

Low-literate youth and ICT in Ethiopia and Malawi

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ABSTRACT

In Africa a substantial part of the population lacks proficient reading and writing skills. This clearly has an impact on the potential for Information and Communication Technology (ICT) around this continent. This paper discusses some findings about the interaction of low-literate youth (the users of the future) with ICT, based on fieldwork in Ethiopia and Malawi.

General Terms

Design, Human Factors.

Keywords

Literacy, ICT, Digital Divide, Africa.

1. INTRODUCTION

We are currently in the midst of the United Nations Literacy Decade (2003-2012) that was proclaimed by the United Nations General Assembly in 2002, in which the commitment was made to achieve a 50% improvement in adult literacy by 2005, given that there are 860 million illiterates in the world [5].

Yet, what does it actually mean to be literate in our contemporary world that is fundamentally changed by technology? Previously literacy was primarily determined by someone's ability to read and write. Since the emergence of new information and communication technologies (ICTs) however, it has started to include a much broader range of competencies needed to access and manage information, analyze and interpret it, critically evaluate its relevance and credibility and finally use it to solve everyday problem [6].

Not only do new ICTs influence the concept of literacy, at the same time the lack of reading and writing skills also influences the ability to use ICT. Many technologies require users to have certain literacy skills such as reading and writing. A lot of people in developing countries, particularly in Africa, often lack these skills and are therefore not able to fully take advantage of these technologies. The lack of literacy skills is usually considered to be the underlying reason for this problem and therefore the eradication of illiteracy the cure, which means to make people fit the requirements of the technology. However, a better approach would be to fit the technology

to the people instead and develop technologies that can be used by people without literacy skills.

As far back as 1953 Lewis already suggested that: "*The existence of means of communication creates a demand for them. The instruments of literacy create a demand for literacy*" [3, p.125]. In other words ICTs that are designed in such a way that they require literacy skills in order to be used are actually creating a demand for literacy. Similarly the existence of ICTs creates a demand for them as well in developed as in developing countries.

Already in 1966 Rogers & Herzog observed that "*Little is known presently about methods of circumventing the barriers of illiteracy by means of radio, movies, or television or through the use of such oral communication systems as animation or through pictorial, non-verbal printed media*" [4, p. 203]. During the forty years that have meanwhile passed, compared to the considerable attention and investments towards the eradication of illiteracy, very little has actually been done to investigate ways of circumventing the barriers of illiteracy for example by means of ICT.

In order to fit technology to a specific user group such as low-literate (no proficient in reading and writing) users and circumvent their lack of literacy skills, a clear understanding of the abilities and needs of this group is required, to be able to eventually make a positive contribution to their lives. This paper will share a few findings of fieldwork that I undertook in Ethiopia and Malawi focusing on low-literate youth and their interaction with ICT.

2. EXPERIENCES FROM THE FIELD

Because Africa has the highest number of people lacking literacy skills worldwide, I chose this continent to undertake my fieldwork. I have undertaken two three month fieldwork periods in Ethiopia and Malawi. In both countries I have interacted with youth in urban and as well as in rural areas by means of interviews, group discussions and letting some of them interact with a digital camera. All the interaction was focused on their current knowledge and perceptions about ICT, the role of reading and writing in their lives and their community, and finally their future ambitions and ideas about future technologies. Despite several methodological challenges that I have faced during

my fieldwork [2], I have obtained an immense and interesting collection of data through my interactions with the youth. In the next few paragraphs I will briefly share some of the findings.

2.1 Gender and urban-rural digital divide

In both countries there was a clear difference in familiarity with and access to ICT in the urban and the rural areas as well as between genders, in such a way that rural women are generally the most disadvantaged. Most ICTs are usually possessed by male members of the family and because the women tend to stay more around the house they have less exposure to ICTs. More interestingly there turned out to be cultural perceptions about technologies that were not supposed to be used by women, such as earphones and handheld radio's. Female participants would therefore often indicate to dislike these, because using them could lead to public shame: "I can't put it in my ears and walk with it, because I am a girl they will laugh at me".

2.2 Current ICT use

Currently the biggest contribution of ICT to people's lives is the ability to communicate over a distance and the provision of information. Particularly in emergency situations, for example to announce a funeral, technologies such as (mobile) phone and radio are quick and can save time and money on travel. After the radio, the mobile phone is the most widespread technology and definitely the most popular one. Even in very rural areas without electricity that are covered by a mobile network there are people who have and use mobile phones. As mentioned earlier the other contribution of ICT is the provision of information, for example about the situation in the country or the rest of the world. For many people radio is probably still the only gateway to what is going on in the world around them.

2.3 Impact video shows

During the fieldwork in Malawi the considerable impact of video shows that can be found all over the country even in the most rural areas, became clear. Although it had not caught too much of my attention during the fieldwork in Ethiopia, the findings of a study in Addis Ababa [1] suggest similar issues are going on there. Not so much the screening, but much more the content of what is being shown is reason for concern, particularly because this is usually the only exposure to the world outside the area they live in. Generally what is being shown is action or pornographic movies and as long as people pay the entrance fee they will not be denied access regardless of their age. This is resulting in probably a majority of the youth being exposed to pornographic material before the age of 15, not even considering the exposure to action movies which is even higher. My suspicion about the underlying reason for the popularity of these kind of materials is the lack of

content in local languages, something which is very nicely illustrated by the following quote: "When you left, there was no one to translate the dialogues. So instead I started watching action movies because they don't need translation. I just watch who beats who and I get the story" [1, p.2]. I had the opportunity to experience this myself during the screening of a Chinese action movie with only Chinese subtitles in a rural village in Malawi. Particularly because a lot of the youth have no idea about the origin of what they are watching, (reality or imagination), the impact of these movies on their views of the world is worrying. Judging from the result of a drawing exercise in which all participants interested to have an airplane in the future were actually drawing a helicopter, these movies seem to be wrongly informing their view of the world.

2.4 Domination of English

Particularly in Malawi where English is an official language, reading and writing was very often directly associated with reading and writing in English. To such an extent that several of the participants were convinced that certain ICTs cannot be used by someone who is only proficient in reading and writing in the national language Chichewa. Also in Ethiopia where English is much less relevant in daily life compared to Malawi, knowledge of English was often mentioned as a requirement to be able to use an ICT, for example to read the text printed on the technologies or the manual. Overall this probably is one of the underlying reasons for the often heard assumption that some of the ICTs, such as a computer, can only be used by educated people.

3. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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