

INTRODUCTION

Computer Mediated Interactive Communication Technology (CMICT): The End of the Social or the Birth of the New World Order?

The present millennium marked both the end of an old regime and the birth of a new one. Capitalism triumphed over communism but only to be challenged by fundamentalisms of various provenances. Scientific and technological discoveries transform ever more rapidly all areas of our lives. The nationstate is increasingly replaced by regional coalitions as the demands of globalization require greater coordination over growing aspects of everyday life. Human rights and environmental concerns, including the energy crises, require constant monitoring and evaluation. Old values are replaced by new ones, with their corresponding anxieties. No wonder that our times have provoked radical comments such as the end of history (Fukuyama) or the end of nature (Castells).

While we may debate which technology is affecting our lives more substantively (e.g. genetics, robotics, cognitive science), there is little doubt that CMICT (computer mediated interactive communication technology) is among them. This has prompted some scholars to make excessive claims about its consequences.

We seem to be on the cusp of a new age! Astonishing claims are being made by social theorists. According to Barlow (1995: 36):

With the development of the Internet, and with the increasing pervasiveness of communications between networked computers, we are in the middle of the most transforming technological event since the capture of fire. I used to think that it was just the biggest thing since Gutenberg, but now I think you have to go back further.

The invention of movable print in Gutenberg in the fifteenth century was the impetus for modernity, with its reflective and abstract textuality (Pertierra 1997). The Internet makes it possible to return to a more intimate orality on a global scale, with its chat groups and informal networks. The limits of community are confounded when the local, diasporal and global intersect. These new intersections produce distinct hybridities embodied in transformed corporealities.

Barlow makes an even bigger claim, equating the Internet with the domestication of fire, the very beginning of human culture. Following him, one assumes that the electronic revolution will transform the human either into the posthuman or at least into the cyborg. The seamless merging of human and machine generate problems for an earlier understanding of culture as distinct from and opposed to nature. In the cyborg, the dialectic between culture and nature is fully established. Culture not only

informs but also constitutes nature, which in its turn disinforms culture. Brute facticity and human purposiveness merge into the human-machine. The classical distinction between science, as the disinterested pursuit of knowledge and technology, as its instrumental application, disappears. The posthuman subject combines the immediacy of a tool with the effectiveness of a machine. For these reasons, social theorists (e.g. Kirby 1997) are presaging the end of the corporeal and the birth of the post-corporeal or the replacement of the human by the posthuman.

Others make equally astonishing claims: "We are going to be Gods, we might as well get good at it" or "In another thousand years, we will be machines or gods" (Gray 2002). How can we assess the basis of these claims? They sound a bit premature for the Philippines, with its low rate of Internet penetration (15%) even if this usage is growing quickly. Nevertheless, new forms of technoscience have enormous potentials for social and cultural change. Cyber space and virtual reality are new ontologies, often subverting the former continuum of space/time. The global merges with the local into the glocal, disrupting identities based on territoriality such as the nation-state. Homogenous and territorialized cultures are rapidly hybridized, while diasporas are localized. A leading electronic journal advertises its orientation as follows:

The Leonardo Electronic Almanac (ISSN No: 1071-4391) is inviting papers that address the complex relationship between technology and difference. Technology is often conceived as an ability to "create," "innovate," "make;" all that which differentiates: 'man' from 'nature'; human from animal. It is seen as a path to 'God(s)' and 'community,' sociality, spirituality, and consciousness. Cultural differences are enacted in differentiations of 'technologically advanced' from 'technologically backward' cultural traditions, often evidenced in statistics on use and proliferation of such technologies. There are significant differences how cultures approach this question of 'technology' both in art and science, albeit they are rarely presented and poorly understood.

In the past few decades, however, a new optimism has been propagated of a technology that is said to operate as a de-differentiating force: it builds bridges, it unites, it globalizes (for better or for worse), it brings us closer. It goes beyond 'old' differences: ethnic, sexual, cultural, animal, towards 'new' differences between human and (intelligent) machine, human and post-human, human and transgenic or artificial species.

The multiple and often conflicting loyalties (ethnicity, gender, nationality) of the contemporary condition are often contrasted with the certainties and promises of modernity. The rationalization of social life under modernity produced a view of the self that stressed its rational orientation. The self had clearly stated goals, appropriate values and used its resources for their achievement. The citizen and consumer mirrored the well-managed nation-state and the free-market. Modernization and development theory predicted a bright future for everyone, including members of the Third World. This prediction has not only failed, but it is now perceived as part of a legitimizing strategy on the part of the affluent and privileged. Narratives of economic development, the benefits of science, promises of equality and the endless bounties of nature are

now increasingly questioned or discredited. Globalization has both narrowed and widened the differences between (and even within) nations, societies and cultures. The global has replaced the local with the virtual, extinguishing the difference between the real and its simulacrum.

These changes are not only producing significant transformations in the sphere of the social but have even more important consequences for culture. Hitherto closely attached to a form of life, postmodern culture becomes a sphere of autonomous signification. The virtualization of the local has detached culture from its sources in the routines of everyday life and instead culture becomes a product of globality. The structures of meaning provided by culture are no longer rooted in ordinary experience but are instead linked to complex and abstract systems. This rupture between culture and its generative structures creates problems for identity. The social as collective is replaced by the intercalation of diverse elements combined in the individual.

The rise of multifunctional spaces such as shopping malls and housing estates (e.g. Eastwood City) mark important aspects of the contemporary world. They usually mimic public space (which in Philippine cities is rapidly disappearing) but are often private spaces easily surveilled by their controllers. These new spaces are often characterized by their conscious separation from local and traditional structures such as markets, plazas and other public areas. Shopping malls and housing estates often invoke the notion of a more rational and ordered virtual world in contrast to the chaos and irrationality of the locally real. They simulate the ideal of a Western lifestyle and substitute it for the realities of Philippine society. A housing estate advertises its products as making its residents feel that they are living abroad – ‘a house so continental, you feel like you’re in another country.’ This results in a simulacrum and virtualization of everyday life. Filipinos experience a New York winter at Megamall or reproduce western chic at Eastwood City. By contrast ordinary life becomes banal and inferior, befitting the poor and the weak.

No other technical device has spread more quickly, including more people, than the mobile phone (two billion by 2008). The cellphone has become the new icon of Philippine life. Filipinos of all classes, generations and ethnicities have adopted this new technology to reproduce traditional relationships under new conditions. Moreover they also employ it to explore new identities and transcorporeal subjectivities. Freed from the constraints of spatial location, cellphones allow perpetual interaction with absent interlocutors. Cyber or virtual communities are easily generated by CMICT. This technology has encouraged or permitted an explicitly sexual subject as well as other subversive identities. CMICT are able to generate virtual communities involving self and other. In these circumstances, notions of the social and of culture have to be radically transformed. Copresence and direct interaction no longer constitute the primary basis for relationships. These new relationships often provide an expanded role for the stranger, hitherto undeveloped in the Philippines in both private and public

interaction. These conditions constitute new possibilities for the rise of a postmodern public sphere and new forms of politics. The Habermasian public sphere can now be extended into cyberspace, generating hitherto impossible relationships and identities.

While members of defined classes pursuing collective interests constituted an earlier (modern) public sphere, a postmodern public consists of a network of diasporal individuals with heterogeneous interests. The cellphone facilitates these networks and reinforces private interests in the public sphere. This new form of politics characterized EDSA 2, and to a lesser extent EDSA 1.

For the reasons above, CMICT is as much a challenge for sociology as it is a challenge to sociology and the other social sciences. This new technology requires the discipline to re-examine its understanding of networks, connections, hierarchies and other organizational modes, nodes, schemas and structures. Functionalist and empiricist approaches have to be reassessed, positivist and other methodologies reevaluated, and actual expectations matched with virtual realities. The possibilities of imaginability have far exceeded previous boundaries. Neither space nor time and even the actual, constrain or inhibit the virtual. Only technology and human interests do so. Sociology can assist this task but only if it gives up earlier notions of the real and the possible.

The articles in this issue confront some of the main questions in the sociology of the postmodern age. Pertierra points out how central Durkheim was for understanding the changes caused by the industrial revolution. New times required new relationships as well as new understandings of the sphere of the social, hitherto absorbed and conflated with nature and a pre-reflective culture. Industrialism separated areas of life earlier confined to locality or kinship (Pertierra 1997). Work and the sphere of the social expanded to include elements not covered by locality or kinship. Economics and politics were the earliest attempts to conceptualize the new conditions of early modernity. The market and the citizen represented hitherto unspecialized practices. New paradigms were required to understand them. Psychology soon followed as reflexivity marked the modern subject and finally sociology arose to explain the sphere of the social. Similar transformations are taking place due to the rapid accumulation of information and communication. New models of the social are required to explain these changes.

Some readers may be wondering about the appropriateness of articles dealing with issues outside the Philippines for this journal. A special PSR issue dealing with CMICT cannot ignore the global context within which these technologies operate. Understanding the influences and consequences of CMICT for Philippine society and culture can best be achieved by comparing their use in other societies in the region. Like all technologies, CMICT is shaped by the social and cultural contexts of their use. This social shaping of technology is best understood by comparing their uses in a

range of societies and cultures. Hence, mobile phone use in Tibet and Guangdong, Web 2.0 as used by Tamils, digital piracy in Malaysia and blogging in China Mainland provide valuable insights for their counterparts in the Philippines. Both the global and the local can now only be understood through their mediated glocal formations.

Raul Pertierra argues that CMICT has significantly transformed the previous constraints of space/time, virtually if not actually. Many interactions now involve interlocutors who are no longer physically copresent. This leads to the phenomenon of an absent presence that allows overseas relatives to micro-coordinate the daily expenses of dependents in their home villages. This coordination of everyday life from a distance generates notions of self and other not adequately comprehended by a sociology that assumes face-to-face interaction as the primary basis of social life.

The claims for CMICT are somewhat excessive but there is little doubt that in association with broader social trends, we are presently undergoing a transformation perhaps of greater significance than the industrial revolution. Modern technology challenges most of our assumptions regarding both the natural and cultural worlds. Nature, previously seen as brute facticity is now seen as having its internal telos. Culture, hitherto seen as the sum of human purposive action, is now perceived as indistinguishable from complex structures with systemic requirements. The human is rapidly becoming a technofaction where dacron, silicon implants and electronic chips merge seamlessly with human flesh. As Gray argues: in another thousand years: "We're going to be Gods, we might as well get good at it" or "In another thousand years, we'll be machines or gods" (Gray 2002: 9).

Social institutions from the family to the nation will have to better express these new realities if they are to remain relevant. A process of democratization is occurring at all these levels, and even extending to the rights of animals and nature. Never before have we had to face such momentous changes so quickly. The use of fire and the domestication of livestock took many millennia before producing significant transformations. By comparison, the industrial revolution changed society in a little over a century. The telegraph, telephone, railway, steamboat and air travel increased the pace of life significantly by practically canceling distance. The motor car privatized travel and the cinema transformed our perception of time. The social sciences were a response to these changes by seeing action as purposive, identificatory and social rather than traditional, pre-reflective or singular.

By comparison to these earlier transformations, the spread of CMICT in the Philippines and the rest of the world have been phenomenal. While the Neolithic revolution took place over millennia and the industrial revolution lasted a century, CMICT has become indispensable in most people's lives only in a little over a decade. As DiMaggio et al. (2001) have pointed out, the Internet and associated communication technologies are reshaping and being shaped by their users at an incredible pace.

These changes are taking place as we watch them close at hand and even participate in these activities ourselves. Mobiles have in five years achieved levels of penetration that took television 50 years to obtain. This example presents an ideal case for studying social transformations whose major elements are observable and whose effects are revelatory of less transparent structures. How quickly will the social sciences adapt to these changes? The rise of postmodern theory, cultural studies and transdisciplinary approaches are an indication of attempts to confront these new social and cultural realities. Sociology will have to confront these questions adequately or be replaced by other paradigms and disciplinary approaches.

Kristinne Joyce Lara-de Leon points out that given the importance of CMICT for many Filipinos, an ethnography of Internet cafes is a timely topic for research. Tuguegarao is a major town in Northern Luzon, characterized by a multitude of ethnic backgrounds and languages. Cultural difference is an ordinary element of most people's lives and the new communication technologies extend this difference globally.

She describes the activities and practices in two Internet cafés in Tuguegarao. One is more interactive, where both virtual and physical interaction takes place while the other favors more private and virtual relationships. Both reflect the real contexts within which they are located. The first mainly caters to students drawn from one school nearby; hence customers often know one another and readily participate in each others cyber activities. The cyber world is an extension of the physical world, even if its requirements often generate new practices. The second café represents a more distinct world, whose members are generally unknown to one another. This second café is perhaps more representative of the urban condition where people are strangers to one another. They may meet at the café but each one is absorbed into their own cyber world.

De Leon gives several examples of how informants' lives have been affected by CMICT. Genuine is a teenager who explores his sexuality by joining gay sites where he meets people with similar orientations. They offer advice and support which is often lacking in his physical world. Flora is deaf and finds it hard to establish relationships with non-deaf people. Instead she prefers logging into sites where she can use FSL (Filipino Sign Language) to communicate with her deaf acquaintances. Jay-r is a boy with advanced skills in computer games that allow him to compete with and often win against much older players. He has established friendships through gaming with people who would normally have considered him to be too young. This has given him confidence in relating to older people. These examples indicate how CMICT provide alternative channels for establishing relationships often lacking in face-to-face or co-present situations.

Given the diasporal nature of Filipino culture and the large numbers of Filipinos working abroad, one expects the new communication technology to play an important

role in many people's everyday life. However, as de Leon shows, the new technology is used both for traditional and innovative ways. Internet cafés serve as linkages between people in Tuguegarao and their relatives abroad. They reinforce already existing ties but as other studies show (Pertierra 2006), they also transform these ties. Parents become super vigilant, wives surveille erring husbands and children discuss hitherto taboo topics such as sex with overseas parents. Moreover, traditional activities such as searching for spouses become globalized. Thus, Imee used the Internet to meet her French-Australian husband after having emotional relationships with several foreigners. Janna explores her sexuality via cyber sex with her overseas husband.

Finally, de Leon points out that despite the increasing use of Internet cafés, this technology is still relatively inaccessible to the majority of people in Tuguegarao. Ironically, even when its importance is recognized in educational institutions, CMICT is as much an imagined as a practical skill. Thus, the local university offers computer courses without having an Internet connection on campus. Students have to travel to the urban cafés for connectivity. This example indicates the often paradoxical situation involving the new technology. While it is increasingly incorporated into everyday life, thereby fusing the virtual with the actual, its practice is as much rhetorical as practical.

De Leon provides valuable insights into the new but increasingly common communicative practices of Filipinos. Contemporary global life is mostly experienced as mediated and CMICT provides a main channel for this mediation. Internet cafés are common sites for these experiences. While much of traditional life was based on co-presence or face-to-face interaction, the global condition requires transgressing spatio-temporal boundaries. The stranger and cosmopolitanism increasingly enter more aspects of everyday life, including its most intimate areas. Locality and its relationship to the global have to be reconfigured. In the process, earlier identities and existing relationships are reconceptualized.

Tilman Baumgartel discusses the significance and consequences of digital piracy in Southeast Asia. Apart from their major influence on all aspects of quotidian life and popular culture, pirated films have also exposed locals to the more specialized worlds of art cinema. Among its consequences is a rising generation of local filmmakers influenced by both classical and contemporary trends. Using the new technologies, young directors are able to experiment and produce films hitherto impossible.

The global circulation of capital and technology has facilitated an underground cultural economy that, although illegal, epitomizes many of the desired features of contemporary life. Baumgartel refers to this as globalization from below. Normally inaccessible but highly desired products become available for ordinary people. The formal economy is not able to provide desired goods and hence people are forced to resort to alternative sources made available, ironically, by capitalist technology. From

Baumgartel's perspective, both the legal and pirate economies constitute two sides of the same coin.

A global economy generates a culture that is both highly homogenized and extremely varied. Consumers are able to create distinctive patterns of consumption based on individual choice of universally available goods. Political and other exclusionary mechanisms preventing access to desired goods are difficult to implement in often permeable borders generated by economic liberalism and the privatization of public structures. Images, ideas and lifestyles cross borders and hierarchies, creating new and hybrid cultural formations. But these new structures are also based on the pursuit of profits by exploiting new niche markets hitherto untapped by more conventional strategies.

Baumgartel is careful not to imply any direct causal connections between digital piracy and the new Asian cinema but their affinities are clearly visible. Their influence has been mentioned by several young local directors who in turn are now the models for a revival of Asian cinema. The digitalization of information has not only made possible new communication technologies but has allowed their dispersal to distant lands at minimal costs. The autonomy of isolation is no longer applicable; instead all cultures are in constant dialogue with their global counterparts. From film, fashion and food to politics, business and education, the world is densely intercalated. Neither disciplinary or cultural and ideological barriers prevent the increasing hybridization of life.

Gopalan Ravindran takes a major issue in contemporary social theory: how adequate are former notions of structure, distribution and consumption in understanding CMICT? He uses the example of Tamil cinema and its huge following among diasporal communities, particularly among Malaysian Tamils. Ravindran begins by analyzing notions of flow first suggested by Williams in his study of patterns of television viewing. While older models of distribution used mechanical models for understanding the consumption of modern media, Williams preferred the notion of flow as more adequate to the way the media is consumed and domesticated. Each viewer has her own preferences, choices and strategies while surfing the available channels. Castells (2000) prefers the notion of flexible networks and nodes, while Giddens (1991) introduced the distinction between structure and structuration. All these models reject earlier notions of rigid structures, fixed hierarchies and predetermined trajectories. Instead, the new models prefer hydraulic rather than mechanical metaphors, where shape, orientation and consequence is more flexible, less predictable and open to individual choice.

For Ravindran the most suitable model for CMICT is provided by Deleuze and Guattari (Deleuze, Gilles and Felix Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.1987). Their notion of

rhizome encapsulates the chaotic nature of contemporary life. According to Ravindran: for Deleuze and Guattari, rhizomatic connections do not follow any order, unlike in the case of the connections that flow between fixed and pre-determined points in a tree. According to them, "any point of a rhizome can be connected to anything other, and must be." He uses examples from Web 2.0 to illustrate the notion of rhizomatic distribution and regeneration.

Ravindran begins by describing the significance of Tamil cinema for diasporic communities, particularly in Malaysia where Tamils occupy a problematic position. Tamil films are followed with passionate interest, partly to keep abreast of cultural trends in the motherland but also to emphasize their own local differences. This already complex phenomenon is greatly amplified with the arrival of the Internet and applications such as Web 2.0. Citing examples of highly popular video clips made available in YouTube, Ravindran shows how inadequate earlier notions of original sources, derived forms and individual use are in the case of Web 2.0.

The notion of original or real was first challenged by the computer and facsimile machines. What is the original copy of a document produced on the screen, printed and latter photocopied? They are all simulacra of an original simulacrum. Web 2.0 compounds these paradoxes and reveals the inadequacy of earlier notions of the real, the copy and the simulated. In such instances Deleuze and Guattari provide better models that capture the intricacies, inconsistencies, unpredictabilities and randomness of phenomena generated by CMICT. Rhizomatic structures closely approximate the often ordered chaos of late or postmodernity.

The case of little superstar, a midget, who dances to the music of Rajinikanth is a good example of rhizomatic structures, where the former distinctions between original, partial or variant no longer apply. New hybridities replace the original and the total, themselves replaced by new totalities. YouTube provides a medium for transforming original versions into mutant and hybrid forms that themselves constitute the bases for new transformations. Local examples of these hybridities are readily available, from sexual scandals to public performances and even surgical techniques. Each case mutates into unpredictable forms, taking on new lives no longer answerable to former genres. How will the old models of change and development deal with these new modalities?

Roudanji discusses how cellphones have affected local Tibetan society. A comparatively new technology, mobiles have been taken up with enthusiasm by Tibetans. Most of the users are presently students living in urban areas but even villagers and monks are starting to use cellphones. Most of its uses are practical such as connecting with friends and relatives or transacting business affairs. Distances in Tibet makes travel difficult and mobiles have significantly facilitated the sharing of information among dispersed networks.

The main issue addressed in this chapter is the development of modernity in Tibet. Modernity is a complex process involving the state, the economy and a host of other institutions dealing with public and private affairs. Modernity also affects identity and processes of individuation. A central aspect of modernity is the rationalization of everyday life required by the growing coordination of locality with the national and the global. At the individual level, this involves an increase in reflexivity as choices provided by the market and the state replaces tradition with purposive rationality. The cellphone is centrally involved in most of these processes, at the collective and private levels.

Roudanji points out the importance of education, particularly the ability to read and write Chinese, for utilizing fully the capacities of communications technology. The contemporary media uses Chinese as its main language and Tibetans unable to comprehend it are at a decided disadvantage. As expected, students and government officials are best equipped to make good use of these resources. Hence they are able to keep abreast of international trends in global fashion, music and popular culture.

As reported in other cases (Pertierra 2006), the cellphone also affects how people project themselves through its use. In Tibet, cellphone conversations have generated new forms of language etiquette among their users but in particular among government officials. The tones employed in their conversation characterize different social status (e.g. the highness or lowness of voice, using formal and polite words in conversing, among others). A famous Tibetan artist Malayjyap, used these new language conventions in a popular comedy 'Phone,' to convey the multiple identities Tibetans project using cellphones.

Finally, Roudanji discusses the role of mobiles among Buddhist monks. The question of adapting modern technology such as cellphones is controversial among Buddhists but some monasteries allow their limited use. Monks generally use their cellphones like most other Tibetans – to keep in touch with friends and relatives in the village. But they also use it to network with fellow monks and in organizing classes in Buddhist theology and liturgy. Interestingly, another consequence of its use is the concentration of ritual performances within the monastery instead of in the surrounding villages. Previously, monks roamed the villages performing life and other rituals. Presently, they wait in the monastery for people to contact them on cellphones to request the performance of desired rituals. As a consequence, the monastery itself has now become a center for ritual performance. This has led to an unexpected concentration and rationalization of ritual action.

Yinni Peng's paper deals with the effects of mobiles on the labor process. Technologies have often been seen as directly increasing the productive capacities of labor and the corresponding rise in capitalist profits. While the productive potential of cellphones is not in doubt, their capacity to empower workers is less explored. Yinni

Peng investigates how the mobile allows workers in the Pearl River Delta Region in Guangdong (China mainland) to obtain crucial information about wages and conditions in local factories.

The economic boom in China has provided employment for millions of Chinese workers from rural provinces who flock to the coastal areas where factories are generally located. While conditions are steadily improving, workers often complain about the harshness of life in the new economic zones. Recently, cellphones have provided workers with access to information that allows them to compare wages and conditions in local factories. As a consequence, given local labor shortages, workers can often improve their incomes by shifting quickly to factories offering better conditions. Official information is generally limited in China and only rarely can ordinary people use it to their advantage. The mobile has changed this situation significantly.

One of the first things rural workers buy when they arrive in the new economic zones is a cellphone. They use it mainly to remain in contact with family and friends in their home villages but increasingly workers also use their mobiles to obtain information about working conditions in their area. Every worker automatically belongs to an extensive social network based on locality of origin, ethnicity and kinship. To this is quickly added new contacts obtained in the work place as well as through other social occasions. Cellphones are therefore not only important devices to remain in contact with significant others but also practical tools for obtaining information about relevant matters at work as well as more generally.

Leaving rural villages for work in the metropolitan and business centers is an inevitable aspect of modernity. New values, skills and statuses have to be acquired as an index of this shift from rural to urban, and the cellphone is an index of this transformation. Factory work is tedious and requires constant monitoring. The mobile, however, allows workers to retain some autonomy and privacy during their work hours. They become adept at sending and receiving surreptitious messages via SMS.

Easily hidden, workers can send messages even when expressly forbidden by managers. Peng reports a female migrant worker as saying:

In our factory, it is okay for us to carry mobile phones. But, we are fined if we use mobile phones during working hours. Sometimes, when I receive an incoming call, I will tell my foreman that I want to use the restroom... I answer the call in the restroom.

Retaining some control over their bodies reduces the micro-disciplinary constraints associated with modern factory work. As a worker said:

I always carry my mobile phone. I seldom receive calls or send short messages when I am working. But, having a mobile phone handy, I feel safe. I know I will not miss any call from my family. I am married and have a six-year-old son. If there is some urgent things happened in my home, I can be reached easily.

Most workers live in dormitories with few opportunities for privacy. Maintaining contacts with relatives and friends using landlines was either impossible or extremely difficult. The mobile not only ensures relative privacy but also guarantees constant availability.

Virtual networks are now as important for most workers as their spatial networks based in their villages of origin or kinship links. Many mobiles have cameras and Internet connections, thereby allowing users multiple channels for extending information. Mediated relationships now occur as ordinary aspects of urban life. Despite the harsh disciplinary controls found in contemporary labor processes, cellphones represent a technology that at least allows workers with some capacity to resist. As Peng shows, Chinese workers are becoming highly skilled in devising strategies that allow them greater access to information affecting the labor process. The mobile, however limitedly, becomes a technology of liberation.

Patrick Pui-lam Law and Ke Yang assert that the importance of CMICT for the constitution of a more open public sphere is one of the most important questions raised in relation to the new media. While there is little doubt that access to information has dramatically increased, this access does not necessarily lead to a more informed or open public sphere (Lash 2002). Data does not always increase understanding and can as easily obfuscate it. Nevertheless, CMICT seems to provide conditions of possibility that can generate more democratic discursive practices. The sheer abundance of information makes censorship impractical if not impossible. The relative facility of access gives ordinary people opportunities for obtaining and disseminating information hitherto not possible.

Law and Yang discuss the role of blogs in developing a civil discourse possibly leading to a stronger civil society. They begin by arguing that civil society in the western sense is weakly developed in China Mainland both during the imperial and the communist periods. Individual autonomy and social institutions necessary to developing civil consciousness expressed, for example, in social movements have not been part of the Chinese experience. The State is mostly hegemonic and only lately has shown signs of relegating its massive coercive powers to other social organizations.

Others have argued that civil society in an indigenous form has existed in China through various societal groups and organizations even if they mostly remain within the state's supervision. Kinship, religion, ethnicity and locality have always played a strong role in Chinese society, at times mitigating and resisting imperial control. It is in this context that blogging has entered the communication field.

Law and Yang give examples of blogs that have elicited extraordinary support among both bloggers and the general public. The first involved a child in need of specialized medical care unaffordable by its parents. Their blog caught the attention

of bloggers and eventually the mainstream media, resulting in generous donations to their cause. The second involved a determined family who refused to move out of their home to give way to a large commercial development. The developers, with the support of local authorities, isolated the family residence, cut off utilities and tried to coerce them to leave their home. The case attracted some attention resulting in online discussions about its relative merits. Eventually a young blogger joined the discussion and took up the cause of the family with great perseverance, even traveling from his home province to Chongqing to report from the scene. Other bloggers joined in and the case quickly became an example of bureaucratic oppression against the common man.

Neither example actually challenged the hegemony of the state but indirectly allowed the public to raise sensitive issues not normally allowed. Bloggers and later the general public participated enthusiastically in discussing the merits of the case and its consequences. A new discursive field was opened resulting in the rational exchange of views, including notions of social justice and private rights. It also generated collective action either in organizing financial contributions or demonstrations in support of the besieged household. Although the consequences of blogging for the development of civil society and social movements is far from clear, these cases indicate that CMICT opens new conditions of possibility.

CONCLUSION

This special issue of the *Philippine Sociological Review* (PSR) has raised questions central to the continuing relevance of sociology in the new world order. There is little doubt that we are experiencing a pace of social transformation equivalent if not greater than the industrial revolution. The latter produced the social sciences in the forms presently known to us. Sociology was based on the new sphere of the social experienced in the growing urbanization of life, linking strangers to one another within a simultaneous present. CMICT has transformed this simultaneous present into a lived experience, where interlocutors spatially separated can interact in a quasi face-to-face mode.

Contemporary life is characterized by mediating institutions and systems that connect everyday experience to broader and global structures. Hitherto closely attached to a form of life, postmodern culture becomes a sphere of autonomous signification. The virtualization of the local has detached culture from its sources in the routines of everyday life, converting it into a product of globality. Meaning is no longer rooted in ordinary experience but is instead linked to complex and abstract systems. The social as collective is replaced by the intercalation of diverse elements combined in the individual, herself linked into complex networks.

One obvious consequence of the above is that journals such as the PSR will have to reflect the global condition. What happens to national traditions in a globalized world? Who will represent and express particular needs hitherto provided by the national or the local? Ravindran has addressed this issue by arguing that the globalized homeland now includes its diasporal members. Distinctions between the settled and the original homeland no longer apply as relevantly as they did before CMICT. A friend describes herself as a Filipino from California, converting what was hitherto a nationality into an ethnicity. A growing Filipino diaspora will similarly interrogate earlier definitions of homeland. The social sciences are presently ill equipped to deal with these conundrums adequately. This issue is meant to stimulate further questions in the practice of sociology for it to better confront and resolve future conundrums.

Raul Pertierra
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