

philippine studies

Ateneo de Manila University · Loyola Heights, Quezon City · 1108 Philippines

Transforming Technologies: Altered Selves- Mobile Phone and Internet Use in the Philippines by Raul Pertierra

Review Author: Randy Jay C. Solis

Philippine Studies vol. 56, no. 1 (2008): 109–112

Copyright © Ateneo de Manila University

Philippine Studies is published by the Ateneo de Manila University. Contents may not be copied or sent via email or other means to multiple sites and posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's written permission. Users may download and print articles for individual, noncommercial use only. However, unless prior permission has been obtained, you may not download an entire issue of a journal, or download multiple copies of articles.

Please contact the publisher for any further use of this work at philstudies@admu.edu.ph.

<http://www.philippinestudies.net>

alternative to the drudgery of factory labor, institutionalized wage discrimination, and daily sexual harassment on the job.

Maram has a keen eye for the interethnic, interracial, and transgender dynamics of her story, in line with the race, class, gender, and sexuality consciousness of the new social history. While her story is focused upon Filipinos, Maram succeeds in creating a picture of an ethnic group in the multiethnic and multiracial context of the United States. They shared similar strivings for wealth with their Chinese neighbors, similar aspirations for the American dream with African American boxers, and similar desires for social affirmation, pleasure, and style with Euro-American and Mexican women. Maram, however, is too sophisticated to idealize the crosscultural relationships of her subjects, for they were not without their own tensions. She points to the old world animosity between Filipinos and Chinese rooted in colonial policies that favored Chinese businesses over native Filipinos. Likewise, boxing matches pitted Filipinos with other ethnic fighters, in some cases with largely Filipino crowds refusing to accept referees' decisions. And taxi dance halls became sites for inter- and intraethnic conflicts and jealousies over the attentions of white and Mexican women. Finally, there is the constant dynamic tension between working class Filipinos and the larger mainstream, predominantly white, society that was always seeking to circumscribe their activities and to regulate their movements.

The book does suffer from a few faults, especially in the last two chapters on the Second World War and the conclusion. There are needlessly redundant passages. In striving for context, the narrative is diverted and for a few pages seems to lose its focus upon Filipinos in Los Angeles, becoming about other ethnic groups or socioeconomic developments in the city. The segment on the Filipino zoot suit, perhaps as a result of the paucity of evidence, does not present the perspectives of Filipino zoot suiters themselves but relies on others' accounts of Filipino zoot suiters. Similarly, Filipino-Japanese relations are not really explored, and there are long passages on the internment of the Japanese but not on the Filipinos' relationship to them.

One also wonders how much stronger the book could have been if Maram had a more comparative, transnational approach that explored developments in the Philippines. Filipino boxers in the U.S. were closely followed in the Philippines. To what extent was there a shared *transnational* community in the making between Filipino immigrants and Filipinos in the Philippines made possible by this colonial sport. Similarly, the narrative of

the discrimination toward Filipino servicemen denied access to service clubs in the Second World War Pacific campaign might have been strengthened by an exploration of the discrimination faced by Filipinos from American colonial officials and military branches in the Philippines during the first few decades of U.S. colonial rule.

All in all, however, Maram has done a superb job of reexamining a subject that has been looked at from many different angles. Utilizing her own interviews with the surviving *manong*, the oral history collections of the Seattle Pinoy Archives, the University of Washington's manuscript collections, and the Carey McWilliams Papers, various government studies, and numerous unpublished sources, Maram has provided a novel approach to a much worked-on subject. She especially validates the importance of popular culture for Filipino and Asian American studies, bringing together the insights of Antonio Gramsci on hegemony and counterhegemony and C. L. R. James on colonialism and sport, and the new social history's emphases on looking at developments from below and above and on hearing the voices of subjugated communities.

Augusto Espiritu

History Department and Asian American Studies Program
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
<aespirit@uiuc.edu>

RAUL PERTIERRA

Transforming Technologies: Altered Selves—Mobile Phone and Internet Use in the Philippines

Manila: De La Salle University Press, 2006. 158 pages.

Innovations in electronics have introduced a faster and more efficient means of storing, manipulating, and transmitting information. This digital revolution has furthered the convergent potentials of communication technology, allowing it to become a more dynamic participant in the new information age. In the Philippines the mobile phone and, to a lesser extent, the Internet were welcomed primarily because of the convenience they offer. So widespread is the use of the economical and highly mobile electronic com-

munication that the Philippines has become allegedly the “texting capital of the world.”

The increased use of the mobile phone and the Internet in the country raises concerns about the yet unseen consequences of technologies on culture. Although scholars are aware that technologies redefine how we understand ourselves and our society, most research on new media can still benefit from rigorous theorizing. The book *Transforming Technologies: Altered Selves—Mobile Phone and Internet Use in the Philippines* addresses this need, providing empirically grounded conceptualizations of the implications of information and communication technologies on Philippine culture.

The book is a rich collection of case studies and commentary that illustrate how modern technologies have been incorporated into everyday culture. The book begins, peculiarly, with “Conclusions and Extrapolations,” in which Pertierra summarizes his views on the transformative value of the cellphone and the Internet. Aside from being an abstract of the book, this section also provides readers an overview of the succeeding chapters.

Pertierra establishes that mobile technology has ushered in an information revolution of the same magnitude as that of the invention of the telegraph (which replaced the mail train) or of printing. At the outset the reader is given the impression that the cellphone has become the signifier of modernity supplementing, if not supplanting, these previous communication revolutions.

The first chapter illustrates the use of a cultural perspective in analyzing the effects of modern communication technologies. It correlates the Filipinos’ practice of science and technology and their cultural attitude toward innovation. Pertierra argues that Filipinos’ experience of and resistance to centuries of colonial schemes account for their aversion to technological production and development. The mentality of subversion has discouraged individualism and excellence, and explains Filipinos’ antipathy to technical expertise and their corollary openness to and appropriation of borrowed technology.

The second and third chapters provide the empirical basis for most of the theoretical discussions in the book. Data were acquired through both quantitative and qualitative methods. Surveys and interviews were conducted to describe the nature and extent of mobile phone and Internet use and its possible effects. Extended case studies were also employed to illustrate further the assimilation of technology in the culture of everyday life.

The survey validates the idea that the mobile phone and the Internet are used for sociability. Gender and age analysis indicates that males and the

youth, more than their respective counterparts, utilize both technologies to expand their social circles. The interviews invite further exploration, as interviewees from an urban university express reservations about cyber-reality, while those from the rural areas welcome it because for them it encourages the development of authentic relationships. The survey also explores technology use in two communities during the 2004 local elections. Data reveal the minimal use of cellphones for political purposes.

The case studies show how new technologies have permeated the personal and professional lives of Filipinos. The Internet overcomes physiological and geographical barriers; the cellphone is a means of professional networking. Priests, for instance, use both technologies to perform their apostolate and to strengthen their vocation. Pertierra concludes that, all in all, communication technologies empower individuals to become active players in modern society. Globalization and cosmopolitanism are also observed in the experiences of the respondents, and although mentioned in the rather limited commentary these concepts are still laid out for further analysis.

Communication historians posit that an information revolution emerges when communication media are diffused within a society already undergoing change. In a continuous cycle of cause and effect, Filipino culture adopts a technology to connect interlocutors anytime and anywhere; almost at the same time the technology determines the mobility of the Filipino. Chapters 4, 5, and 6, the more theoretically grounded sections of the book, explain why the rituals of texting have become an essential practice of communication. In “Without a Room of Your Own? Buy a Cellphone,” texting is seen as a mechanism to welcome the stranger into the private sphere. Thus, this mediated form of communication redefines the notions of identity and intimacy. “The Gift of Text” views texting as an act of gift-exchange in light of Marcel Mauss’s theory of “The Gift.” The Filipino’s natural liking for and skill at SMS are explained as a custom of reciprocation rooted in the indigenous value of *utang na loob* (gratefulness). “Enabling Technologies” views the cellphone as an empowering gadget, which expands the concept of the self beyond corporeal identity. Pertierra initially presents case studies on deaf persons who use the texting function of the phone to maintain close relationships and to facilitate communication in the workplace. Toward the end of the chapter, he includes case studies on mediated long-distance relationships and communication with the dead.

If I may apply concepts in filmmaking to describe the book, *Transforming Technologies* is a rich montage rather than a cohesive narrative. Each of the six chapters can actually stand alone as a theoretically sound and empirically grounded commentary on the transformative value of new communication technologies in the Philippines. Instead of presenting stories that build on one another, the book weaves together strands of various cellular experiences. In the end it creates a comprehensive picture of the most salient aspects of new media and Philippine culture.

The general applicability of the book's conclusions, as the author himself admits, is limited. Rather, the strength of the book is in its broad commentary, which opens the discourse of new media and culture in the Philippines to further empirical investigations. The book's interdisciplinary approach (which even includes a foray into the supernatural) contributes widely to the theorizing of many more concepts like globalization, identity, and modernity.

Just as montage editing expresses the zeitgeist of the present MTV generation, so also *Transforming Technologies*, in form, signifies the spirit of the times. Indeed, the book embodies the ever-growing discourse on the new icon of Philippine modernity.

Randy Jay C. Solis

Department of Communication
Ateneo de Manila University
<rsolis@ateneo.edu>