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Book Review: From Rural Village to Global Village: Telecommunications for Development in the Information Age, by Heather E Hudson, 2006

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From Rural Village to Global Village: Telecommunications for Development in the Information Age, by Heather E Hudson, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, NJ, 2006.

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"The Death of Distance?" asks Heather Hudson in the title of the first chapter of her book. The mere question is attractive and justifies hundreds of pages in reply – or more for the many other open questions it generates. Is the world on the brink of a *retour aux sources*? Are we nearing the time where living in rural areas will no longer be a disadvantage?

From Rural Village to Global Village is a very comprehensive panorama of how new information technologies are reshaping the world, both industrialised and in development. The author focuses several chapters on rural development, education and telemedicine, among other applications, but also tackles the issue of digital divides and universal access. What does it take to extend connectivity to reach every community in the world? Technology, of course, but also new telecommunication policies in developing regions.

From the outset, the situation described is astonishing: the expansion of information and communication technologies (ICTs) worldwide is happening in spite of tremendous social inequalities. What is driving it in a context of unfair trade practices? Hudson rightly signals: "…this phenomenal change masks both old and new disparities. More than half the world's population has never used a telephone, let alone accessed the Internet" (p. 1). She offers a wealth of figures and also interesting comparisons: "A computer costs the equivalent of eight years' income for the average person in Bangladesh, but less than a month's wages for the average American".

The author shows that ICT development is driven by the implacable logic of world trade and international markets. Even small, rural producers are forced to adopt the demand-driven trends. She openly advocates for "the need of liberalization" and privatisation of the telecommunications sector in the developing world, arguing that then "growing economies appear promising to the telecommunications industry and to investors who are looking for new markets" (p. 118). In Hudson's reasoning, the "gap" cannot be closed unless the role of governments is reduced to create a regulatory environment that favours private investment. However, how could weakened national states enforce regulations, particularly when the whole sector has passed to private hands?

In spite of the author's declaring that the purpose of her book is "to analyze the role of ICTs for social and economic development in rural areas and developing regions, and then

examine techniques and strategies to close communication gaps…" (p. 2), the book focuses more on technology than on social and economic development. Hudson provides an impressive sum of information about policies, technical developments, investments, international agreements, institutional positioning, and other similar topics, but always subscribing to globalisation, posed as an inevitable (and even welcomed) tsunami. Any room left for culture?

The book offers such an accurate picture of the current situation in the development of new technologies of information that you wonder if, by the time the book is on bookstore shelves, the picture might not already be partially outdated, given constant shifts. This is the risk of focusing on technological developments without fully analysing their cultural, social and political implications. Although mentioned several times as a warning signal, the real obstacles for ICTs in development (language, content, ownership) are not really addressed in the book.

The author's reports on multi-national initiatives to expand ICTs, such as those implemented and funded by hardware and software giants – the league of Microsoft, IBM or CISCO – are a-critical, with little or no analysis of the motivations of these companies, or the conflicts that arise, for example, over the issue of copyrighted software versus open source and free software, which are essential for a democratic expansion of new information technologies. Some international programmes are described without any critical glimpse – vertical, donor-driven initiatives for which local communities are sought to be passive receivers; yet often they are not, which is why we see so many conflicts and failures. WorldSpace[1] provides such an example of programming produced outside of the cultures, but disseminated within them.

The author acknowledges that most of these private and official projects in the field of new information technologies have not been evaluated. However, she often describes them at their face value, and neglects to report on alternative uses of ICTs in development and activism for human rights and social change.

The issue of evaluation is sufficiently important to warrant one of the last chapters of the book, and is maybe one of the most interesting, since it contains more reflection than other chapters (in which Hudson limits herself to information sharing). Here, she begins with a progressive quotation from the World Bank, stressing the need to find "what works and why" in ICT for development, and signalling the "growing consensus in the development community that ICT will only become an effective and mainstream tool of poverty reduction and sustainable development if the proponents of ICT-for-development can provide more rigorous evidence, strategies, benchmarks, indicators and good practices…" (p. 130). However, the

1 WorldSpace broadcasts via satellites to previously distributed radio receptors programmed to block other frequencies and thus only able to receive the WorldSpace signal.

author fails to address fully the issue of evaluation, although her own observations on the field question the victorious tone of the reports from official and corporate initiatives. The question of "who evaluates and why?", which is at the centre of current debates, is not posed, and most of her topics of evaluation have to do with technology and access, not really with the impact of ICTs on social change and development.

The problem is that we are increasingly seeing ICT "development strategies" that have little relation to development issues. Led by international organisations, governments or corporations, such strategies display little communication strategic thinking.[2] Technology alone – rather than social change and development – seems to be in the driving seat. At times it appears as though the dominant trend in ICT expansion is leap-frogging backwards to the language of the 1960s, when "information needs" were thought to be the barrier to development, and the "information poor" the object of our concerns. Have we not learned anything in 40 years, that we have to fall back on the language of diffusion, which failed to achieve? Information and knowledge are discussed very much as a one-way flow, from those who "have it" to those "below" (on the social scale or in the geographic distribution) that do not. The implicit assumption is that information and knowledge are only the privilege of a few.[3] What information and what knowledge? Those who do not have "access" to new technologies "lack" knowledge?

The focus on "information needs" is only one aspect of the restricted approach. The other is "access", as opposed to participation. The right to communicate is not analysed; only access is promoted. The concept of access is too often limited to technical issues: connectivity, location, hardware and software cost, affordability (p. 85) – whereas participation and ownership have more to do with strengthening local voices and empowering communities, and leading to social sustainability. Access strategies alone do not do any good in terms of sustainability. Access should not be seen only as a technical door you need to open, the same as sustainability should not only be seen as an economic and financial window to maintain projects over a longer period of time. The concept of social sustainability – participation and ownership – is generally absent in the analysis, because it has to do with a radically different

2 The author fails to expand on discussion of ideas such as those contained in her quotation from Canada's Information Highway Advisory Council (p. 73): "The Information Highway, in our view, is not so much about information as it is about communication in both its narrowest and broadcast senses. It is not a cold and barren highway with exits and entrances that carry traffic, but a series of culturally rich and dynamic intersecting communities…".

3 "A paradox not fully acknowledged by some developing country leaders is that the inevitable result of investing in information infrastructure is to increase access to information. Telecommunication planners and policymakers in both developing and industrialized countries must recognize that the sharing and utilization of information, and not the mere extension of networks, should be the ultimate purpose of the telecommunications policy reform" (p. 153).

approach to communities (rural or urban) and their willingness (or lack of willingness) to take over an initiative.

The author establishes a distinction between "universal access" and "universal service", particularly applied to a third world context. She claims that "universal service originated not as a public policy goal, but as an industrial strategy" (p. 83), and that universal access is targeted at communities and individual users. The distinction that is important, however, is between access and ownership. The first allows people to use services that have been designed for them; the second implies participation in the process, in decision-making, and in the development of local contents. For example, the idea of "information brokers" is put forward (p. 20) to support communities in their relation with new technologies. It is assumed that communities cannot manage ICT by themselves, and need intermediaries to do so. This, of course, poses problems for sustainability; problems that are not, however, really analysed in the book, although, again, the author includes a valuable quotation from the Canadian "smart communities" K-Net programme: "Getting communities involved in the planning and implementation of broadband connectivity solutions and applications supports local innovation and capacity building. These communities will be better prepared to be the providers of online services and resources making them owners of their local networks and producers of local socio-economic opportunities" (p. 80).

The analysis of sustainability seems driven by commercial criteria: will people pay or not? Conversely, the emphasis is on criteria such as household income (p. 89) to evaluate the commercial potential of the expansion of ICTs. The assumption is that, if poor people tend to buy themselves TV sets and VCRs then why not connectivity? The fact, however, is that poor households do spend their income on non-essential goods but ICTs have yet to prove as important to their daily lives. People will spend their savings to buy TV sets, VCRs or DVD players, not necessarily driven by the need for more information. It is mostly distraction that they seek, as can be seen by the collection of titles in the DVD/VHS rental outlets that can be found even in the poorest rural settings.

As long as ICTs continue to be seen as a commodity and a paid service, their role in education, culture and rights-based social development will remain on the periphery. The commercial logic is the same applied nowadays to health, education and culture in countries like the United States: people are expected to buy these "goods" as if they were not an obligation for national states to guarantee them as basic human rights.

The author does mention the risks of pushing new technologies to create new needs in poor communities: "… projects may be proposed because funds are available rather than because they may solve a high priority problem[…]An offer of free hammers tends to generate proposals for projects that use a lot of nails, even if nails are not really needed" (p. 77).

Hudson acknowledges that "many ICT initiatives seem overwhelmingly technology driven" because "they are implemented primarily by technocrats" (p. 76) and recalls the 1970s "when satellites were too often a solution in search of a problem…" (p. 76).

In a book so recently published, it is startling to see the absence of references to cultural diversity and the right to communicate in its relation to ICT. The UNESCO debates around the approval of the Convention on Cultural Diversity,[4] show that the ICT expansion strategy does not really take into consideration the analysis of key aspects of society, history and culture. UNESCO claims in a recent report that the Internet is contributing to the extermination of languages in the world; one language disappears every week.[5]

In terms of portraying how ICTs are transforming the lives of the rural village, the reader misses in Hudson's book more personal accounts of personal observations. There are plenty of references to other studies, which say much about the exhaustive literature review that Hudson has undertaken in preparing her book.[6] However, it would have been good to see more of the author, more investment of personal experience. She includes a few anecdotes, very specific, but often elevated to paradigmatic examples. Most of the case studies mentioned in the book are already well familiar from the academic literature. At some point the original source has been forgotten. Worse, sometimes the actual experience has evolved or been changed, which means some case studies live longer in the academic literature than in reality.

This book is mainly about the development of the new technologies to link people; seldom about voices and empowerment – although the shorthand might be mentioned in some chapters. The book is a very detailed technical report, but often fails to analyse the real issues that concern people living in the local and the global village. ❑

4 In spite of very fierce opposition from the United States (US), the Convention was approved by 182 votes, 4 against (the US, Israel, the Marshall Islands and Palau).

5 The UNESCO report, *Towards knowledge societies*, was presented simultaneously in Brussels, Paris, Geneva and New York, on 03 November 2005.

6 It is worth noting, however, that the book only references literature in English, a limitation of many studies from the US. In this field, there is much more to read. Normally, scholars from Latin America or Europe make the effort to read other perspectives in languages other than their own.