

Translation, the ‘Killer App’... Reflections on Technology Appropriation by Marginalised Communities in Durban, South Africa

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Policy rhetoric and the media portray Information and Communication Technology (ICT) as a means to social and economic empowerment. Academic literature draws from a range of disciplines but fails to address the significance of new technologies for African-, and South African urban spaces. Debates on technologies and cities reflect a Northern bias and case literature that dwells on the developmental aspects of ICT do not engage with the broader significance with regards to urban change in African cities.

This paper draws on two case studies in addressing these gaps. The research question is essentially: does ICT enable transformation at the local scale that could potentially be harnessed by urban policy makers? The first case tracked a process by which web sites were developed for 8 community organisations in marginalised places in Durban, South Africa. This was an action research project where participant observation, interviews and focus groups were methods used to collect data. The second case was concerned with the ways in which technology is used by informal traders active in the city. Photography, interviews and focus groups comprised the methods used in this instance. Actor-network theory was used in both cases in the analysis of the field work, uncovering material and human actors, network stabilisation processes and agency in determining the transformative potential of ICT at city and local scales.

Network relations are determined by aligned strategic agendas as actors are enrolled into the actor-network through translation. A failed web development process showed that translation processes are core to stabilising network relations. Work with informal traders indicated that appropriation of technology is informed by livelihood strategies. Innovation is enabled when translation extends to appropriation. Throughout the research the spatial dimensions of the relationship between ICT and networks were considered. The network spaces that emerge from actor relations do not correspond with the physical spaces usually considered in policy. Future work on these contradictions is necessary in order to provide insights into how more meaningful public intervention can be enabled; the true spaces of transformation.