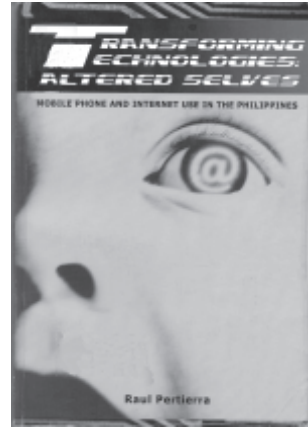# Technologies of Body and Soul
Sakari Taipale

Book Review of
Transforming Technologies:
Altered Selves – Mobile Phone
and Internet Use in the Philippines
By Raul Pertierra
Manila: De La Salle University Press
2006 (158 pp)

A t the turn of 21ˢᵗ century there were high expectations for information and communication technologies (ICTs) in Asia. It was hoped that the mobile phone and the Internet would improve the economies of the region, reshape social networks, and strengthen cultural identity. Raul Pertierra's book *Transforming Technologies: Altered Selves – Mobile Phone and Internet Use in the Philippines* analyzes the social and cultural consequences of ICTs for the Philippines. It addresses the question of why the Philippines did not benefit from the ICT boom like Singapore or Hong Kong. Even if economic development did not follow, Filipinos quickly embraced the mobile phone, reaching the top of international ranking lists for the number of sent text-messages.

The book deals with two major concepts in analyzing the interplay of ICTs and identity; *discursive intimacy* and notions of the *stranger*. These concepts are skillfully applied in the study in order to describe how Filipinos are re-evaluating their bodies and even their souls through the new technologies. The concepts fit in with

anthropological research conventions where the results are bolstered by extensive case studies and illustrative citations. This latest book is an extension of an earlier research project which resulted in the book *Txt-ing Selves: Cellphones and Philippine Modernity* in 2002, which received the Outstanding Book Award by National Academy of Science and Technology of the Philippines the year after.

Echoes from the Past

The book begins with a sharp and critical review of the ineffectiveness of technology and science policy in the Philippines. According to the author, there is a major culture-historical process behind the current state of affairs. Philippine science policy was politicized when the local administrative power was transferred from the Americans to Filipinos during the 1930s. Thereafter, Filipinos aimed to strengthen their national identity by redefining the focus of national science policy. By implication, Pertierra leads us to understand that the seeds for an information society were sown under the American regime, but the "seedlings" were mostly uprooted before they started to bear fruit.

In addition, Pertierra considers that the culturally-embedded idea of inborn skills has decelerated the scientific and technological development in the Philippines. Because Filipinos consider many of the characteristics of their national culture as modern and global, investments in the cultivation of skills and knowledge have been insufficient. According to Pertierra, features like sociality and musicality are often perceived as blessings, not as improvable skills. He suggests that sociality as an inherent feature would explain, at least partially, Filipinos' enthusiasm for text messaging. Deficiencies in the cultivation of skills, for one, may help us to understand the invisibility of science and technology in the country.

Although the cultural and historical bases of the book can be justified, the book does not bring out many causes for optimism.

Are there any positive signs in the Philippines regarding the future of science and technology? It could be assumed that the new "cellphone generation" and the great mobility of Filipinos could gradually lead to the creation of a science and technology culture. Service sector occupations abroad have employed less-educated Filipinos already for long. Asian, European and American universities, on the other hand, have fascinated education seekers and contributed to international mobility among the well-off. Considering that around 10% of Filipinos are estimated to reside overseas, it could be assumed that mobility as presented above indicates the growing thirst for knowledge and self-development fueled by societal circumstances. Despite all this and the fact that overseas workers actively utilize new ICTs, Pertierra does not seem to believe in new generations and mobility as transforming forces. Quite the contrary, he proposes that many Filipinos are bound by family-centeredness and that well-educated returnees optimize poorly their skills for the common good of the country.

The Networks of Intimacy

The analysis on the networks of intimacy is by far the most interesting part of the book. Considering a lack of domestic space in densely built-up areas like Metro Manila, the mobile phones and the Internet may provide ordinary people with many possibilities for extending their private space. Pertierra vividly illustrates how the networks of intimacy, the members of which are significant only to a given individual, are created with the help of new ICTs. The conceptions of body and soul are more often re-evaluated in virtual networks, and in a constant dialogue with "online others". This kind of intimacy gets its meaning from the total independence of the present "others". Therefore, virtual space may become an irreplaceable arena of privacy-making in densely occupied societies.

Pertierra presents case studies which illustrate how Filipinos get to know strangers via mobile phones, how the Internet enables

explanatory online journeys and cybersex. It is surprising to notice how intimate virtual spaces appear as private but not secluded at all. The beauty of Pertierra's insightful analysis is right here. It brings out a reversed version of the privacy-paradox originally presented by Durkheim (1951) in his study on suicides. Whereas the initial purpose of mobile phones has been social (i.e. to connect people), the mobile phones are increasingly utilized for private and intimate purposes (e.g., Ito, Okabe & Matsuda, 2005; Castells, et al., 2006: 91; Goggin, 2006: 126-141; Nyíri, 2005: 151-217) .

A close relationship of religion and the mobile phone is another distinctly Philippine phenomenon presented in the book. In a Roman Catholic country, spiritual content services which link a human being to the sphere of spiritual life have gained much popularity among a wide range of social classes. Although Pertierra courteously argues that the conservative and religious culture has been hindering technological and scientific development in the Philippines, he depicts the relationship of religion to ICTs otherwise as rather uncomplicated and tolerant. Pertierra suggests that the popularity of spiritual services may well indicate the capacity of new technologies to bring out the innermost feelings and beliefs of human beings.

Whose Technologies, Bodies and Souls?

The book hints that new ICTs could have opened the floodgates to globalization in the Philippines. My reading herein is that mobile phones have manifested themselves rather as commodities brought about by globalization, not as the enablers of globalization. The study describes how mobile phones have been utilized in order to overcome the norms of intimacy, as well as the limits of time and space, in various ways. However, the analysis in this respect is confined to the Philippines. Regarding the Internet, the picture is quite different. The information highway has broken down boundaries and it really seems to link Filipinos with the rest of the world. This is the case even if the number of Filipino Internet users is still limited.

The generalizability of the study is fairly difficult to assess. However, some deductions can be made since the study includes a small survey and some background information on interviewees. The study deals mainly with young adults. With regard to the Internet, the focus is on the comfortably well-off people. With the mobile phones, the socio-economic coverage of the study seems to be wider. Even if the elderly and the elite are to a certain extent underrepresented, the study presents a fairly good snapshot of the accessibility and diffusion of new technologies in the Philippines. Only the well-off can afford the Internet without major efforts, but the mobile phone is within the reach of the many.

Finally, Pertierra's study on the Internet and mobile phone culture in the Philippines opens up new horizons for research on technology-meditated social networks. While sociological studies on ICTs have paid much attention to teenagers and entertainment usage (e.g., Kasesniemi 2003; Ling 2004: 83-122; Castells, et al., 2006: 41-41, 127-169), Pertierra's in-depth analysis reveals that mobile phones have the capacity to accumulate social capital and extend social networks. Interestingly, this capacity may be active even when the primary purpose of mobile use is to strengthen the sphere of privacy. This is illustrated very well in the examples dealing with texting with strangers. In addition, *Transforming Technologies: Altered Selves* provides fascinating examples of the blending of the "social", "cultural", and "technological" in the context of the Philippines. The book provides food for thought for social scientists and anthropologists, not to mention the experts of development studies.

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