

Discussant comments on Gabriela Vargas-Cetina's paper "Very Much a Midnight Child: Software and the Translation of Times at the University"

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Dear John

Thanks for inviting me to initiate discussion of this interesting paper. It is a good opportunity for me to actually put fingers to keys and move beyond lurking to be a more active participant in the EASA Media Anthropology Network. As I have not introduced myself before, I will say that I am an American, trained in Americanist anthropology at Stanford, Chicago, and the American University in Washington, DC. After completing a dissertation in 1978 on workers' education and the reproduction of working class culture in Sheffield, England, I found a job at the Technology campus of the State University of New York, where a theoretical interest in technology turned into a field ethnographic interest in automated information and communications technologies and social change. I have done a number of studies on this issue in the US, Britain and Scandinavia, and, most recently, Malaysia, and I also put considerable effort into drawing the attention of anthropologists and other social scientists to the AICT/culture nexus.

In 2004, I moved to the new School of Informatics at Indiana University, where I am currently Director of International Activities, Coordinator of the Human-centered Informatics group, and run a small Information Ethnography group. My current research program is promotion and execution of comparative studies on Free/Libre and Open Source Software, including the assessment of the roles of F/LOSS and other AICTs in what is called ICT4D, or ICTs for Development. I am also currently the co-director of the Science and Technology in the Pacific Century Project being run through the East Asia Studies Center at IU, where I am working with Area Studies humanists who want to think hard and systematically about the correlations of techno-science and culture change.

Which brings me to the paper at hand, whose reasons for being of interest to me are, hopeful now obvious. Vargas-Cetina rightly presents software as a privileged locus from which to explore issues of knowledge and the future of the University. She offers a particular reading of this history of software from which she takes inspiration, both for alternative, open approach to knowledge and for an alternative future of the University, which she expresses through extension of several computing metaphors. Her reading and inspiration reflect arguably common, certainly widely-held in the global South notions about these relationships, manifest at the World Summit on the Information Society and the Access to Knowledge movement. This latter is an effort to move WSIS-type activities beyond the narrow issue of access to IT toward active, truly global participation in the construction of contemporary knowledge, thereby to equalize participation in the entire range of economic activities.

It thus seems to me that the issues Vargas-Cetina raises are of signal importance to any current media anthropology worth its salt, and I appreciate your use of her paper to raise them for discussion. Their importance also warrants attention to the details of her readings and inferences, and thus the following:

1. For me, Vargas-Cetina is too willing to buy into “computing as socially transformative” rhetoric. I describe my problems with Castells at length in my recent book on The Knowledge Landscapes of Cyberspace, but my basic point here is that this and many of the propositions which she takes as resolved are highly contested ethnologically. I appreciate her reference to Anita Chan’s important work on F/LOSS in Latin America, but she is only one of several anthropologists who for more than a quarter of a century have devoted themselves to field studies of the cultural correlates of AICTs in use. A media anthropology of software needs to pay attention to this work.

Other points, at varying scales of theoretical importance but worth getting right include:

2. a more nuanced understanding of the similarities and differences between Free/Libre and OS software;

3. The extent to which it makes sense to think of OS X as Open Source. I am happily and well applied, but as with the iPod, Apple has often taken a profoundly proprietary approach, its emphasis on branding having indeed gotten in the way of creating and spreading the open standards that are as essential to V-C’s vision as is free software.

4. Struggling against becoming a partisan in the software wars. The functional superiority of F/LOSS has been demonstrated in several areas, as general on servers, but is highly doubtful in others; hence, the near universal presence of Powerpoint even at events put on by organizations like IBM who have bought heavily into F/LOSS talk. Indeed, the biggest difficulty in fostering field study of software and culture is the felt necessity to take sides on more ideological than empirical grounds.

5. “Linux” comes in many varieties, not all of which are free/libre or even OS; e.g., Chinese “red flag” Linux is being high proprietyed.

Despite these issues, I am very much in favor with the kinds of lessons V-C wants to draw for the future of the university. When Matt Suzlik, CEO of Red Hat Linux, was at IU recently, he offered a telling critique of the contemporary university, which has unthinkingly modeled itself on the limited liability corporation. Instead, especially public universities need to defend and extend the public commons notions that are at their reason for being. Software innovations are an extremely important arena for showing what the university can do to extend knowledge, and F/LOSS is certainly more compatible with this idea than is proprietary software.

Thus, my plea is not to reject the reading that V-C offers but to argue for a media anthropology that subjects it to empirical study. For example, it certainly seems plausible to me promotion of an independent software industry is likely to be an important element of the development strategy of any nation that wishes to free itself from Northern neo-liberal domination, and it makes sense that F/LOSS is a better bet than trying to convince Microsoft to move its R&D from Redmond to, say Cyberjaya in Malaysia, in hopes that doing the work there will somehow provide a basis for local activity. These are among the reasons I went to Malaysia. However, despite a vigorous F/LOSS movement, it is hard to argue that a basis for a software path for a substantial Malaysian effort to climb the value chain has been laid yet. Why not? Who has? What has been the result of the several national policies affording F/LOSS that V-C cites?

These are all important questions that a media anthropology of software should be grappling with. If the, admittedly quite plausible, reading of software that V-C offers has the consequence of turning efforts to these empirical tasks, then it is a worthwhile effort. We cannot treat these issues as resolved, however, and unfortunately, we also need to develop enough technical skill to follow these debates intelligently. These really are important issues.

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