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Book Review: Hanna, N. (2010). E-Transformation: Enabling New Development Strategies – Innovation, Technology and Knowledge Management

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HANNA, N. (2010). E-TRANSFORMATION: ENABLING NEW DEVELOPMENT STRATEGIES – INNOVATION, TECHNOLOGY AND KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT, SPRINGER SCIENCE AND BUSINESS MEDIA, NEW YORK

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Information about the book is available at http://www.springer.com/economics/public+finance/book/

Reading a book on media technologies and development is always accompanied by some anxiety. Much has been written by scholars of different persuasions in this broad and interesting subject area, though sometimes without much intellectual rigour and philosophical depth. Much as this topic has been of intellectual curiosity and debate across the world, scholarship has often been characterised by a poverty of theory and simplistic interpretations of the relationship between society and technology. Social development has often naïvely been perceived as technologically driven, despite the equal or greater importance of factors related to human agency and social context. From the steam engine to electricity, the printing press to radio, technology has often erroneously been understood as the sole driving force for development and human progress.

The advent in the 1990s of new ICTs, such as the Internet and mobile phones, has re-ignited the optimism wherein the Information Society and its concomitant innovations in communications are sometimes blindly celebrated as the panacea for all human development challenges. At the one end of the spectrum is the utopian and deterministic view of new ICTs as neutral tools that will always lead to universal progress at once autonomous, unidirectional, and predictable. At the other end is the view that new ICTs are far from being neutral or value free, since they represent materialised ideology, based on the overarching interests of the producing cultures and elite classes. As products of a capitalist system, new ICTs are believed to first and foremost serve the interests of power. In the continuum of philosophy surrounding the questions of technology and development, many other epistemes exist that critically engage with the subject. Given this context, Nagy Hanna's contribution represents a milestone in fostering a critical engagement with the subject matter. In e-Transformation, Hanna explores the question of new ICTs and development in a probing and intellectually invigorating way, underpinned by a sound theoretical grasp of problems in the key approaches in the society-technology matrix. He confronts the practical and institutional bottlenecks impeding the effective use of ICTs in participatory development and unravels the greater philosophical questions relating to the dialectical relationship between ICT and development.

The author's 35 years of experience in international development, working mostly for the World Bank, strongly influence how he explores the question of ICTs and development, based on knowledge gathered from cases around the world. The main themes that run through the book are the strategic integration of ICTs into national development processes, and how public and

private enterprises and communities can appropriate ICTs to enhance their productive capacity, empower themselves and unleash their development potential. Hanna notes that the ICT revolution is replete with promises to institutions, local communities and the global community about the opportunities embedded in a networked economy, but warns that without a sound, comprehensive and holistic e-transformation strategy that weaves and mainstreams ICTs into national development, such promises will remain a dream. The digital revolution, he argues, necessitates a fresh concept of development as a techno-economic paradigm, recognising that new ICTs as communication and information resource tools are indispensable. He also acknowledges, though, that ICTs are not a magic bullet for development challenges. Their success depends on many other factors.

His experiences at the World Bank have clearly been instructive in facilitating an understanding of the range of cognitive, institutional and social factors that can undermine the effective use of ICTs in development. He argues that e-transformation must be a responsibility not only of ICT specialists, but also of development workers who provide development thinking, models and practice. At the World Bank, Hanna observed how the power of ICTs as an enabler of development can be compromised by the communication and philosophical gaps that exist between ICT specialists and development practitioners. Hanna's voice is not only that of an insider and a technocrat, reflecting on his experience at the Word Bank to explore and unravel some of the deep-seated institutional dilemmas of the development world, but also that of a scholar who is advancing an intellectually compelling argument regarding the potential that new ICTs carry for development. However, he is equally aware of the limitations that abound; in his words, the ICT revolution offers "many promises and opportunities, even while posing serious risks and uncertainties" (Hanna, 2010: 29). Ultimately, he contends, countries must fashion responses that address their specific social, political and economic experiences and conditions.

This acknowledgement of geographic and cultural relativism locates Hanna's work within a critical and scholarly vein that perceives ICTs as socially shaped. New ICTs as General Purpose Technologies (GPTs) might affect how we work, learn, play, produce, or even date, but questions of agency and social context must never be ignored. He emphasises the social character of new ICTs, which he perceives as socially embedded rather than as an autonomous force outside society and human agency. The social context underpins how technologies are appropriated and deployed to achieve what people perceive as pressing developmental goals in a given social and historical setting. The author notes that new ICTs are ambivalent as they are at once a resource and a constraint. They are without a singular essence and can play different roles in different social systems. Hanna confronts the downside risks, such as the exacerbation of inequalities and reinforcement of power relations, and observes how new ICTs may control rather than empower the individual in the development process. While, for example, mobile phones and the Internet have compressed space and time in many sectors such as e-transactions, e-learning, e-networking, and e-politics, digital opportunities are concentrated in the affluent and elite classes, while poor communities remain trapped in abject poverty.

More often than not, ICTs are quickly appropriated by the powerful political and economic elite to advance their interests. Yet Hanna sees this domination as not necessarily embedded in technologies, but as socially and historically contingent, based on the economic models, policies, and political choices that the elite make in their struggle to inscribe their meanings to the process of development. Thus, while he sees new ICTs as far from being a panacea for social, political and economic ills, he simultaneously rejects the essentialist view that their sole purpose is for political and economic domination. In my view, it is this middle ground constructivist and critical position of Hanna's conceptualisation that makes his work interesting and relevant to every reader.

But Hanna's treatment of the concept of the digital divide appears to emphasise the physical access to new ICTs, hence his perception that telecentres may provide the answers to those without access. In the process, the author forgets that the divide, which stands as a stumbling block to popular participation in e-development, is in reality more complex and multi-dimensional. National ICT infrastructure cannot unleash the e-transformation of institutions or national development potential as long as the content and language of ICTs remains irrelevant and alienating to many, especially in the developing world. These questions are not exhaustively dealt with and the complex questions of balancing universal access to ICTs and corporate profit maximisation by networks are not convincingly answered through a comprehensive political economy analytical perspective. This may be partly because Hanna, while addressing many other important issues, has institutional analysis as the flagship of his contribution. For example, he argues that the ICT revolution has brought about network-centric enterprises whose business ecosystems are dependent on what other network players do. However, in emphasising his normative theme of how networks contribute to e-transformation and e-agility, Hanna overlooks the fundamental questions of power and agenda-setting, which Manuel Castells has seen as co-existing with networks.

So what knowledge gaps in terms of theoretical and policy interventions does the book fill? Hanna's input is rich, complex and multidimensional, because of its interdisciplinary approach. The author makes a persuasive argument for e-transformation for development by integrating insights from political economy, development studies, management studies and technology studies. His work is versatile in many respects, but institutional analysis in the uptake of ICTs for development stands out as the major strength of the book. Through interesting case studies, Hanna amply demonstrates how ICTs, if appropriately utilised, can revitalise and re-kindle organisations as sites of production, not only through interactive communication but also through the creation of participative spaces for workers and managers.