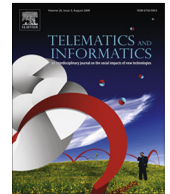




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Telematics and Informatics

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/tele

A socio-technical contract: Network governance and ICT4D in Turkey



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 26 October 2014

Received in revised form 3 May 2015

Accepted 23 June 2015

Available online 23 June 2015

Keywords:

ICT4D

Technology and politics

Network governance

Governmentality

Participation

ABSTRACT

Critiques of Information and Communication for Development (ICT4D) often highlight the ways in which programs are disempowering rather than empowering, due to their furthering of capitalism and/or neoliberalism. While not denying the relevance of these critiques, this article looks at the multiple, unstable, and at times contradictory effects of the micropolitics of ICT4D assemblages and their articulation to the more general project of the “information society” in Turkey. Mobilizing a Foucauldian framework of governmentality, this article considers norms, rationalities, and models of governance as technologies of power that are productive of certain socio-technical orders, while distributing agency within them. In the Turkish context, ICT4D is implicated in the trend toward multistakeholderism, or network governance, steered by non-governmental organizations, tech companies, and the United Nations. I argue that ICT4D governance networks operate on the basis of two governing logics: participatory self-governance with regard to “local” and “communal” affairs and biopolitical management with regard to “global” affairs, including the modes of operation of informational capitalism. Yet networking as a micropolitical practice and a political imaginary can also challenge the stratification of spheres of participation and biopolitical management.

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1. Introduction

The Turkish NGO Habitat Center for Development and Governance (*Habitat Kalkınma ve Yönetişim Derneği*, HKYD) is based in Istanbul and operates throughout Turkey to promote participatory governance and youth empowerment. HKYD supports the formation of youth councils and their integration with umbrella city councils, in which civil society organizations, groups of women and of disabled, and single-issue working groups also participate. At the same time, HKYD conducts information and communication technology for development (ICT4D) programs that focus on information and communication technology (ICT) access and skills. Receiving software and financial support from companies such as Microsoft, Intel, Vodafone, and Cisco, HKYD is responsible for implementing free ICT trainings, ranging from basic computer skills courses to vocational education for “network experts” and tech entrepreneurs. According to HKYD, the two areas of activity, of participatory governance and ICT trainings, are intrinsically related. A recent website formulated HKYD’s mission as to “increase the youth’s capabilities and support its participation in decision-making mechanisms through the effective use of information technologies.” The updated website aligns the aim of increasing “information access and exchange through support for effective use

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.tele.2015.06.011>

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of information and communication technologies” with wider social and political transformation that includes empowerment, collaboration, and participation of different social groups and especially youth.¹

This article deals with the conditions, possibilities, and constraints of participation in the context of ICT4D programs in Turkey. It inquires into the question of in what ways ICT4D assemblages enable and/or constrain participation for those who take part in ICT4D and empowerment programs. More specifically, it explores the ways in which the articulations between technological practices of networked communication and political rationales, models, and norms revolving around “networking” distribute agency and organize relations of power.

This article draws from debates on ICTs and political participation (Coudry 2007; Mansell 2002; Servaes et al. 2012), communication for sustainable development (Servaes et al. 2012; Servaes 2013), and political economy critiques of ICT4D initiatives (Leye 2007; McLaughlin 2005; Nederveen Pieterse 2005; Ojo 2013; Oyedemi 2013). Alluding to the workings of capitalism, critics often argue that ICT4D fails to challenge, and even reinforces, informational capitalism by reproducing unequal global relations of power between centers of accumulation in the overdeveloped world and the developing world, which is often the locus of ICT4D projects (Leye 2007; McLaughlin 2005; Ojo 2013; Oyedemi 2013; Fish and Srinivasan 2012). McLaughlin (2005, p. 59) suggests that Cisco-funded ICT4D projects that involve digital literacy courses operate on a North–South divide “where research and development mostly remain in the Global North” while “vocational education is utilized in order to provide low- and semi-skilled labourers in the Global South.” The populations targeted through ICT4D programs end up advancing the interests of the corporations and informational capitalism more broadly. They do so either as relatively low-paid, precarious, and semi-skilled workers in the postindustrial service economy or as new, brand-loyal consumers. Moreover, while ICT4D initiatives promise participation and empowerment, they tend to reinforce what Leye (2007) describes as the “corporatization of development”: corporations increasingly are key governance actors in development efforts. This notion links up with a prominent critique of neoliberalism, according to which governance models lack mechanisms of democratic accountability as well as frameworks to contest institutional rationalities and ideologies of change.

While deploying some of the normative and critical insights that have emerged from these debates in the present analysis, this article develops an approach centered on the concept of governmentality that was introduced by the widely influential philosopher and historian Foucault (1978, 2008). To bring the concept of governmentality to bear on the discussion of ICT4D necessitates paying greater attention to the norms, rationales, and models that govern practices. These technologies of power are productive of certain socio-technical orders including positions of agency occupied by recognizable actors and stakeholders, yet simultaneously they constrain agency and disable other possible orders. Moreover, a Foucauldian perspective underscores the multiple and unstable workings of technologies of power in ICT4D governance formations. Capitalism cannot be assumed to determine social and political realities, which are constructed in more complex ways, nor can neoliberalism be considered to operate as a singular, globally homogeneous structure (see also Clarke 2008; Ong 2006).

Governmentality refers, in one sense, to the management of behaviors “at a distance,” or the art of indirect governance through techniques that shape and organize human conduct. This type of government involves “the regulation of conduct by the more or less rational application of the appropriate technical means” (Hindess 1996, quoted in Lemke 2007). As a form of micropolitics, governmentality is mediated by norms, standards, discourses, codes of behavior, measures for skills and capabilities, and technological affordances or environmental designs. Governmentality attends to the dissemination of such techniques of governance throughout society. Yet, in a second sense, governmentality addresses the role of multiple expert institutions, civil society, and supranational governance actors, which are to a greater or lesser degree managed by nation states (Jessop 2002; 2007a). Research on governmentality focuses on the articulation between “government in general,” which describes the workings of micropolitics throughout society, and “the political form of government,” which refers to the organization and operation of institutional actors and constituencies (Lemke 2007; see also Grossberg 2010, p. 251; Jessop 2007b).

This article focuses on governmentality implicated in the codes of behavior and political rationales, norms, and models of the so-called “information society,” as imaged by ICT4D governance actors. It was Andrew Barry (2001, p. 2) who observed that technology informs rationales through which actors in different fields construe whatever problems they see, imagine ways of intervening in them, and invoke political futures. Accordingly, the articulation between practices involving technology and political rationales, norms, and models informed by technology merits critical attention. In this article, the “information society” contracts a widespread, rather technological-determinist discourse that projects the inevitability of social change in the wake of technological change (Williams 2003; Slack 2012). “Information society” discourses often suggest a technological fix to multifaceted social problems and needs. Yet in order to underscore more complex articulations between technology and society, Barry introduces the concept of the technological society. This concept does not describe an epoch or stage in history that takes the deployment of technology to a new level but analyzes contexts in which specific technologies or techniques do more than fulfilling a strictly technical function. In Foucauldian manner, Barry (2001, p. 12) focuses on technology’s implication in a type of governance that revolves around the proliferation and dispersion of technical devices together with techniques, rationales, norms, and models throughout an entire population (19).

Following Barry, I focus on networking not just as a practice of using ICTs for networked communication but also as a normative framework that guides behaviors and interactions of communities and governance actors in ICT4D projects

¹ See <http://habitatkalkinma.org/amacimiz/>, accessed on August 17, 2013.

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