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Electric media in rural development: Individual freedoms to choose versus politics of power and control.

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INTRODUCTION

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I -
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.
Robert Frost, The Road Not Taken

1.1 BACKGROUND
While the Internet-hype was building up in the US (early 1990s) and slightly later in Europe, I was fulfilling a two-year contract as an engineer in Ghana, mostly unaware of the Internet-revolution in the northern hemisphere. Whereas I considered myself fortunate if one out of every two or three faxes would reach its destination in the Netherlands, the Internet-worked part of the world was turning to the more sophisticated means of electronic mail. In Ghana, a tropical downpour could end international communication for days, while many people in the US and Europe had already moved well beyond the unreliability of basic telephone services. During my stay in Ghana, the Internet was still something you could only read and wonder about in European and American magazines or newspapers. However, things would change dramatically, at least for people with money. In 1997, Internet access became available through a small number of ISPs in the capital, Accra. Ghana’s first cyber-cafe opened its doors and linked its computers to the world wide web. Initial developments took place in Accra, but soon access was available in the country’s second largest city, Kumasi. Visionary ISPs were already developing plans for NGO-supported communication centers and electronic networks in other parts of the country, although financial constraints hampered progress on those initiatives. Nevertheless, a small but growing number of people in Ghana grew aware of the economic possibilities of the Internet and some of them also realized its potential contribution to development.

In 1996, I traveled through West-Africa and noticed the large number of communication centers in cities. I also became aware of people’s lack of access to information and means of communication in smaller cities and towns in general and in rural areas, in particular. One balmy West-African evening, I discussed the potential development opportunities, created through an increased access to information, with an American photographer in a bar in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso. We dreamed up a provisional plan to combine basic telephone services of communication centers with Internet access and ever since the idea kept my mind occupied. At home in Amsterdam, the Netherlands, I connected myself to the Internet to do some initial research on Internet and development. By then, the Internet-hype had already affected significant parts of the development community, but I soon became skeptical with a perception of increased information provision as the panacea for development, as well as with the Internet focus.

Finally, I decided to stop my freelance consulting and engineering work and to embark on an academic inquiry into the possible contributions of Internet and other electronic media to development. I discovered that most initiatives had been started in metropolitan and urban centers and that only limited attention was paid to increased information dissemination in rural development. Since I did not feel like venturing into a field already covered by many organizations and individuals, I decided to tread on a less traveled path: the use of information and communication technology (ICT) in rural development in developing countries.

1.2 JUSTIFICATION OF THE RESEARCH
The use of information and communication technology (ICT) in developing countries to meet people’s information needs has been addressed elaborately in development discourse over the past years. Mostly, the focus is on a direct relation between the information provision capabilities of ICT and a presumed lack of information in rural areas as the main obstacle to development. As a result, initially,

1 In the remainder of this dissertation I will refer to rural development as meaning rural development in developing countries.
the debate favored addressing those information needs by providing people with physical access to ICT, preferably through small-scale communication centers. Although the communication center approach continues to command widespread support from development organizations in the field, the academic discourse has gradually been moving away from providing availability of access toward ensuring accessibility. The latter also addresses socio-economic gaps, as well as the issue of whether using ICT in development processes narrows or widens those gaps within developing countries. However, the narrow focus on facilitating information flows to level quantities of available information fails to address the potential of ICT, which, in my opinion, is to contribute to increasing capabilities of individual people to choose alternative lifestyles by means of electronically mediating free and independent information exchanges. Thus, I attempt to broaden the focus of development discourse on ICT by also discussing relations between social change, information flows and power.

Essentially, development discourse on ICT consists of two perspectives on the potential of ICT to contribute to development, an optimistic and a pessimistic one. The optimistic perspective conceives of an ICT technology-push as the solution to lagging development in developing countries. This perspective is shared by advocates of a positive correlation between expanding telecommunication networks and economic development, typically neo-liberal economists, proponents of technological solutions to problems in development and telecom experts. In the tradition of neo-liberal policies, benefits of ICT are expected to trickle down to even the remotest of rural areas. The pessimistic view, on the other hand, which mostly originates with sociologists and anthropologists, claims that economic disadvantages, gender biases and social unfreedoms will make that ICTs will favor people who are in privileged socio-economic situations. According to the pessimists, using ICTs in developing countries will result in widening socio-economic gaps within countries and possibly a reduction of such gaps between the political and economic elite in developing countries and people in developed countries.

However, since neither technology-optimists nor Luddites predicted the social and economic effects of technological developments of the industrial revolution correctly, there is also likely to be a mixed effect on development from using ICT. However, rather than arguing in favor of, or against, the use of ICT, I am more interested in moving beyond such antagonisms, as well as beyond the narrow focus with respect to the potential of ICT, which still prevails in discourse on ICT and development. Furthermore, it is, in my opinion, futile to argue against a seemingly inevitable development and I prefer to find ways to channel the benefits of the new technological developments to those who may otherwise be excluded, people in rural areas of developing countries. Therefore, I address the issue of which individual and structural political, social and economic factors influence the impact of ICT in rural areas, as well as how ICT can change those factors. Although ICT stands for information and communication technology in general, rather limited attention is paid to technologies other than the Internet. Thereby, the Internet is not even a technology in its own right, but just an application of a technology, namely computer mediated communication. Therefore, I prefer the term electronic media instead of ICT. I prefer the concept of electronic media, since it stresses the electronic aspect of mediating information and draws attention to other ICT as well. In the following sections I elaborate on the scope of the electronic media under consideration, justify my choice to study electronic media in rural development and elaborate on the selection of the three case study countries.

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2 The difference between access and accessibility is that accessibility addresses the capability of individual people to actually use the opportunity of available physical access to ICT. In this dissertation I distinguish between (i) physical accessibility, which refers to the capability of an individual to physically reach an access outlet. (ii) financial accessibility, which considers an individual's financial means and (iii) psychological accessibility, which addresses the attitude towards ICT, literacy skills and gender biases. Access, on the other hand, is typically limited to the physical availability of ICT (service providing outlets).

3 In this dissertation I will refer to telecommunication by using the popular term telecom.

4 Initial results from the study Cybercafes and Telecottages: Increasing Public Access to Computers and the Internet by the Virtual Society (virtualsociety.abs.ox.ac.uk) on user groups of internet-connected communication centers, a popular format for providing physical access to ICT in developing countries, indicate that such access outlets mostly provide an extra access outlet to those already online, rather than expanding access to new users.

5 For the remainder of this dissertation I will use the term rural areas to refer to rural areas in developing countries.
What are electronic media?

*Media* is plural for *medium*, which in interpersonal communication is a means of transmitting a message. In my opinion, communication is about conveying information and electronic media convey information electronically. The term media is also used as shorthand for *mass media*, whether those media convey information electronically or not. In the context of electronically mediated messages, I distinguish between *electronic mass media*, like radio and television, and *networked electronic media*, like basic telephone services and computer mediated communication. Therefore, the term *electronic media* refers to both mass and networked electronic media. At the same time, the term electronic media can stand for both the technology and the organizations which use that technology, electronic media enterprises. In short, in my definition, electronic media convey information by means of transmitting analogue or digital signals from a sender to individual terminal equipment of receivers. This definition includes a range of communication technologies, as well as organizations, but in this dissertation I focus on the following electronic media and mostly address them, from political, social and economic perspectives, as organizations:

- radio (broadcasting and communication);
- television (broadcasting);
- basic telephone services; and
- computer mediated communication (cmc).

A less well-known, and therefore perhaps less popular, means to electronically convey information is data-broadcasting, for which non-used parts of radio and television signals are used. Although, in my opinion, data-broadcasting is interesting from a purely technological point of view, it is essentially an application of either radio or television broadcasting. This means that this technology is most likely to be used by electronic mass media enterprises.

Why study electronic media in developing countries?

Since the 1950s and 1960s, the use of electronic media in developing countries has been a subject of discussion in development discourse, partly as a result of an evolution in broadcasting technology for radio and television, which resulted in the emergence of electronic mass media. Initially, many authors voiced wide-spread optimism concerning the positive contributions electronic mass media would make to development in general, and to information provision in particular. In his book *Mass Media and National Development* (1964), Wilbur Schramm expresses a level of enthusiasm for electronic mass media in development, which is now equaled, if not surpassed, by the expectations for the Internet. Schramm anticipated almost limitless opportunities for information dissemination through electronic mass media⁶. Thereby, the focus was more on information quantity than on the quality of information. However, reality turned out to be less rosy and dissemination of information and knowledge is still a major problem, as is access to sources of information and knowledge. In hindsight, it is easy to explain why electronic mass media did not make the much expected impact, as authors like Servaes (1989) and Melkote (1991), amongst others, have done.

Now that the Internet is being announced as the electronic medium that will fulfill and exceed the expectations, which were previously attributed to electronic mass media, I considered it appropriate to study whether, and if so why, the Internet can be expected to avoid the traps encountered by electronic mass media in earlier decades. Most of the problems which hampered a successful use of electronic mass media in developing countries still exist in the Internet-era: a mismatch between demand and supply of information, unbalanced one-way information flows, a lack of access to electronic media and central control over information flows. Characteristic of all four problems is inadequacy of information flows, whether in form or content. Bordewijk and Van Kaam link information flows to information and communication power structures, which control the form, content and direction of information flows. The main elements of the power structures are

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⁶ However, in his book *Big Media, Little Media* (1977), Schramm acknowledges that electronic mass media alone cannot be the panacea to rural development problems when he states that 'electronic mass media have proved in many, many countries to be a necessary but not a sufficient condition for development' (Schramm, 1977: 4). In this dissertation, I argue that electronic mass media are also not a necessary condition, but one of many means to facilitate information dissemination for the benefit of people in rural areas of developing countries.
governments, international organizations, transnational companies and electronic media enterprises. With electronic media enterprises merging into ever larger electronic media conglomerates, the issue of power in relation to information flows appears to be more and more relevant and complicated.

I realize that the Internet is conceived of as an independent source of information, accessible to everybody, but political, social and economic constraints restrict the accessibility of the Internet. At the same time, the Internet also consists of largely unbalanced flows of information which do not meet the demand for information in rural areas. The key characteristic of the Internet, free and independent information exchanges between individual people, is a cause for concern amongst the power elite in developing countries. The world may be moving towards ever more nominal democracies, which means that openly restricting the political freedoms of individuals has become more complicated, but that does not mean that restrictions of a political, social or economic nature no longer exist. Social freedom, interpreted as being literate, educated and healthy, has not been achieved by large parts of the populations of developing countries. Legislation and regulation in the economic domain can also, to some extent, yield the same results as political restrictions and a lack of social freedom.

Therefore, in my opinion, research into political, social and economic conditions which influence the role of electronic media in developing countries is warranted. In addition, little attention has been paid to the different types of information flows which Bordewijk and Van Kaam distinguish. Since they claim that most information flows can be expected to strengthen existing power structures, it is relevant to identify the types of electronically mediated information flows which prevail in developing countries, as well as which types are preferred by States and international organizations in development policies. In my opinion, this approach to the study of electronic media in developing countries may reveal some of the underlying information and communication power structures, which, since the introduction of electronic mass media, have controlled, and, therefore, hampered, the dissemination of information in those countries.

**Why study electronic media in rural development?**

In development discourse, information dissemination has long been seen as important to development in general. However, in my opinion, it is even more crucial in the particular case of rural development. In most rural areas, many people depend almost completely on commercializing their agricultural produce for income and in many areas the population lives on subsistence farming. Access to relevant technical and commercial agricultural information is often crucial to survival. In addition, information exchanges are instrumental to development efforts aimed at increasing people’s capabilities to choose, or their individual freedoms. The dependency on agricultural information is true even in situations where people participate in seasonal migration to urban areas to generate extra income. This extra income is not only needed for agriculture related activities, but also for education and health care in order to increase individual social freedoms. Unfortunately, relevant information is often not available when needed, inappropriate, or out of the financial or physical reach of people.

Whereas metropolitan and urban areas are relatively compact spaces, the distances in rural areas of developing countries are often enormous, the infrastructure typically limited and in a poor condition and transportation not always available or not affordable. Apart from other complications concerning access to schools, health care and credit facilities, this hampers the dissemination of information on paper, which must be distributed physically. In fact, spatial obstacles in rural areas have led to initial enthusiasm for applying electronic mass media in information dissemination efforts in developing countries. Through an improved information dissemination, electronic media’s contribution to rural development appears to be so obvious, that the fact that such a contribution has not yet materialized already warrants research into the role of electronic media in rural development. With many of the obstacles to rural development still in place, the question is how networked electronic media can accomplish what electronic mass media could not. Another, perhaps even more

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7 Changing traditional or conventional agricultural ways under conditions of dependency could seriously affect chances of survival, or at least the material standard of living. This fact is of paramount significance to successful information dissemination in rural areas of many developing countries. Individual decision-makers cannot take lightly the possibility that the newly acquired information or technology may fail to live up to its expectations. I will elaborate on the issue of reliability of the source of information in section 6.4.
intriguing question is whether networked electronic media could compensate for some of the disadvantages of electronic mass media. Therefore, I decided to study electronic media in rural development in an attempt to, amongst others, discover whether combinations of electronic mass media and networked electronic media could fulfill expectations of a successful increase in independent information dissemination in rural areas.

Why select Vietnam, Indonesia and Peru as case studies?
In the initial stages of the PhD, I decided on field research in Vietnam, Indonesia and Peru and this section justifies that selection. In his book on strategies for qualitative research, Wester distinguishes between three types of qualitative research:

- ethnographic studies, which are (i) aimed at reconstructing an aspect of a culture, (ii) use the method of participatory observation and (iii) tend to have a mostly descriptive nature;
- case studies, which are (i) aimed at analyzing or assessing a specific situation, (ii) address a concrete problem and (iii) use theoretical and substantive insights for a structured research approach; and
- qualitative surveys, which are (i) directed at constructing a theory, (ii) use a relatively large number of cases and (iii) results in definition of a number of central concepts of which the mutual relation are research by means of empirical research (Wester, 1995).

In this dissertation, I address the concrete problem of which factors influence the impact of electronic media on information dissemination in rural development processes. However, I intend to move beyond a mere analysis and assessment of specific situations, into tentatively defining a relationship between two central concepts: the conduciveness of a nation-state's socio-political and economic context to social change and the interactivity of electronic media which are used in rural development. The broad research approach, in combination with financial and time constraints, did not allow me to collect data on a large number of cases. Therefore, I decided to limit myself to three case study countries and only tentative definitions of the two central concepts for further research.

I used UNDP and World Bank classifications to determine which countries are considered to be developing. Given the small number of case study countries, as well as the diversity within the group of developing countries, I did not consider it feasible to select three countries which would each represent a larger group of countries. As a result, I decided to select three countries on the basis of a criterion which, in my opinion, is relevant to the conduciveness of a nation-state to social change: the state of democracy of a country. As a qualitative measure of the state of democracy, I use the concept of a democratic deficit, which I elaborate in chapter five. In my opinion, the democratic deficit increases under authoritarian rule and decreases under democratic rule, although this view is not shared by politicians in all developing countries. Based on this perception of a democratic deficit, I selected a largely authoritarian State (Vietnam), an authoritarian State with all the formal democratic institutions (Indonesia) and a formally, or nominally, democratic State with an authoritarian tendency prevailing amongst its political leaders (Peru). The choice for the three countries was confirmed by their different levels of economic development, which, in my perception, would enable me to illustrate to some extent the impact of economic conditions on the use of electronic media in rural areas as well.

Since the initial selection of the three countries, both Indonesia and Peru have experienced some serious political turmoil and change. In the case of Indonesia, political changes have led to a formally more democratic state, whereas in Peru the authoritarian tendencies of its political leaders were only confirmed with the heavily contested election of Alberto Fujimori for a third presidential term. In my opinion, the political turmoil in the two countries has not affected the validity of the initial selection. Indonesia has even provided an interesting case of the effects of political change on political freedoms of speech and the press, important freedoms in a context of information dissemination.

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8 The most recent developments in Peru, including Fujimori's bizarre resignation, the emergence of a transitional government, new presidential elections and the removal of the head of the security services (Montesinos), appear to initiate a positive change from the perspective of Peru's democratic deficit. However, the democratic credentials of the popular opposition leader, Alejandro Toledo, are not clear and institutional changes are required to reduce Peru's democratic deficit. Therefore, I have decided not to adjust the assessment of Peru's conduciveness to social change in chapter eleven, but added footnotes for clarification.