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OLIVER LEISTERT

ON THE WESTERN NARRATIVE OF EMPOWERMENT THROUGH ICT – A COMMENT TO AMANDA ATWOOD

While there certainly are successful projects of internet-based civil society actions in the Global South, the Western projection that ICTs can solve issues of bad governance and civic administration alone turns out to be just another re-enactment of the delusional relationship between citizens and the state in liberal democracies.

THE TROJAN HORSE OF ONLINE EMPOWERMENT

The *Right to Privacy Report in Zimbabwe*[1] from March 2016 by *Privacy International (PI)* and other organizations provides some enlightening additional information to Amanda Atwood's report on Zimbabwe's unstable infrastructures. It even offers critical arguments against the use of ICT or mobile phones for civil societies' actors. In it, the authors not only stress the basically unlimited surveillance capacities for internet and mobile phone traffic by the Central Intelligence Organization (CIO), the powerful spying agency that has close (personal) ties with Mugabe's ruling party ZANU-PF, but they even point to the possibility that the regime's surveillance agencies have purchased UK-German state-of-the-art infiltration tools from FinFisher.

In addition, as the PI report states, while the vast majority of Zimbabwe's population has basically no access to the internet (radio remains by far the most important media technology), and suffers from serious corruption and harsh repression by state officials, Mugabe's regime shares resources with South Africa's State Security Agency (SSA) to monitor NGOs outside his turf.

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1 The Zimbabwe Human Rights NGO Forum et al., "The Rights to Privacy in Zimbabwe. Stakeholder Report", *Universal Periodic Review*, 26th Session – Zimbabwe, 2016. Available at: https://privacyinternational.org/node/846 [accessed June 26, 2016].

Under such circumstances, it becomes important to ask whether it really is a good idea to try to motivate Zimbabwe's civil society to invest in online reporting about infrastructure failures and other civic problems, such as the project SMART Harare Atwood describes. Crowd mapping may be a good idea in specific situations and contexts, but maybe not (yet) in Zimbabwe. Too few people have access, and those who do are tracked and identified, monitored and eventually muted because of their civic engagement.

Confronted with such severe conditions, online activism turns into a trojan horse: connectivity is super expensive compared to the means available to the general population, the ICT or mobile phone infrastructure is unreliable and shaky, and, as if this was not already reason enough to think about alternative ways of improving the conditions of everyday life in Zimbabwe, the traffic that eventually makes it into the air or through the wire very likely rings the alarm for the authorities, resulting in unforeseeable serious repercussions for the senders (and receivers).

But maybe this is wrong and I read Atwood's report on the state of Zimbabwe's (and especially Harare's) infrastructure malaise with the wrong mind-set: imagine you live in a country that is governed by one and the same dictator as long as you can remember, whose only continuities are its corrupt, degenerated and repressive clique around this old hat, and whose mostly poor population is either leaving the country or remains in a state of hopelessness and despair. Imagine you live in a country that imprisons, tortures and generally represses the brave who speak up, while it nurtures fear and suspicion within communities. Imagine you live in a country that has had an outbreak of cholera with high fatalities in 2008 mainly because parts of its infrastructure are so broken that it cannot discriminate fresh water and sewage anymore. Can you imagine all this? I cannot. This is simply far beyond my Post-WW II West-European powers of imagination.

THE ETERNAL RECURRENCE OF WESTERN FANTASIES AND IGNORANCE IN THE FORM OF TECHNO-FETISHISM

But I can relate to a different angle on Atwood's report. To me, it serves as a much-needed remedy and reminder of the limits in which the tale of ubiquitous computing is to frame, which takes up so much of our fantasies in the West currently. The Western discourse on big data and distributed data processing is – as usual – universalizing a particularity, lacking situated accounts and concerns for the peripheries of the hyper-connected empire. By ignoring the fact that access to ICT remains a precarious and expensive good for most of this planet's population, this

discourse enforces and deepens the gaps between a country like Zimbabwe and Western Europe, because it can and does not offer a country like Zimbabwe a real perspective and place within its hyper-techno-fantasy.

One of the outcomes of such a re-enactment of the Western tale of progress via ICT that is blind towards its consequences thus can be the idea to bring crowd sourcing tools to Zimbabwe so that the citizens of Zimbabwe finally find a way to tell their government where potholes or faulty street lights are located.

The Western European mind-set is invested with a high degree of resilience towards billions of peoples' everyday experience of violence and corruption by state officials, because this reality undermines the very idea of the good and functional relation between citizens and the state (which ultimately can be summed up as "taxes equal services and infrastructure"). The trust and belief in a just and super-visioning state that is guided by experts to ensure optimal functionality easily and almost naturally, equates the dissemination of information about potholes with the repair of these potholes, or the information about dramatic water draining and leaking with an almost-instant repair thereof. This highly delusional equation is a symptom of a paternalistic relationship between citizens and the state. The subjection of the former under the latter produces such naturalizations as a way to process this structurally violent relation and to value it positively. It is highly artificial and completely naturalized at once.

But this hard link between signs and things (almost a monism) is non-existent within many parts of the world. In countries like Zimbabwe, such a link does not exist. This is what we can learn from Atwood. Such a projection of a functioning state in the service of its citizens as a possible future – if only development would succeed – remains an exclusive trajectory of Western 'development' efforts, echoing eurocentric fantasies, which then turn out to be the opposite of a decolonizing model.

While Atwood's description of Zimbabwe leaves little room for hope that anytime soon access to water or sewerage will be provided for, it still opens the field for different kinds for action that might be based on existing and learned skills with tools and language that are as ubiquitous in Zimbabwe as access to the internet is in Western Europe. What might be needed, is a way to bring enough bodies into resonance that finally transduce the order of outages and leakages into an order of stability and functionality. Such magic is not at all in the exclusive domain of digital telecommunication. The imaginary of crowd-based internet activism for better living standards actually seems a rather exotic and not very

persuasive proposal. Its effectiveness, I guess, is limited in even the most promising environments. At its core resides a managerial phantasma of control, which is nested into the scheme of ICTs themselves.

To export managerial phantasma to Zimbabwe seems as ignorant and finally cynical as the idea of global ubiquitous computing. In light of Atwood's findings, it appears that Zimbabwe's people need to find other means and practices of efficiency. These might entail aspects of commonality, persistence and flow – such as stable infrastructures –but they need to be part of a collective enunciation that ultimately opens the horizon for creative milieus in such a contaminated environment.

From what Atwood reports, it seems the state and its civic administration in Zimbabwe can and should not be the recipients of such enunciations. This would only consolidate their powers.