Dot Com Mantra: Social Computing in the Central Himalayas

Jeffrey Barlow
Pacific University

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Review of *Dot Com Mantra: Social Computing in the Central Himalayas*

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Payal Arora’s Dot Com Mantra. Social Computing in the Central Himalayas

Posted on November 5, 2010 by Admin

Review by Jeffrey Barlow

Dot Com Mantra is an excellent work by Payal Arora, a much-published Indian anthropologist who writes frequently on social computing, that is, the connection between society and the use of computers. This study is an ethnography (a branch of anthropology dealing with the scientific description of individual cultures) done in the town complex of Almora, in a fairly isolated area of Uttarakhand, India, formerly Uttar Pradesh.

Dr. Arora is well qualified to write this particular work. She has studied at Cambridge (Certificate in Teaching ESL), at Harvard (M.A. in International Policy, Education) and at Columbia (Doctorate in Language, Literacy & Technology). This work is derived from her Ph.D. Dissertation, Social Computing in the Central Himalayas.

Dot Com Mantra focuses largely on the social, economic, and political aspect of development considered within a global framework. Dr. Arora speaks the language of the area and fully immersed herself in its day-to-day life, moving among farmers’ organization, development groups (non-governmental organizations-NGOs), teachers and students, and even volunteering her time working in an Internet café, from all of which she derived deep understandings.

In many cases, Arora’s conclusions are counter-intuitive and the book sparkles with frequent flashes of insight. We learn also that many of the approaches of the non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and of the Government of India are ineffective in the area, because they have ignored the social aspects of technology.

It is not that the area is under-computerized; many groups have distributed machines in a variety of settings, but these attempts fall afoul of existing social conditions. For example, schools are given computers, but one-quarter of the teachers never show up to teach. Of those who do, fully half do not teach even when present. Most of them are held personally responsible for the books and machines sent them and will have to pay if they are damaged, so they lock them...
safely away.

Aware of these issues, NGOs and the Government of India previously sponsored a variety of access points—via the Hole-in-the-Wall/HiWel program among many others [4]—to encourage children to teach themselves [5]. These meet with initial success, but in order to be safe from vandalism or theft, the centers have to be placed on school-grounds where the same conditions which vitiate the educational process also impact the use of the “free” computing facilities.

Arora’s insights are deeply rooted in a close knowledge of both practical and theoretical pedagogy and anyone interested in education could benefit from understanding this aspect of her research. Part of her progress here might be said to be “unlearning,” as she finds that many of her assumptions are simply irrelevant in the social context of village India. For example, after working in the Internet café, she comes to understand the limitations of Western attitudes toward plagiarism.

Arora has focused closely on gender issues in her previous research. In her ethnographic research in Almora, she also derives a new understanding of gender issues. This comes about when she watches female students, usually treated in the critical literature as deliberately marginalized in the world of technology, ably manipulate not the machines so much as those who work in the cafes (including the author), on the model of traditional Indian mistress-servant relationships. She concludes that choosing not to work directly with technology is also a means of using technology, and a valid choice in many situations.

The author also begins to understand the complexity of globalization when she assists two local girls prepare school papers on “Western” art by selecting a variety of graphics, including cowboy-style horse paintings done by a contemporary Chinese artist, side by side with the Mona Lisa and the works of a noted Indian painter [6].

The weakness of NGO and governmental assumptions about the link between development and I.T. development are treated directly in a section on farming. Farmers are given access to computers by the government in the belief that, with better information about markets and prices, they can avoid exploitation by traditional middlemen.

However, the author learns, the middlemen are also a critical element in farming practices, advising farmers of how to develop new crops, for example. And even with perfect knowledge of the market, the farmers are still producing on such a small scale that they cannot take any better advantage of the information.

*Dot Com Mantra* really comes alive and makes a significant contribution when Arora begins to reconceptualize the Internet cafes and their most frequent use as places not of learning so much as of recreation. Here she undermines one of the major assumptions of developmental economics: that the poor are so desperate that given the opportunity they will always choose to look first after basic needs and that idling away time is the province only of the wealthy. Arora
concludes: “There is an assumption that the poor will somehow behave differently from their wealthier counterparts. Herein lies a deep bind of contemporary ICT development thinking [7].”

As with the issue of plagiarism, however, when the author situates the recreations of the Internet cafes in the local social context, she comes to see the play as also a valid social choice for the use of computing. We learn, for example, that due to widespread broadband access in Almora, local children and teens are now fully conversant in many elements of Indian urban culture, their rural dialects are now inflected by urban usages, and they are also fairly aware of international pop culture. These may seem to a developmental economist to be an inadequate result for billions of dollars of investment in I.T., but in fact, as Arora points out, in their own way, these consequences represent considerable progress.

The work betrays its origins in that it is extremely dense and steeped in academic jargon. However, it should be of interest to a variety of audiences, including most especially those concerned with development, with I.T. investment, with teaching and pedagogy (in any context—many of the weaknesses she spots in constructivist practices in education are as relevant in London or New York as in village India—and generally interested, as are we, in the impact of the Internet). But given its cost ($99.95) most readers should probably seek it out in an academic library, where it properly belongs.

Endnotes

[1] For the author’s publications and reviews see: http://www.payalarora.com/Publicationspage1.html


[5] The One-Laptop-Per-Child program, about which we have been very enthusiastic at the Berglund Center (see a Roundtable presentation at: http://bcis.pacificu.edu/roundtables/Presentations/2008/), does not fare much better in Dr. Arora’s brief analysis at p. 17.


15 THOUGHTS ON “PAYAL ARORA’S DOT COM MANTRA. SOCIAL COMPUTING IN THE CENTRAL HIMALAYAS”

silver shoes uk  
on January 31, 2014 at 11:40 AM said:

Hi there, I wish for to subscribe for his website to get most recent updates, how where can i do it. 

nigeria social network  
on February 4, 2014 at 10:15 AM said:

Hi there! I know this really is kinda off topic on the other hand I’d figured I’d ask. Would you be interested in trading links or possibly guest writing a blog article or vice-versa? My website addresses a lot of the exact same subjects as yours and I believe we could greatly benefit from each other. Should you happen being interested be my guest to send me an e-mail. I glimpse forward to hearing from you! Terrific blog by the way!

nigeria entertainment news  
on February 4, 2014 at 10:26 AM said:

It is my belief that mesothelioma is most lethal cancer. It’s got unusual features. The more I take into account it the greater I am assured it does not conduct itself as a genuine solid tissues cancer. During the event mesothelioma is really a rogue virus-like infection, then there’s the prospects for developing a vaccine plus offering vaccination for asbestos uncovered people who are vulnerable to high risk connected with developing extended word asbestos associated malignancies. Thanks for discussing your ideas about this significant ailment.
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on February 4, 2014 at 10:35 AM said:

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Emilie  
on February 4, 2014 at 8:34 PM said:

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buckhead christian ministry  
on February 5, 2014 at 2:48 AM said:

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on February 5, 2014 at 10:12 PM said:

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on February 6, 2014 at 1:38 AM said:

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on February 6, 2014 at 3:50 AM said:

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Ministry Font

on February 6, 2014 at 5:57 AM said:

excellent issues altogether, you simply won a brand new reader. What might you recommend in regards to your post that you simply made a few days in the past? Any sure?

http://thetexascafeandbar.com/

on February 6, 2014 at 7:56 AM said:

Good blog you’ve got here.. It’s hard to find high quality writing like yours nowadays.

I really appreciate individuals like you! Take care!!

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on February 6, 2014 at 9:57 AM said:

I’d like to thank you for the efforts you have put in penning thus website. I’m hoping to see the same high-grade content from you later on as well. In fact, your creative writing abilities has motivated me to get my own blog now😊

http://bcis.pacificu.edu/interface/?p=2478