of information, the presence of technology has taken a subtle, yet dominant position. It is subtle because it has come to be so deeply intertwined with the everyday life of both Asians and Europeans that it merged with the backdrop of that which is trite. Yet technology is dominant, in the sense that its widespread presence has inevitably shaped the users. In the preface, it is stated, "The new media of communication discussed in this collection makes possible the localization of the global as well as the globalization of the local" (vii). It is in this context that the book asserts its significance and relevance.

While there are differences as regards the experiences of Asians and Europeans, there are also important similarities in terms of practice and use of these technologies; consequently, the problematic is similar as well. The articles in this collection were presented at a conference funded by the Asia Europe Foundation, the Asia Foundation, and the

Embassy of Finland. Although the contributors approached the subject from varied perspectives, the prominent disciplines were sociology and anthropology. The research methods employed were likewise varied, thus providing significant interdisciplinary import. There are a total of ten articles, each article dealing with a particular aspect of CMICT and how the latter makes an impact on a given locality. This gives the articles a wide scope, the common thread being the question of how CMICT has been asserting itself in the cultural milieu. But the number of articles does not pose as much difficulty as their variety. The articles have points of convergence, and these points tend to overlap at times. For the purposes of this review, the articles may be grouped according to how their themes play out in their analyses. The following categorizations are simply broad strokes; these are attempts to identify which parts of the collection are more empirically inclined in terms of research content, and which ones deal more with theoretical content.

“Doing IT in Developing Societies: Varying Contexts, Similar Epistemic Practices” by Czarina Saloma-Akpedonu, *“Cellphones in the Rural Philippines”* by Itaru Nagasaka, *“Cellphones and the Social Lives of Migrant Workers in Southern China”* by Patrick Law and Yinni Peng, and *“Vietnam and the Internet: A Brief History”* by Bui Hoai Son, are articles that present empirical data showing how cellphones and the Internet are utilized in China, Philippines, and Vietnam. They provide valuable information that shows how the younger members of society are more eager and adept at using these technological developments, and how the technology itself is influenced by these informed users. However, these articles deal primarily with Asian countries.

The articles, *“Understanding Mobile Phone Design”* by Leopoldina Fortunati, *“Affected by the Mobiles: Mobile Phone Culture, Text Messaging, and Digital Welfare Services”* by Timo Kopomaa, *“Managing Banality in Mobile Multimedia”* by Ilpo Koskinen, and *“The Cellphone: Is it an Urban Phenomenon?”* by Sakari Taipale, are more explicit with their discussions pertaining to the theoretical aspect of CMICT’s impact on society. The

discussions raise important issues, such as informational identity, cyberspace, virtual reality, and physical/non-physical boundaries, all in the context of emergent technologies.

“Three Technological Paradoxes: Power Manifestations of Mobile Phone Usage among Malaysians on the Run” by Reevany Bustami and Elisha Nasruddin, along with the article, *“Transformative Capacities of Technology: Computer-Mediated Interactive Communications in the Philippines – Promises of the Present Future”* by Raul Pertierra, seek to present empirical data together with the theoretical underpinnings of such data. The articles implicitly grapple with the question of what the nature of the relationship between the technology and its user really is. How exactly do they influence one another? What are the effects, hence, the changes, resulting from the encounter?

The manner in which the articles are formatted facilitates easier reading: useful headings, graphs, and charts. The standard presentation makes for good, solid, scholarship, and the relatively updated sources are indicative that the articles are well-researched. However, the organization of the articles themselves can be a bit distracting, especially if the sub-themes are considered. As shown by the broad categories earlier, it is possible to arrange them according to the nature of their analyses, whether a specific article tends to be theoretical or empirical. In other words, some articles explicitly deal with presentations of how the cellphone and the Internet are used in a locale, while other articles explore the theoretical (or lack of) foundations of the phenomena. As it stands, the sequence of articles can be justified to a degree, by maintaining that the common link, that is, the information and communications technologies (ICTs), is of such a ubiquitous nature that it is extremely difficult to pin them down and clearly categorize them into neat groups or clusters. In short, the current sequence is simply reflective of the nature of the subject. But for purposes of clarity and efficient conceptualization, it can be argued that there ought to be, at the very least, some easily perceptible semblance of order. It can be in

the form of identifying which articles deal explicitly with the European experiences, and which ones deal with the Asian experiences. Again, it can be stated that the current presentation is more in accord with the book's conclusion that there are shared experiences between Asian and European cellphone and Internet users. Of course, it is admitted that perhaps there is order at work, but the reviewer is simply amiss. Regardless, if the aim is to theorize about CMICTs, it is always useful to make as clear as possible the conceptual frameworks that underlie the presentations.

Insofar as the content is concerned, the entire collection is able to raise pertinent issues, particularly regarding the capacity of current technologies to shape and transform the user and his/her milieu. Through texting alone, attitudes about areas such as sexuality are slowly and continuously being changed (Pertierra 221). Consequently, the cultural practices are also being influenced in varying degrees. On a more theoretical level, the effect that the cellphone and the Internet have on the concepts of space and spatial boundaries results in the latter begging to be redefined and perhaps re-conceptualized, especially with the advent of what is termed "cyberspace". Further, the concepts of the private and the public sphere need to be re-examined in light of the capacity of CMICTs to blur the line between public and private boundaries. The article by Bustami and Nasruddin clearly demonstrates this problematic as a paradox. Indeed, there is a seeming paradox involved in the use of emergent technologies, the cellphone being a prime example. It appears that the connectivity and mobility attributed to the technology are the very same factors responsible for enabling an individual to create more private space, and vice versa. The feeling of control that one has over time and space seems to carry with it the consequence of losing actual control over one's boundaries, both spatial and conceptual.

The very issues raised by the articles highlight the limitations of the collection. While the articles are able to identify, and thereby open

the space for more discourse, the need for a more basic, philosophic analysis becomes apparent. Perhaps such a lack can be better appreciated in the context of identities, considering that all the articles in the collection either implicitly or explicitly hint at the formation of “multiple selves” in cyberspace. This raises important metaphysical questions about the self and identity: What is identity in the cyberspace sense? What does it mean to say that identity is “constructed” in the Internet? Is the identity outside cyberspace the same or parallel with the one inside? Considering the terms, “cyberspace” and “virtual reality”, it is meaningful to ask: In what sense is “virtual reality” real?

The collection of articles also seems to overlook ethical issues that may be raised by CMICTs. Questions may be framed as such: What moral codes affect or influence texting practices? Are ethical standards in cyberspace different from standards outside of it? What are the possible bases for cyber ethics? Should there be cyber ethics?

In conclusion, the book as a collection of articles exploring the impact of CMICTs on social practices both Asian and European provides valuable insight. Well-researched and presented in a clear manner, it is an important contribution to the infant literature on the effects of modern technology on society. Its value lies precisely in its ability to pave the way for more discourses, hence a more productive interplay across disciplines.

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