
BOOK REVIEW

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*Networking Peripheries:
Technological Futures and the Myth of Digital Universalism*

Anita Say Chan (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2014)

As more and more scholars are interested in information and communications technologies' (ICT) roles in global development, theory has sluggishly followed practice. Ideas of a universal digital future have become a central part of the contemporary technology and development discourse, evidenced by a range of initiatives in government, education, health care, and practice. Anita Say Chan's work, *Networking Peripheries*, situates the idea of digital futures, and how these are being imagined in the so-called periphery.

Chan investigates three cases at various points of this spectrum. She examines Denominations of Origin (DO) for artisans in Chulucanas in coastal Peru. By doing so, she looks at the role of technology in livelihoods and in cultural questions around internationalizing arts that can be specific to a certain region. She then turns to a broader infrastructural question: people's opinions and action around what software the government *should* be using, a question she explores by analyzing the history of and language surrounding the use of Free/Libre Open Source Software (FLOSS). Finally, she analyzes the discourse surrounding the widespread implementation of the One Laptop Per Child (OLPC) throughout Peru, investigating how people use technology as a means of improving primary education, particularly in parts of the rural hinterland. *Networked Peripheries* offers readers three stories, each of which could well be a separate book.

Although Chan's own position as a skeptic of neoliberal development work is clear, she is careful to document stories that highlight how difficult it is to form a single normative position. In her opening story of the bumpy coming of urban age in Chulucanas, she presents readers with perspectives along a spectrum that propose intellectual property (IP) and production optimization as the necessary means to artistic salvation at one extreme and, at the other, reject such optimization as a pathway to destroying the fundamental cultural fabric of the region. With the ceramic artifact as the site of contestation, readers encounter the struggle for authenticity between one set of perspectives that seek purity in turning to traditional means of creating art, and others that

seek global validity in certification and converting the art into a monetizable information product. At the heart of this argument is a fundamental rethinking of craftwork, moving beyond expression of tradition to interpreting it as a form of information work that can be owned, standardized, and, with permission, perhaps replicated.

Chan finds that the entrepreneurial exercise of applying IP to a craft as a means of creating a new collective consciousness around artistic heritage ironically leads instead to diminished trust among some Chulucanas artisans. This exercise also contributed to dissolving spaces of collective identification as artisans from other parts of Peru poured in to cash in on their star product. At the same time, Chan brings to light how yet others are energized by the frenzy of production, thrilled by the activity and rhythm of life that small town living otherwise rarely affords its residents.

Chan's second case presents a paradox to the positive spin on IP in Chulucanas. The movement for FLOSS, which emerged at a knotty moment for anti-establishment activism in Peru toward the end of the Fujimori era, offers an intriguing contrast to the ceramics case. While in Chulucanas, artisans focus on monetizing a knowledge artifact, FLOSS advocates argue against the intellectual property paradigm. Standing up to Microsoft becomes at once a signaling of technological expertise and a normative paradigm for facing down the powers of the global corporation.

The case introduces readers to FLOSS users and activists throughout Peru who dabbled with software as students or as casual experimenters but ended up as spokespersons for a hacker ethic of the Global South. As fleeting technocrats, Chan's Peruvian FLOSS activists become a parable unto themselves as they emerge like scientists and modernizers, exercising the moral authority to speak for a broader social collective. Their choices of open technology production and its inherent values come to represent a larger Peruvian leadership of an open software culture in the Latin American region.

Chan highlights the case of a rural politician who wrote a letter against the use of proprietary software in Peru and was instantly elevated to brief global celebrity as a champion of open technology. The case underscores the weight associated with technology as a tool of development, not just within entrenched structures of power, but beyond that to a global public, hungry to see the digital artifact transformed into a weapon for the underdog. Chan deliberates the liberational notions of FLOSS as a case of technological work as activism. The ideal of a redemptive technology represented by the FLOSS activists is framed against the broader notion that working in technology as liberating in and of itself—as represented through idyllic workplaces in which play and leisure are seamlessly related. Even the corporate work environment for a technologist thus represents values of an empowering liberty and a self-actualizing Maslowian ideal of the digital future.

Chan sets up her final case of the OLPC computers in Peruvian schools by analyzing what professionals claim can and will happen when they are engaged in getting the devices to children and figuring out what to do with them. OLPC case is not interesting as a story of laptops stumbling through a teach-the-man-to-fish pathway to connected digital figures, per se. OLPC is indeed part of the global and largely discredited approach of inserting computers in regions where existing educational infrastructures are failing children. What is truly fascinating in Chan's work is how she interweaves the ways the so-called native is called upon as explanation and motivation in the story of OLPC in Peru. A neoliberal global gaze is rooting for a technology-driven shot at a piece of the pie for the underdog, and this turns the indigenous community's role in the use of the OLPC into a story worth spreading.

Chan maintains stylish prose throughout the book. She ties the three stories side-by-side as "messianic capitalism tailored for the twenty-first century that doesn't need to come to the rescue – but that offers up to subjects the tools for auto rescue" (p. 43). She could, however, have gone further in bringing together these three cases. The task of condensing this vast amount of material takes away some of the depth readers could otherwise explore in more detailed accounts of each of the cases. While the cases give readers a lot to compare, the readers could have used more discussion of how she saw the three cases connected as part of a broader future. Likewise, she could have turned to voices from among engineers and software enthusiasts outside of the FLOSS activists to address the breadth of voices in this ecology, or similarly to present the perspectives of teachers or students in schools or regions that offer a contrasting view of the OLPC case.

Chan captures a critical moment in Peru's history in its reinvention as a nation state, still recovering from the complex human rights record of the Fujimori era, and a Maoist insurrection that complicated the relationship of the hinterland and indigenous populations from urban elite. Technology, a symbol of modernity, becomes the element that reconciles nativity and nationhood. The Chulucanas case uses technology to highlight heritage, the FLOSS case underlines a discourse for a technology framework that works for the people, and finally the OLPC case highlights ways in which some of the least empowered populations can be brought to the key-tapping tables of the Peruvian elite. In this, readers have the final thread tying the stories together: each case is constructed around two concurrent heroes, technology, and the Peruvian people.