

Power Inequities in ICT Observations from an African Place

#WebSci20

July 6th - July 10th

dr ing Gertjan van Stam
Masvingo, Zimbabwe

WebSci'20 Workshop on Digital (In)Equality,
Digital Inclusion, Digital Humanism

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Power Inequities: Observations on the Development of Information and Communication Technologies, from an African Place

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ABSTRACT

Using power to achieve political goals is not a new strategy. This paper unpacks observations about the use of power in the development of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in Africa. This analysis shows the use of unequal powers by non-African academics, development actors and technical experts (including the power to set the agenda, fund and build), embedded deeply in the current structures of ICT development for Africa. It also looks at how benefits accrue to non-local development actors and outlines some of the unmitigated risks for Africa.

CCS CONCEPTS

• Information Systems; • World Wide Web; • Web Applications; • Social Networks; • Social and Professional Topics; • User Characteristics; Computing / Technology Policy; • Applied Computing; • Human-Centered Computing;

KEYWORDS

Politics, power, ICT, Africa

ACM Reference Format:

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1 INTRODUCTION

The advantages and blessings of information and communication technologies (ICTs) are well established in the literature and understood by the private sector. The development of ICTs has been heralded as a driver of economic growth, a revolutionary force in learning, a factor in the increase in productivity through what is called the 4th Industrial Revolution, and an important part of the management of health, including the management of pandemics. Some advocate for access to ICTs to be seen as a human right. Such narratives extol the benefits and opportunities provided by ICT for the connected. Solutionists argue that 'unconnectedness' needs to be (urgently) solved by ICT developments so these benefits can be imparted to all.

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However, there is an array of other voices that claim that ICTs are increasing inequality, sustaining digital imperialism, and providing a new vehicle for colonialism, a vehicle that enables the extraction of personal information and surveillance, and that facilitates the privatisation of the benefits and socialisation of the costs.

Power structures are deeply embedded in the current ICT structures and wielded to gain political advantage at all levels. Here, power is regarded as the capacity or force to influence events, in this case in ICT development. In this paper, I assess the wielding of power by foreigners, those who influence events in geographical locations and situations they were not born into and do not live permanently. I provide a preliminary reflective analysis of my experiences with geo-technopolitics in Africa and observations about foreign actors enacting their (open or hidden) political goals through interactions in knowledge systems (like conferences) and in the development and operation of ICT artefacts. Geo-technopolitics emerge when ICT equipment, knowledge systems, and extraneous models of intervention are imported for use outside of the context in which they were conceptualised and designed.

The aim of this paper is to bring observed power-enactments by foreign experts to the fore. The paper does not deal with the underlying structures of hegemonic power embedded in ICT systems and their governance. It is hoped that the paper will provide an (uneasy) checklist, augmenting discussions on ethical behaviour in ICT development.

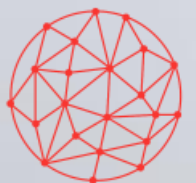
In the sections that follow, I first describe the method used, after which I identify and provide insights into the observed wielding of power by foreigners. Subsequently, I provide an analysis of the agency of these powers, structured according to frameworks provided by Burawoy and Appiah. In the final part, I discuss these agencies with respect to the African environment, followed by some brief conclusions.

2 METHOD

For the past 20 years, I have lived in Zambia and Zimbabwe and travelled extensively in Africa. I have disclosed my various positions in previous works, especially when assessing foreign solutions imported into Africa [33]. For this paper, using Burawoy's extended case method [6], I have analysed over 10 years of participant observations during national and international conferences in Africa, Europe, and the United States of America. Between 2010 and 2020, I attended over fifty conferences in various disciplines, of which over twenty focused on ICT; other conferences pertained to mechanical engineering, mathematics, energy, and health (full list of conferences available at <http://www.vanstam.net/gertjan-van-stam>).

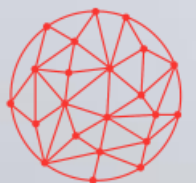
Short introduction

- Gertjan van Stam (PhD-culture, MTech-ICT, BSc-Telecoms engineer)
 - Living and working in sub Sahara Africa since 1987, full time since 2000
 - Research focus on the intersection of technology and culture
 - Community deposits from African viewpoints @ <http://www.vanstam.net/gertjan-van-stam>
- Presentation to give glimpses to context and content of the paper
- Invitation to read and contemplate the paper
 - might be an uneasy read, as reported by those who did during its writing
 - uneasy to write, I can say



Method

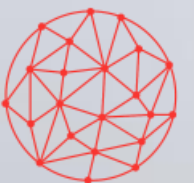
- Reflexive paper, taking years to mature and might never finish
 - Attending > 50 conference
 - Observations from Africa, with > 180 academic deposits
- Depending on 'communal grace' for persons willing to disclose
- Took lots of 'unlearning' and discomfoting experiences, over 20 years
 - to be able to access and understand other ways of knowing
 - to withstand respect for, and use of, undeserved privileges
- Possibly obscured when submersed in academic environments
 - explicit and implicit exceptionalism, wherever one goes
 - institutionalised powers in line with cultural and philosophical eurocentrism



Enshrined Injustices hit the mainstream (1/2)

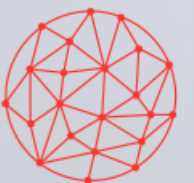
Since writing the paper, social movements heated up

- Complex issues
 - Black Lives Matter focus on institutional racism
 - Climate Movement focus on civil rights
 - National scrutiny of colonial history and questioning of cultural practices, e.g.
 - “Zwarte Piet” (blackface) in the Netherlands
 - King Leopold II in Belgium
 - Cecil Rhodes in United Kingdom
- Sustained struggle for social, historical, political and economic justices
 - Publications in various African fora call for epistemic justice
 - Students in (South) Africa demand decolonisation of learning



Enshrined Injustices hit the mainstream (2/2)

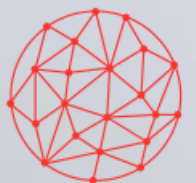
- An overarching issue: the demand to 'Be Seen'
 - Clouded by remnants of slavery, genocides, and dispossessions
 - Subalternisation by oriental, imperial and colonial action (the Terrible Three)
 - Institutional racism and enshrined racist systems
- Matters of injustice in ICT development
 - Ubiquitous computing shown to align with colonial practices
 - Western academia has track record of expropriating ideas from the South
 - Leaders with power (even when well-intentioned) exhibit attitudes that governed relationships between Africa and the rest of the world for centuries
 - Result: hesitance to disclose *knowing in the South* from the South



Glimpse: on Western values in PhD defense



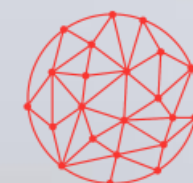
“... by ‘Western’ academic values ...”



Glimpse: on researchers in rural Zambia



“... I have seen it ...”



Glimpse: online conference in Africa (May 2020)

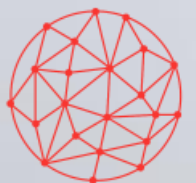
- WhatsApp conversation ‘in the background’, after the first half hour

66

Again, a conference that start with non-Africans speaking. The talk time of non-Africans must have been 99% so far

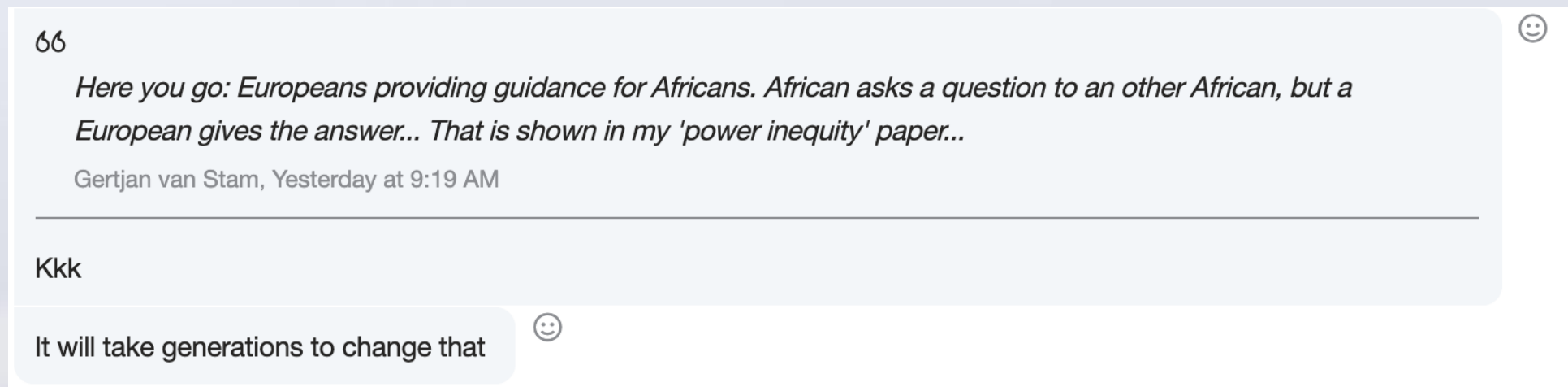
Gertjan van Stam, Yesterday at 8:46 AM

Kkkkkk



Glimpse: online conference in Africa (May 2020)

- WhatsApp conversation 'in the background', after a presentation



Foreign powers, mentioned in paper

At conferences and elsewhere

- Power to categories
- Power to fund
- Power to travel
- Power to demand entitlements
- Power to speak first
- Power to set the agenda
- Power to survey
- Power to make visible
- Power to represent
- Power to apprehend and build
- Power to socially control

“Some [foreigners] are quite conscious of their privileges and actively avoid using their power, others wield a selection of them; there is also a limited – but quite visible – group that actively use them, whether consciously or not.”



Effect, using Burawoy's power categories

Power	Explanation	Example	Mediation
Domination	Effect of prolonged and surreptitious power struggles	Rhetoric of the struggles between centres and peripheries	Being inert
Silencing	Ideology in the interest of dominant elites	Orations by persons from non-local authorities	Restricting or refraining from speaking
Objectification	Assessment informed by oriental/external, natural and social categorising	Enforcing norms in situations where there are dynamic and integrative epistemologies	Using long-term, oral means of data collection
Normalisation	Reducing the world to categories	Judging activities using extraneous categorisations	Using trans-disciplinary approaches



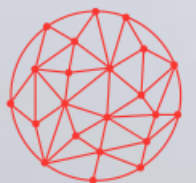
Effect, using Appiah's identity categories

Power base	Description	Example	Mediation
Belief system	Essentialistic views of the benefits of ICTs	Body-of-knowledge framed by experience and beliefs valorised in Euramerica	Orthopraxis (acting right)
Sovereignty	Institutions, procedures and precepts that govern sovereignty	Echo chambers of normative knowledge at international conferences	Value epistemologies
Colour	Segregation based on observable distinctions	Race and location-affiliated negation and affirmation, dominance and resistance	Conversations
Class	Created social hierarchies sustaining in-groups and out-groups	Orientalistic generalities about them and us enmeshed in social fabric	Intersectionality
Culture	Community building to live life with others	Exchange, adoption and assimilation of practices	Respect



Assessment using interrogative questions

Interrogation	Power	Aim
Why	Agenda setting, front seat, speak first	Fits Eurocentric agendas that yield benefits for the already powerful
Where	Travel	Priorities actions where powerful can travel; action where the powerful decide 'a certain lack' should be alleviated
What	Categorisation, surveying, funding	What fits a universalised scheme gets done, what does not is made invisible; where money flows, things get done
When	Funding, agenda setting	Activities are set by funding patterns, fitting foreign conceptualised agendas
Who	Make visible, represent	Those recognised as suppliers of information and data for foreign experts
How	Social control, make visible	In line with Eurocentric valorised methods
With what	Build	Using methods and activities that can be controlled and done outside of Africa



Issues, mentioned in paper

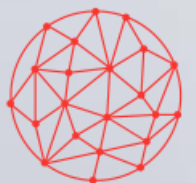
- The lopsided accrual of benefits
- Witnessed self-denial and stigma
- Omnipresence of coloniality
- Unaligned context projections
- Countering disempowering and apprehended powers
- Issues of ethical conflict mediation

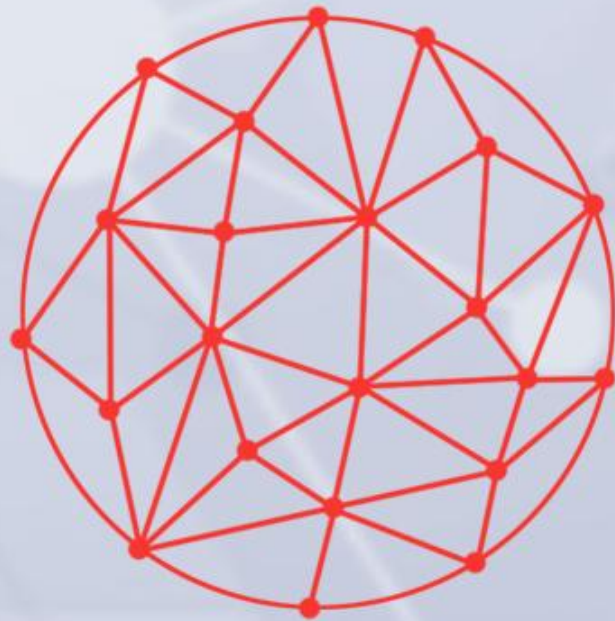
Quote: “Why did I come here? I have seen no recognition of the works by non-Western ancestors. I have seen Western professors juggling for access to areas where they were not born nor do live. I have seen professors using the event to jostle for position among themselves. I have seen disrespect for non-Western contributions. In the meantime, contributions from Southerners seem to speak to Eurocentric audiences only, not to the context where I am living in. I have found little to bring home to justify the investment of my community to bring me here, unfortunately.” (International ICT conference with Southern focus, participant from East Asia, 2019)



Conclusion

- ICT developments appear mostly framed in a system that promotes and protects Eurocentric power by denying, and at best bracketing, the abilities of Africans to think through, reason about, and solve problems
- It appears that non-Western ICT professionals have to justify their existence, even during expressions in their own environment





Tatenda, Siyabonga (Thank you)

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