New Media: Technology and Policy in Developing Countries, edited by NC Lesame, Van Schaik, Pretoria, 2005.

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In the acute drought of information and communication technology (ICT) literature emanating from Sub-Saharan Africa, this latest collection of essays from mostly South African authors, which overviews contemporary developments in ICT policy issues, provides some welcome relief.

The book describes the development of communications policy issues, applications of ICTs (including for community access such as in telecentres), the role of Government in the development of policies for technology provision, and regulatory issues and challenges in Africa. As per the reference to "developing countries" in the title, the text largely showcases ICT issues in selected African countries, with a bias towards South African cases.

In the Introduction, Professor Gary Madden (Curtin University, Australia), opens the book with a discussion of the "new economy", which he describes as being based on the rapid deployment and usage of new ICTs. He argues that if productivity improvements in the ICT sector are understood as key to growth in the new economy, then the question arising for developing countries is whether they can bridge the digital divide to catch up with advanced countries in this new economy. Madden's discussion is weighted towards economic issues, including the role of ICT for improving business practices, such as using the Internet to enable better communication with customers and business partners. He raises the question of the extent to which, in the era of technological revolution, benefits are spread or are capable of being spread, so as to reduce North-South economic disparities. However, Madden's discussion completely veers away from the issues of "new media" highlighted in the book's title. For example, a discussion of unravelling the nature of new media, how it is "new" as opposed to "old" media,[1] as well as its socio-political or development implications for African countries, could have balanced out the economic focus of the discussion.

The first and second chapters, by the book's editor, Ntombizandile Lesame (Senior Lecturer in Telecommunications Policy at the University of South Africa), cover some aspects of the digital divide, and policy interventions that can be mounted to bridge it in the African context. Lesame proposes that, because the digital divide is particularly huge in Africa, the continent should be doing comparatively more in providing ICT access. Mobile cellular phones are cited as one appropriate technology bridging the rural-urban divide in African countries while also having developmental applications. An example offered from Uganda describes

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[1]   Philip Roe, for example, discusses how the terms "new media" and "new media research" are used in a number of ways, while the question of how new media are in fact new is infrequently asked (see Roe, 2003, That-which-new-media-studies-will-become, *Fibreculture Journal*, Issue No. 2).

rural farmers using mobile phones to get information on the real prices their crops fetch, thus increasing their negotiating power by circumventing misinformation from unscrupulous traders (middlemen). In terms of policy interventions, Lesame suggests broad strategies to be followed by African Governments, which should include private sector subsidisation of ICT connectivity, and financial incentives to private sector investors who invest in ICT infrastructure. Promoting the continent in a positive way that is favourable to investment, a willingness by political leaders to provide funding to ICT projects, "economic safety" to attract entry of new companies, and reasonable taxing of businesses by regulators are additional recommendations. In terms of projects to bridge the digital divide, the e-Africa Commission, an ICT arm in the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD), is considered one step in the right direction.

Including the issue of the digital divide in the book was quite pragmatic considering the ICT access disparities in Africa. However, policy suggestions for bridging the digital divide ideally should be situated in the context of the existing flourishing literature, which consists of various divergent suggestions regarding appropriate implementation policies.[2] Lesame might have summarised some of the prevalent trends in literature addressing the digital divide.

In the third chapter, entitled, "New connections: Development of communications technology", Richard Gerber (South African Department of Communications) highlights technological breakthroughs that have contributed to communications. He sketches the development of telegraphy, telephony, radio, satellite, optical and computer communications over 150 years. What might have been more appropriate, given the African focus of the book, is an account of how the various ICTs have evolved in the African context as well as successes and obstacles related to their respective uses. In outlining the historical trajectories of the different technologies, the author merely lassoes African country experiences in sometimes irrelevant examples. Underscoring the claim that mobile cellular phone usage has increased dramatically in Africa since 2001, even in rural areas, the author points to an instance in South Africa during the 2001 Christmas period during which the use of SMS to send Christmas messages to loved ones was reported as phenomenal, surpassing even the use of the traditional Christmas card by 200%. However, indicators rather than anecdotal instances of SMS popularity would better illustrate his point of mobile telephony growth.

Other themes covered in the chapters of the book include new media and knowledge management, community development and the Internet, and socio-economic aspects of the Internet. Chapters with a specifically South African focus contemplate South Africa as an information society, the impact of community broadcasting on rural development in South Africa, ICT and South African youth, and South Africa's ICT policy and attempts to bridge the digital divide.

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[2]   See, for example, Judith Mariscal (2005), Digital divide in a developing country, *Telecommunications Policy* 29, 409-428. Mariscal asserts the lack of consensus on policy for the digital divide and, in this regard, draws upon the various policy trajectories in literature as an analytical lens to examine the case of Mexico.

One chapter, "The corporate website as an effective marketing and public relations tool", by Charmaine du Plessis (University of South Africa Communication Science Lecturer), seems out of place in this collection. The chapter includes a discussion of the Internet as a new communication medium and the need for, as well as advantages of, a corporate website and marketing/public relations resource tools for a corporate website. The text shoots off at a tangent from the central thrust of the book, which is ICT policy, development and regulatory issues. This reader was left somewhat perplexed as to what the policy implications of corporate websites might be – upon which, however, the author does not expand. The chapter would have been more fitting in a marketing or organisational communication reader.

Any reader interested in ICT issues will find this collection a worthwhile read. In segmenting its reading market, the book will be useful to the postgraduate student or academic seeking insights into ICT issues – such as telecentres, knowledge management and the digital divide – on the current menu of African scholarship. This is an issue-raising text. Given the dynamic field of ICT, it is both commendable and useful to take stock of contemporary issues occupying scholarship. The more advanced reader, however, should not expect vigorous discussion imbued with theoretical depth consisting of various dissenting approaches in literatures. Indeed, this work will prove a most welcome read for undergraduates seeking introductory insights on contemporary ICT issues. For instance, the chapters on the digital divide and knowledge management guide the reader, beginning with basic questions of: *What is the digital divide?* And, *what is knowledge management?* In what can be considered a student-friendly and outcomes-based textbook, the work lists learning outcomes and revision questions for each chapter to assist the reader in understanding and synthesising the content.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS. Explication of the term "new media" – which can be used irresponsibly even for media that may not be that new – would have been helpful. Further, concealing the African focus of the book with the title's broad reference to "developing countries" does not promote it as an African text. This is unfortunate, because the chapters in this book raise pertinent themes for Africa, including digital divide issues, the information society, telecentres and rural development, among others.

New Media: Technology and Policy in Developing Countries is a welcome addition to the very few African-oriented texts and texts written by African authors in the ICT field. It is written in clear, well-structured chapters that will benefit the African reader, and provide insights for readers already interested in these issues, for those new to this field, and for those who indulge in occasional reading on ICT issues in Africa. In the foreword, Professor Fourie (Department of Communication Science, University of South Africa) comments that this is the first South African social science-oriented textbook on ICT compiled from an outcomes-based perspective. It is indeed quite a timely text to stem the tide of the prevalence of Western authors in the ICT field. ❑