BOOK REVIEW

Pertierra, Raul. 2006. Transforming Technologies: Altered Selves, Mobile Phone and Internet Use in the Philippines. Manila: De La Salle University Press. 158 pp.

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Expectations for information and communication technologies (ICTs) were high at the turn of century in Asia. It was hoped that the mobile and the internet would improve the economies of the region, reshape social networks and strengthen cultural identity. Raul Pertierra's book, *Transforming Technologies: Altered Selves, Mobile Phone and Internet Use in the Philippines*, analyses the social and cultural consequences of ICTs for the Philippines. Filipinos quickly embraced the mobile, reaching the top of international ranking lists for the number of sent text-messages, even though economic development did not follow. To examine why the Philippines did not benefit from the first wave of new technologies, the book deals with two major concepts: discursive intimacy and notions of the stranger, and describes how Filipinos are re-evaluating their bodies and even their souls through the new technologies. This latest book is an extension of an earlier research project which resulted in the book, *Txt-ing Selves: Cellphones and Philippine Modernity* (2002).[1]

ECHOES FROM THE PAST

The book begins with a sharp and critical review of the ineffectiveness of technology and science policy in the Philippines. According to the author, there is a major culture-historical process behind the current state of affairs. Philippine science policy was politicized when the local administrative power was transferred from the Americans to Filipinos during the 1930s. Thereafter Filipinos aimed to strengthen their national identity by redefining the focus of national science policy. By implication, Pertierra leads us to understand that the seeds for an information society that were sown under the American regime were mostly uprooted. In addition, Pertierra considers that the culturally-embedded idea of inborn skills has decelerated the scientific and technological development in the Philippines. Because Filipinos consider many of the characteristics of their national culture as modern and global, investments in the cultivation of skills and knowledge have been insufficient. According to Pertierra, especially such features as sociality and musicality are

often perceived as blessings, not as improvable skills. He suggests that sociality as an inherent feature would explain, at least partially, Filipino enthusiasm for text messaging. Deficiencies in the cultivation of skills, for one, may help us to understand the invisibility of science and technology in the country.

Although the culture-historical basis of the book can be justified, the book does not bring out many causes for optimism. Are there any positive signs in view in the Philippines regarding the future of science and technology? From the European point of view, it could be assumed that the new cellphone generation and the great mobility of Filipinos could gradually lead to the creation of a science and technology culture. Service-sector occupations abroad have employed less-educated Filipinos already for long. Asian, European and American universities, on the other hand, have fascinated education seekers and contributed to international mobility amongst the well-off. When one also considers that around 10 percent of Filipinos is estimated to reside overseas, it could be assumed that mobility as presented above indicates the growing thirst for knowledge and self-development fuelled by societal circumstances. Despite all this and the fact that overseas workers actively utilize new ICTs, Pertierra does not seem to believe in new generations and mobility as transforming forces. Quite the contrary, he proposes that many Filipinos are bounded by family-centeredness and that well-educated returnees optimize poorly their skills for the common good of the country.

THE NETWORKS OF INTIMACY

The analysis on the networks of intimacy is by far the most interesting part of the book. Considering a lack of domestic space in densely built-up areas like Metro Manila, cellphones and the internet may provide ordinary people with many possibilities for extending their private space. Pertierra vividly illustrates how the networks of intimacy, the members of which are significant only to a given individual, are created with help of new ICTs. The conceptions of body and soul are more often re-evaluated in virtual networks, and in a constant dialogue with online others. This kind of intimacy gains it meaning from the total independence on the present others. Therefore, virtual space may become an irreplaceable arena of privacy-making in densely occupied societies. Pertierra presents a set of case examples which illustrate how Filipinos get to know strangers via mobiles, how the internet enables exploratory online journeys and cybersex. It is surprising to notice how intimate virtual spaces appear very much as private but not secluded at all. The beauty of Pertierra's insightful analysis is right here. It brings out a reversed version of privacy-paradox originally presented by Durkheim in his well-known study on suicides. Whereas the initial purpose of the cellphones has been social (i.e., to connect people), the cellphones are increasingly utilized for private and intimate purposes.

A close relationship of religion and the cellphone is another distinctly Philippine phenomenon presented in the book. In a Roman Catholic country, spiritual content services which link a human being to the sphere of spiritual life have gained much popularity among a

wide range of social classes. Although Pertierra courteously argues that the conservative and religious culture has been hindering technological and scientific development in the Philippines, he depicts the relationship of religion to ICTs otherwise as rather uncomplicated and tolerant. Pertierra suggests that the popularity of spiritual services may well indicate the capacity of new technologies to bring out the innermost feelings and beliefs of human beings.

WHOSE TECHNOLOGIES, BODIES, AND SOULS?

The book hints that new ICTs could have opened the floodgates to globalization in the Philippines. My reading herein is that cellular phones have manifested themselves rather as commodities brought by globalization, not as the enablers of globalization. The study describes how cellphones have been utilized in order to overcome the norms of intimacy, as well as the limits of time and space, in various ways, but the analysis in this respect is placed mainly within the borders of the Philippines. Regarding the internet, the picture is quite different. The information highway has really broken down boundaries and it really seems to link Filipinos with the rest of the world. This is the case even if the number of internet users is still limited.

The generalizability of the study is fairly difficult to assess, alongside the composition of internet users. However, some deductions can be made since the study includes a small survey and some background information on inter- viewees. The study deals mainly with young adults. Regarding the internet, the focus is on the comfortably well-off people. Considering the cellphones, for one, the socio-economic coverage of the study seems to be wider. Even if the elderly and the elite are to a certain extent underrepresented, the study presents fairly good snapshot of the accessibility and diffusion of new technologies in the Philippines. Only the well-off can afford the internet without major efforts but the cellphone is within the reach of the many.

Finally, Pertierra's study on the internet and cellphone culture in the Philippines opens up new horizons for research on technology-meditated social networks. Whereas sociological studies on ICTs have paid much attention to teenagers and entertainment usage, Pertierra's in-depth analysis reveals that cellphones have the capacity to accumulate social capital and extend social networks. Interestingly, this capacity may be active even when the primary purpose of mobile use is to strengthen the sphere of privacy. This is illustrated very well in the examples dealing with texting with strangers. In addition, the book provides fascinating examples of the blending of social, cultural and technological in the context of the Philippines. The book provides food for thought for social scientists and experts of development studies.

NOTE

1   Pertierra, Raul, et al., 2002. Txt-ing Selves: Cellphones and Philippine Modernity. Manila: De La Salle University Press. 197 pp. This book won the National Academy of Science and Technology (NAST) Outstanding Book Award, Social Sciences Division in 2004.