

Transnational Times: Locality, globality and mobility in technology design and use

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ABSTRACT

This workshop will bring together an interdisciplinary group of scholars to explore the role of ubiquitous computing, the use of information and communication technologies and the politics of technological design in transnational practices. The ultimate goal of this workshop is to investigate the implications for the design and development of ubiquitous technologies in non-western contexts. We will consider the implications for conducting research and technology design within and across global and networked sites of technology production and use. The aim of the workshop is to gain a deeper understanding of the social, cultural and economic practices within global IT development.

Author Keywords Transnationalism; Design; ICT4D

ACM Classification Keywords H.5.m. Miscellaneous

General Terms Human Factors

INTRODUCTION

This workshop will bring together an interdisciplinary group of scholars to explore the role of ubiquitous computing, the use of information and communication technologies and the politics of technological design in *transnational* settings, e.g. migration between nation states, cross-cultural collaboration and the role of technology in international politics. The stated goal of this workshop is to investigate the implications for the design and development of ubiquitous technologies in non-Western contexts. However, we also aim through the workshop to expand our current scholarly vocabulary for the conceptualization of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in addressing the interplay of local and global phenomena.

Our critical questions are located in a conversation that is already taking place within the Ubicomp community. At Ubicomp 2009, the workshop “Globicomp” [1] brought together researchers studying ubiquitous technologies in the “developing world” and marginalized users in the

developed world for a collection of high quality papers aimed at special issue publication. The efforts of this workshop were also addressed by papers in the main conference program, which focused on design for communities in India [16] or in South America [21]. Such work echoes a concern in the broader HCI community about the importance of considering “ICT4D” [i.e. 4,7,11,16,20,21].

In contrast, this workshop aims to examine interactions with ubiquitous technology in a *transnational* context. After all, technologies such as mobile phones, social networking applications and the internet writ large permit crossings between national and socioeconomic borders, generating hybrid user practices and identities. As such, we take inspiration from theorists of the global [3,13,17,19] who focus on flows across boundaries, hybridity and the transnational. Recent work in Ubicomp is beginning to address this trend, examining how pervasive technologies such as multiplayer gaming or social network sites are deployed and appropriated in transnational contexts [6,8,14,18]. This workshop aims to deepen the conversation, to develop a language and toolset appropriate for the study of ubiquitous technologies in transnational spaces, and to engage a wider community of researchers working in this area.

PRIOR WORK

Current discussions of ICTs in global context are limited by three factors: a rhetoric of unity and homogeneity, a false binary of global and local, and concern for cultural difference. The rhetoric of homogeneity considers new mobile devices and participatory digital media as carrying the potential to equalize social conditions across local contexts or to exacerbate inequalities in favor of global flows of capital [2,12]. Understanding transnationality as affected by ICTs can also be stymied by an analytical reliance on the binary opposition of global and local processes [3,9,19]. Productive work in recent years has focused instead on the networks and connections between different local practices and value systems [i.e. 4,9,20]. These studies have also challenged the notions of cultural difference based on geographical boundaries such as nation states, and highlighted how national identity can be enacted

across multiple sites and spaces. However, locating cultural contrast shifts analytical interest away from the cultural and national boundaries made permeable in an ICT-connected world.

The proposed workshop would unite recent efforts in the humanities, social sciences, new media and technology studies to challenge these assumptions. We seek to examine how technologically-mediated practices of mobility mutually constitute the 'local' and the 'global', neither homogenizing nor differentiating but constructing complex and hybrid uses and practices. We also seek to consider how global centers and peripheries are negotiated as sites of interaction, made possible by new technological mobilities. We will explore how immigrant and transnational groups manage ties to multiple countries, forms of life, and technological infrastructures while at times navigating the social conditions of poverty and illegitimacy and how technology might fit into these negotiations of daily life. We aim to present the contributions and results of our workshop as original papers in a special issue or an edited collection of interdisciplinary work.

CRITICAL QUESTIONS

The papers and activities in this workshop will convene around the following questions.

What makes a transnational technology?

Ubiquitous and mobile technologies enable as well as constrain national boundaries. How are the global notions of transnational communities and information flows engaged and produced locally by immigrants, refugees, international art collectives and NGOs? Who is involved in the project of designing and imagining ICTs and participatory Internet cultures and who is excluded? What kinds of political, local and translocal, projects are at stake in the design of and participation in new technological sites?

How unified is “the internet”?

Our current vocabulary for ‘the internet’ is either one of unity and homogeneity, a single Internet that was once envisioned as forming a global village (e.g. [12]), or one of cultural difference. Yet language-specific social networks that connect individuals across nation states (such as Orkut in Brazil or Odnoklassniki in Russia) and local discourses of Internet policy and addiction (as for example in China) that link to Internet policy debates in the United States suggest the need for a more complex framework of the role of the Internet in contemporary networked practice. When and why might we usefully conceive of “many internets”?

What is local, what is global?

Theorists in the humanities and social sciences have repeatedly challenged terms like “the local” and “the global.” The transnational discourse, here, insists on the continuing significance of borders, state policies, and national identities even as these are transgressed by transnational communication and social practices [15,17,19]. This view is constructive for the argument put

forward in this proposal since it does not conflate transnational processes of interpersonal connection and exchange across state boundaries with the discussion of globalization as a specific set of economic and political processes. Rather it is described as the condition of social and cultural interconnectedness and mobility across space, time and geography [13]. The critical questions we ask give rise to a broader conception of what role ‘locality’ and ‘globality’ play in technological practices, and what is the role of mobility and circulation in constructing or moving between them.

What are our methods and methodologies?

While traditional ethnographies relied upon single geographical sites, contemporary theorists such as anthropologist George Marcus suggest that ethnography should be concerned with transnational movements and connections, to challenge binaries of the local versus the global [10]. Moreover, the recent trend of mixed method studies that remix quantitative approaches with ethnographic data, undermine the disparate notions of the researcher as an objective observer or a subjective participant. In this workshop we ask, what new kinds of methodologies emerge when studying virtual and/or dispersed communities and technological practices that span multiple sites? And how can we usefully incorporate such a repositioning of the researcher and the subject of research in the context of Ubicomp?

BROADENING UBICOMP’S SCOPE & REACH

The workshop aims to unite strands of theoretical and empirical work by scholars who bridge the computer sciences, the humanities and the social sciences. We hope to bring these literatures and practices into conversation through critical and reflective engagement. Thus we envision a workshop that will entail both the academic presentation of existing work and the subsequent discussion of this work among participants, with the goal of developing original contributions for a collective set of publications. We believe that such a workshop would be beneficial for the sake of the UbiComp community and for advancing our research and methodological agenda.

Through this workshop we aim to broaden the scope of UbiComp research and to bring into the fold researchers engaged with these critical questions who might otherwise not consider themselves as working within the design space of Ubiquitous Computing: such as researchers and theorists working in areas of human computer interaction, anthropology, media studies, sociology, science and technology studies and social geography. We also hope to engage technology designers and developers currently working in non-Western contexts. We believe that their work, as well as that of the Ubiquitous Computing community, will be greatly enriched by this exchange, and by the eventual products of such an exchange, that will be released in an edited volume.

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