



The politics of technology in Africa: communication, development, and nation-building in Ethiopia

by Iginio Gagliardone, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2016, \$99.99, 190 pp., ISBN 9781107177857

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BOOK REVIEW

The politics of technology in Africa: communication, development, and nation-building in Ethiopia, by Iginio Gagliardone, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2016, \$99.99, 190 pp., ISBN 9781107177857

Iginio Gagliardone explores in this book the process of technology adoption and adaptation of Information and Communication Technologies in Africa. Information and Communication Technology adoption in Africa was expected to bring inclusive transformative development in every country, but this is not the case in Ethiopia. The fascination for promoting inclusive forms of development has ‘obfuscated’ the reality of the negotiations that take place among political and economic actors seeking to use technology in their quest for power. Readers get introduced to the dynamics between development and politics and how politicians can shape or reshape technology (p. 3).

The book features eight chapters, each capturing an essential element of the dynamics in play between technology adaption, politics and the actors or implementors of technology. The author introduces us to the concept of Technopolitics and the relationship between technology, politics and Governments or implementors agenda’s and how this impacts development. Iginio Gagliardone conducted empirical research during 10 years to address why Ethiopia as a country, after having adopted technology and received sizable amounts of donations, development aid and support has it not shown visible signs of inclusivity and increased access to ICT. This issue was his reason for choosing Ethiopia as a case study, to serve as a lesson and example on region improvement and the role of technology as a tool for development planning and public participation.

In Chapter 1, the author’s primary purpose is to investigate the relationship between politics, development, and technological adoption. He departs from the view that when scholars research adaptation of technology they concentrate mostly on the common implementation challenges and nature of the Government – whether authoritarian or democratic– not the dynamics between politics and development. To analyze this dynamic interplay between technology and politics he based his arguments on the concept of *Technopolitics*; which he has defined as the dynamics and interplay between technology, politics and the actors involved in the adoption of technology (p. 13). The focus of the author was to identify those interactions within Woredanet (Internet Protocol satellite-based network of district administrations mostly used for Video Conferencing) and Schoolnet (similar architecture used to broadcast pre-recorded classes on a variety of subjects to secondary schools) technology projects.

The main themes of the book are Technopolitics, Technopolitical Regimes, Ethnic Federalism and Revolutionary Democracy. Ethnic federalism is based on seeking to reframe Ethiopia from a unitary nation into a federation of ethnicities, all entitled to the same rights to self-determination that mobilised the people by connecting the oppressed minority groups and offering the opportunity to participate in re-founding the nation. While ‘revolutionary democracy’ is a concept that emerged at the time of guerrilla warfare against the Derg and was continued after Ethiopia People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) came into power, it avoids the focus on the individual that characterises liberal democracy, preferring to stress group rights and consensus (p. 66). These are the themes that formed part and parcel of the Governments rhetoric and political ideologies which can be viewed as the information flow through the Internet.

Chapter 2 deals with Techno-determinism, the theory that takes technology as the principal initiator of society's transformation, and according to the author the public's intake of political ideologies and policy. The author builds on the concept of Technopolitics: hybrids of technical systems and political practices that produce new forms of power and agency. The entanglement of technology with politics takes place on narratives of national identity with concrete policy positions and material outcomes. He proceeds to demonstrate that a Technopolitical regime both the medium and the outcome of negotiation between a specific technology and the actors that animate it and compete power. The author further demonstrates a Technoregime is as a result of layers of decisions made by actors tied to denser or looser networks and employing technology to achieve political goals in ways that politics alone would not allow. Thus in our case, he looks at Ethiopia's adoption of ICT, and how it transpired with a focus on Woredanet and Schoolnet as the media.

Chapter 3 is a well-detailed description of Ethiopia's political history. It demonstrates the agendas and goals of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) the coalition Government. Their specific goals, centred on Ethnic federalism and Revolutionary democracy, and how they planned to materialise them. The gaining of legitimacy in the technology space relied on the goals mentioned above in the context of rights for all nations, nationalities and peoples, claiming that all ethnic groups in Eritrea shall be well recognised and their rights realised thus promising equal representation and public participation.

The second part of chapter 3 deals with the Network of actors and the interplay between them competing for power over the space. It explores the evolution of the technology adoption of ICT in Africa and Ethiopia. The interaction of the Government with the technology artefacts and conflicts that arose between the various actors while competing for power over the space. On one end, individuals connected to the Government, Politicians and Technocrats while on the other side, members of the local civil society, the private sector and the diaspora. The Government marginalised other actors by appropriating the images and recipes proposed by international organisations denying them the opportunity to shape the ICT policies and projects.

Chapter 4 is titled 'A Quest for Hegemony' and as the title denotes it deals with the EPRDF's authoritarian tendencies, but to understand its content one needs to know the political structure and history of Ethiopia which the author addresses. To begin, one needs to understand the type of Government that has led Ethiopia and its politics to understand Ethiopian Technopolitics. Ethiopia is a federal parliamentary republic. The advent of ICT development began under the Governance of EPRDF as a coalition government of various liberation parties. However, the EPRDF emerged to be an authoritarian type of Government. The EPRDF Government claimed to have a unified ideology and political philosophy but via its actions, it did the opposite, acting authoritarian. The author details the practice of divisive ethnic politics, human rights violations and the EPRDF's marginalisation of non-state actors in the development of an approach to ICTs. The Government continued with its programmes, a political agenda and it also took on a hostile, adversarial tone both online and offline. It stuck to its policy ignoring dissenting voices and resulting in measures that amounted to Human Rights Violations. The Government thus used the technological artefacts to disseminate political ideologies according to the national agenda of Ethnic federalism and revolutionary democracy by controlling the decentralisation of ICT using the tools of Woredanet and Schoolnet.

In chapter 5, the author draws us to interact with the two technological projects Woredanet and Schoolnet and their counter patch projects. Woredanet, network of district administrations, is an ICT programme which employs Internet protocol based in satellite communication to convey information from the centre to the districts and vice versa via videoconferencing and email. Hence, the spread of ICT into Woreda district administrations enabled ministers and staff in Addis to Videoconference with regional Woreda offices and

convey instructions from the Central Government (p. 83). Woredanet was used to instruct administration officers but also could be converted into Telecourts, virtual courtrooms and a way of decentralising disputes resolution into the grassroots (p. 98). However, because of the costs and waste in power and bandwidth the resources were not equally rolled out, some regions got the access denied to these resources or some were omitted from the project deliberately, particularly non-government influenced regions.

Schoolnet, with a similar architecture, rolled out pre-recorded classes to almost every secondary school in the country, both in the urban and rural areas, targeting mainly secondary schools students (p. 101). However, the author highlights that this was also a way of distributing political discourses and ideological contents, from the centre to the grassroots, which could be understood as a form of indoctrination. When students were on school holidays, the project was used to train military groups in secret (p. 102).

In Chapter 6 the author deals with marginalisation, circumnavigation and Governments resistance to alternative technopolitical regimes. These regimes include the international technopolitical regime, diaspora technopolitical regime and local civil society technopolitical regimes. A circumnavigation attempt occurred when International and multilateral organisations developed a patch or alternative Schoolnet project unlike the Governments' own system, known as INTSchoolnet. That project comprised 2,700 computers donated to 161 schools to set up Computer labs connected to the Internet for self-study. It was interpreted as a counter to plasma television-based Schoolnet.

There were attempts to modify policy without influencing technology adaptation, by including and organising workshops and other projects by external actors like the USA and the World Bank, mainly targeted to private sectors. They included – for example – telecentres offering Internet access, business incubators, refurbishment centres, community radios, and private Internet Service Providers to enhance public participation. However, this was met with frustration because the Government failed on its promise to pass an open democratic friendly ICT policy. There was also an oppositional use of ICT to find innovative ways of dissenting. For example the use of activist blogs, diasporas' address or satellite broadcast, or circumnavigating the uncensored or blocked Internet access ports to be able to criticise the government. Many of those attempts were frustrated by the Government through filtering, blanket censorship, and arbitrary arrests or killings claiming terrorism. However, current Prime Minister has pardoned most of the prisoners that were arrested for dissent and suspected terrorism.

Chapter 7 deals with the above mentioned human rights violation and the use of laws to marginalise other actors and exercise a monopoly over ICT and Internet access in Ethiopia, for example, charging high tariffs for calling abroad but maintaining low tariffs to communicate within the country. The government has shown a remarkable ability to exploit the contradictions in the agenda advanced by foreign donors in its ICT policy.

The author reveals a successful project that is an excellent case study to the world using the same rhetoric of the above principals of ethnic federalism and revolutionary democracy. Introducing us to the Ethiopian Commodity Exchange ECX project that links farmers to buyers and it is completely centralised reducing costs and enhancing efficiency without the need of the usual bottlenecks caused by intermediaries (p. 146).

This is a book that every ICT and Technology policy maker and decision maker must have on their shelf it not only addresses the history of ICT in Africa. It also addresses the dynamics between development, technology and politics and how technology can be manipulated to advance positive or negative political ideologies. However, it would have been of assistance to the reader, to provide example of other projects or other means of accessing the Internet and how they operated to compare with the projects mentioned.

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