

**EASA Media Anthropology Network  
e-Seminar Series**

**<http://www.media-anthropology.net/workingpapers.htm>**

**E-Seminar on Gabriela Vargas-Cetina's working paper  
"Very much a midnight child: software  
and the translation of times at the University"**

**(24 – 31 October 2006)**

**John Postill (Sheffield Hallam University)**

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Message subject: *Vargas-Cetina seminar open*

Dear All

Our 13th EASA media anthropology network e-seminar starts now and will run on this mailing list for a week until Tuesday 31 October at 9 pm GMT. As previously announced, we shall be discussing a working paper by Gabriela Vargas-Cetina (University of Yucatan) entitled "Very much a midnight child: software and the translation of times at the University". You will find a PDF of this paper, courtesy of Philipp Budka, at

<http://www.media-anthropology.net/workingpapers.htm>

The discussant will be David Hakken who is Professor of Informatics at Indiana University. David is a cultural anthropologist who does ethnography in cyberspace. He shall be posting his comments later today, Gabriela will then respond and after that the discussion will be open to all on this list.

Have an enjoyable read and I look forward to an engaging discussion on a subject new to this seminar series.

Best wishes

John

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**David Hakken (Indiana University)**

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Message subject: *David Hakken's comments*

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

for the European Association of Social Anthropologists (EASA)  
Media Anthropology Network e-seminar 24-31 October 2006

by David Hakken (School of Informatics, Indiana University, IN, USA)

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:

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.

David Hakken, Indiana University

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**Gabriela Vargas-Cetina (Yucatan University / Cornell University)**

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Message subject: *Response to Hakken*

First of all, thanks to John for making this amazing seminar possible, and thanks to David Hakken for reading my paper so carefully and engaging with my arguments. David's reading is very flattering, since he believes I stroke an important chord in thinking about alternative models for a possible university through the lessons we can draw from the free software and copyleft movement. Being a fieldworker, I believe that in order to chart new avenues for change we really need to try to look at the problems at hand from new vantage points we can find within the field. So, these vantage points have to be based on what surrounds us. As David says, my use of metaphorical analogy through hardware and software was intended as a way out of the conceptual rigidity of current models regarding the course the university as an institution has taken in the last two decades.

That said, I now address David's qualms with my reading of the software movement itself:

1. Yes, I am oversimplifying a very complex situation regarding the different elements and their combination in different types of software, and especially in different types of operating environments. Different operating systems incorporate more or less free and proprietary elements to different degrees. The first Halloween paper had what was probably one of the most comprehensive classifications of software licensing at the time. My interest, however, was to set up the continuum, using the terms that Stallman has been using recently to advertise the free software movement in India and Argentina, two places where he has spoken recently on the issue of free software as a matter of liberty. I have merely pointed at three stops along what in fact is a complex continuum, in order to streamline the rhetorical argument I am trying to make (namely, that we need a new type of university and that we can think about it in terms of the copyleft and open source movements). However, it is a point well taken and I should probably add a footnote or a paragraph acknowledging the complexity I am just glossing over. David's points about Linux and Mac's OS X would be part of this too.

2. Yes, there is much ethnography already on the way in which free, open source and proprietary software is being combined in different regions of the world. However, I think that most of that literature lies outside the limits of the paper at hand. Chile

and Argentina, for example, seem to have developed important models to extend the use of non-proprietary software. In the island of Sardinia, in Italy, instead, Video Online did not manage to survive possibly because it relied too much on utopian ideals of completely open source, while Tiscali has become an almost overnight sensation through its use of a combination of free and proprietary code. I guess one question that the ethnography of software really needs to address is to what extent free software can survive and prosper without the actual support of governments or wealthy donors. Maybe access to software should be conceptualized as one of the basic human rights. However, I can't see how to include much more ethnographically-based discussion in my already long paper; I still have to cut it down in order to submit it to *Traces*, the journal where the papers from the Cornell Symposium on the Future of the University will be published. If any of you has an idea as to how I can make reference to the ethnographic material and still cut the paper down, please send me your suggestions. I am an ethnographer and very much like to acknowledge my discipline's methodology in my conceptual work.

3. Last, on the point of taking sides, I do think that our commitment to a better university has to be a strong ideological one. I don't think the free software movement is all what Stallman and friends make it out to be, but I admire their dedication and conviction. I have taken sides, yes. I believe we don't have to turn the university, our universities (both public AND private), into corporations that perpetuate the unequal access to knowledge. So, my intention was to chart a possible new way for the university, and I was looking for possible ideas and ideals that could sustain an alternative vision. The ideal of the common good is a powerful one, and as all political anthropologists know, it is necessary to have a clear and powerful vision to set the basis for a campaign. I don't know if many others will join me in trying to imagine and then to drive the university to what I think could be a more equitable and more just university of the future; I know I am looking for a viable models. Whether I have managed to point at one of them, and whether others will help define it better, is something only time will tell.

Thank you again to David and to all of you, and I look forward to your comments,

Gabriela

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**John Postill (Sheffield Hallam University)**  
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Message subject: *Re: Response to Hakken*

Many thanks for that response, Gabriela. The discussion is now open to all.

John

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**Simone Abram (University of Sheffield)**  
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Message subject: *Re: Response to Hakken*

I note that no-one seems to have responded to this particular discussion yet. There could be many reasons for that. One may be a sense that the discussion might be moving into a domain of technical expertise rather than an anthropological debate. Another might be a sense that the argument is normative, and could be described as technologically determinative (I say might, not is). But also, that the larger question of 'what is a university' may be both too big and too particular. To what extent is the description of the university appropriate to all our different university systems? What other models may we have already that provide a more open university system? The Open University of the UK springs to mind, which still remains a prime example of open access to education at a high standard and employing virtual space for both dissemination of material and discussion.

I would like to ask why the open university and open source necessarily need to go together, and if the combination is favourable, why is Linux not enough? I also think that the question of open university and open access to academic production are not quite the same. On the other hand, there is increasing agreement that having to pay publishers for access to material which is produced from the public purse is increasingly perverse, and that auditing systems like the UK Research Assessment Exercise have had unexpected consequences in terms of the rate of publication and the profitability of journals. It surprises me still how few high-quality online refereed journals there are. Although there are plenty of journals online, these are mostly proprietary journals which

one has to pay to view (despite occasional free offers). Increasingly, overstretched university staff hand over the administration of journal editing to commercial publishers, and pass on the incidental cost of that work to the reader. It is this which makes our work exclusive, and which undermines the public good of academic research. If universities could fund internal editing and copywriting staff, then our work could all be made freely available online in the interests of public knowledge. That wouldn't require any particular change in the world of software, given how many free browsers there are.

I would like to ask Vargas Cetina whether his new model university goes beyond this to a radical redefinition of public knowledge, and if so, how and why?

Best wishes  
Simone

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**Gabriela Vargas-Cetina (Yucatan University / Cornell University)**

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Message subject: *Re: Response to Hakken*

Thank you for jumping in. Like you, I was surprised to see no one was entering the discussion. Probably, this is because the reasons are that the paper is not exactly on software or its uses, but on software as a metaphor. And, as David Hakken pointed out, there is no ethnography to accompany or support the thinking leap. We were asked to write specifically discussing Bill Readings' "The University in Ruins", which is not exactly an ethnographic but a conceptual text. This is why I had to think of THE university, although none of us at the discussion actually think such a thing exists.

In fact, other scholars were asked to present specific cases of universities, and I have to say that the sad conclusion was that ALL the universities in the different countries represented at the conference (China, Taiwan, Mexico, Japan, Australia, the US, India and Hong Kong) seem to be going toward the corporate model of 'the university of excellence' Readings described those many years ago. The university, it appears, has become an institution that functions on standards of productivity as quantity of output and profit, accountability in terms of accounting (counting how much each professor 'produces' and how many students s/he attends to) and 'excellence'. As Readings predicted, this 'excellence' changes each time according to general international policies favouring transnational corporations. And the implementation of 'rational management' on the university does have the effect of turning academics into rational choice entrepreneurs instead of public intellectuals. Readings apparently continues to be right on.

So, Linux (in terms of the free version of Linux) IS enough to think of an alternative model for the university. The university would not have to run only on free software, but the ideals of the free software movement should help us imagine a better university.

Regarding publishing, I am with you. I think all academic publishing should be made available for free, since we as professors have the obligation of being public intellectuals. This was one of the problems identified by Readings: publication of research becomes an end in itself that gets related to academic promotion and prestige, instead of serving the advancement of knowledge and the enrichment of everyone's life. Scholarly associations, such as the AAA, are finding it hard to continue publishing journals in the current corporate environment, where the large academic presses have taken over due to the introduction of online academic publishing. But the associations' response is not always the best to the requests for public access to academic publications. In fact, the American Anthropological Association signed this year a protest, along with some other 30 publishers, because the US Senate wants to pass a bill making public access free to all those publications that received government funding in any way. We the members were not consulted on this. As you say, this is an issue that is not quite the same but is closely related to what the university is and what it should be.

So yes, the open streams university would be a radical change from what we have now, only because, as Masao Miyoshi has repeatedly pointed out, the university has been overtaken by the corporate logic, and I am trying to envision a university that is not. Of course, one of the problems is that I, like most university professors today, am probably too young to have seen a very different university from the one we have now: it was already becoming what it is by the time I became an undergrad, in 1982. That is why I need to look around me now and find ideas where I can get them, in places that are familiar to me. The software debate seemed a good place to start.

Gabriela

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**John Postill (Sheffield Hallam University)**

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Message subject: *Materiality of software*

Yes, it's been a quiet seminar so far, let's hope it picks up over the weekend!

I was intrigued by David Hakken's concluding passage about Gabriela's raising of 'important questions that a media anthropology of software should be grappling with'.

I was wondering if Gabriela and others had any further thoughts on how to proceed empirically as well as theoretically with the study of software as a medium, what other sites in addition to the university may be prioritised. I'm thinking in particular

of Georgina Born's anthropological work on software as a medium (Born 1997) where she stresses the specific materiality of software, e.g. its lability, rapid obsolescence, uneven textuality (e.g. little in the way of reliable documentation of the programming process, incl. reliable textbooks), and so on, which makes it an inherently unstable medium (incidentally, Georgina has recently joined this list).

So this idea of some forms of software being 'open' and therefore suitable as enabling metaphors for a progressive politics may be misleading, in that software development requires levels of expertise and dedication that are beyond most of us. Will the complex materiality and technical demands of software, as shown by Born, ever make it a suitable metaphor for egalitarian movements, I wonder?

Also, I imagine that even within local chapters of the so-called 'open-source movement' stark inequalities -- built partly on software expertise -- are already in place. In my own recent fieldwork site (Subang Jaya, Malaysia) some cyberactivists who use open source rely on their technical knowledge to warn unruly/dissident elements on web forums that even if they use nicknames their IP addresses can be easily traced (which may not always be the case, though, but these scare tactics are nonetheless used).

## Reference

Born, G. 1997. 'Computer software as a medium: textuality, orality and sociality in an artificial intelligence research culture' in M. Banks and H. Morphy (eds.), *Rethinking Visual Anthropology*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.

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## David Hakken (Indiana University)

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Message subject: *Re: Response to Hakken*

To sharpen, in hopes of stimulating more responses:

1. I share Gabriela's concern for the present, and especially the future, of universities. Indeed, I now work at a publicly-financed one whose recent tuition increases have radically restricted access to poor, working class, and minority students; one, moreover, whose enchantment with "intellectual property" is both getting in the way of good scholarship and undermining its own reason for being;
2. I agree that it is quite legitimate to look for metaphors to inspire a discourse about alternative university futures, and that automated information and communication technologies (AICTs), which currently have something of a corner on the inspirational metaphor market, provide such provocative metaphors;
3. where we may disagree is on the issue of the extent to which what we use the metaphors for should be disciplined by an empirical understanding of the actual character of these technologies in use, and therefore over the proper role of an anthropology of AICTs in use. When one attempts to use F/LOSS, Linux, etc. metaphors, one can easily run into trouble; I once heard Ulf Hannerz argue,

appropriately in my view, that a metaphor is like a horse; one needs to be careful not to try to ride it too far.

4. one example of the problems I have in mind: the world of F/LOSS as it evolved was greatly affected by the dot com bubble; that is, to some substantial effect, for about five years in the late '90s, companies could afford to pay software developers to write F/LOSS code because they had money to burn, so the virtual commons got a lot of free code. Since the collapse of the dot.com bubble, the name of the game for F/LOSS organizations has been to find a way to make money F/LOSSing; it has not been easy, but many of them manage. How they manage is interesting, but I think, if we wish to argue for modeling our alternative university on F/LOSSing, we should understand how it actually is practiced today.

5. This means an ethnography of it, one not served well by framing our talk about it primarily in ideological terms, very fertile ground for ending up beating a dead metaphorical horse.

David

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“Creating intellectual property is the essence of what we do at Microsoft...”

--Microsoft press release, August, 2005

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**Daniel Taghioff (SOAS)**

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Message subject: *Universities, development and global publics*

Hello.

I have just caught up with my email after a short break, and coming home was brightened up by this great paper.

I really like it, because it is brave, it actually tries to ask some big questions, and to explore some new ground in interesting ways.

I do not think we need to get right down to the nitty gritty of empirical work without considering the bigger questions this paper asks. It is like skipping breakfast, or foreplay.

And the questions asked are some of the biggest: What is the character of the 'public'. This is pressing in a world globalising under the political banner of democracy and thus 'the public', whilst being consituted under the practices of managerialism, the hegemony of Neo-liberalism translated through MBAs, 'public service management' and management by objectives.

This is in many ways a development debate, indeed development embodies many of the practices that have led to this stifling hegemony in universities. Logical Framework Analysis is an approach to planning projectives based around discrete objectives and ouputs, with strict, and often quantitative reporting requirements on these objectives built in to the planning phase. This is a practice that has spread throughout public service (see Cracknell 2000), and now is part of how universities must budget plan, and then prove that they have 'produced' the necessary output. Within management literature this kind of management by objectives has been criticised for missing out on big systemic issues within corporations that exist beyond the objectives of specific projects.

In universities and the world at large such an approach tends to systematically exclude the 'public' and thus undermine what is understood as 'democratic' both in terms of 'public debate', or 'public goods' or 'the public' as a sense of a collective with a common fate rather than a future splintered into projects and objectives. And yes, this has much to do with disciplinary practices and how people are implicated in their self creation in relation to this (I think the story about discipline and punish is wonderful, I laughed out loud.).

The university is an important site to take up such issues, as V-C (not CV) rightly points out. It is a place of both self-making, of potential collectivisation, and of knowledge and power in practice. But this is not the only sphere of this that is/are of interest to Media Anthropology. At the broadest scale, where are our publics, where are our spaces of common debate, and how do we make ourselves as collectives? What are the implications of this for how we see ourselves as a human collective, and how we imagine our systems of rulership and our governmentalities within that? One debate I have recently touched on, in my largely readerless blog, is that of the need for a global public service media, to constitute some sort of 'public' globally.

<http://danieltaghioff.blogspot.com/2006/10/who-shall-speak-truth-to-power.html>

Universities are crucial in consituting global publics, and the relationship to knowledge is crucial in that. I can only really comment on this directly in terms of what I have learnt from my work attempting to critically examine communications in development.

I ventured into critical media studies and anthro-media from development communications, with the question 'what on earth is information' ringing in my mind.

I eventually worked out it was a metaphor for knowledge, and a disciplinary metaphor at that.

Information consists of discrete 'bits' which are seen as basically non-transformable. Information theory is predicated on this non-transformation: Agents are excluded from information exchange, instead replaced by machines that must guarantee the non-transformation of information. This is a basically conservative metaphor, that goes along with what Paulo Friere terms the banking metaphor of education. Knowledge is seen as akin to capital, poured out of teachers and into students. It is thus wealth to be amassed and reproduced within highly unequal relations.

This is a view of knowledge that is basically conservative, excluding both questioning and political action a priori. As such, along with the exclusion of agency it implies, it is a highly undemocratic metaphor, since it does not really fit with a sense of people's active political participation in creating their life-worlds. My paper at EASA Bristol was about these kinds of issues. All this probably rings rather true in contemporary university life, I see it that way as a Phd student.

Flow, as used in V-C and in Castells work, is a very unfortunate metaphor since it reinforces this information hegemony. Liquids can move, change shape, and be transported through conduits, but they do not transform their character along the way. What is implied is a similar conservatism as with 'information.' What needs to be born in mind is that when social agents are involved in representation, this inevitably involves transformation of knowledge, and selection, all from a particular standpoint. This is not a new insight, but it is important pay attention to what a metaphor of 'flow' can imply.

The same applies for 'transparency.' Here knowledge is seen as passing untransformed as if through glass. Not through a lense or a filter, but through pristine transparent conduit. Again, knowledge is untransformed in this, and so social agency, representing knowledge, is excluded.

The big question is of course, why are there so many anti-democratic metaphors for knowledge going around today, and I think that V-C's paper goes some way to address these questions. I would add that the managerialist practices we are subjected via tend to systematically exclude that public, and this is implicated with some very stilted views of knowledge and communication.

Where should universities go with all of this? Well, there is an interesting blog entry about the dangers and value of honesty for a university academic:

[http://ringmar.net/forgetthefootnotes/?page\\_id=87](http://ringmar.net/forgetthefootnotes/?page_id=87)

What is interesting in this is that, in terms of marketing a university, such intellectual honesty is an important issue for students: It is not just academics that see the importance of these public issues. I would venture that the current undergraduates students are responding to pressures like the rest of us, and this does not mean they cannot see the value of 'public' mindedness, if only they could find it on offer: In other

words, if you want to succeed commercially as a university, perhaps it is a good idea to be radical and be proud of it! I think that going with open access is a good idea, but we also need to tie this to a strong political purpose and message, this is not just an academic issue.

As for media anthropology, we really need to be careful about the metaphors for knowledge and communication that creep into our work: How often do we talk about information, or flow or transparency, or participation or voice for that matter, without looking carefully at what this might imply?

Open source is a wonderful area because it throws so many of such issues, well, open, and I really hope we hear more from this area.

Apologies for an overly long contribution, which thankfully avoided any mention of horses (oops.)

Daniel

## References

Paulo Freire (1975) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, London: Penguin.

Cracknell (2000) *Evaluating Development Aid*, London: Sage (see Chapt 5 on Logical Frameworks and public service management.)

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## Mark Pedelty (University of Minnesota)

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Message subject: *Open streams university*

A few thoughts concerning Gabriela Vargas-Cetina's Very much a midnight child.

First, it is heartening to see someone raise this issue. I find the open streams concept appealing, partly do to my recent experience at the U of Minnesota. I spent the last 7 years working in the General College at the University of Minnesota. It was closed last year in the effort by the university to become "one of the top three public research

universities in the world.” Seriously, that is the explicit campaign language. They needed to eliminate our students, those with low entering test scores, meaning that the GC had to disappear. The GC mission was to bring low income, first generation, diverse students into the university and give them the support to succeed.

The easiest way to move up in the superficial ranking rubrics is to become highly exclusive (elitist), increase faculty salaries (interestingly enough, that is meeting little resistance), partner with corporations who will inject funds into the tax-starved U, and emphasize grant-funded research (as opposed to public interest research). As a result, I now teach in a very different context. My new students and colleagues are wonderful, but it is a different life when compared to walking the halls and hearing a diverse array of languages and having students in my classes from refugee communities, the inner city, and working class contexts. There were certainly problems with GC, but the solution was certainly not to disenfranchise the working and middle classes.

Given the above, I have been thinking a lot about alternatives to the corporate university. Gabriela provides an intriguing one. Much like the copyleft movement in popular music, the proposed model would provide a domain in which we can simply “go around” private networks that threaten to, or already have, turned scholarship into a private interest. It would seem that a place to start is with publishers. Journals should be publicly available, but of course that would mean academics need to write in ways that are publicly accessible. One of the biggest disconnects is us.

Unfortunately, most publishers work on an extremely thin profit margin. The technological, logistical, and human infrastructure for making journals open domain would need to be paid for somehow. Most “free” media are ad-driven, and we all know what sorts of limitations that eventually imposes on content. It would take courage on our part to buck the professional disciplines imposed upon us and voluntarily contribute to an open-stream system. So, let’s do it.

The modern university developed out of theocratic antecedents. So much of academic culture arose out of theological tradition, from the robes to the architecture. Professorial life was modeled on that of the cloistered cleric, a vocation. It is now a profession, meaning that faculty expect the sorts of incomes and privileges that fly in the face of vocational motivations. Our practices, from the hotel-hopping conference ritual to the year end faculty activity report have turned us into warmed-over corporate professionals. We criticize big business, but we are big business.

Finally, I see the Vargas-Cetina model as dealing with the single most pressing problem of our day: sustainability. We fly around the world preaching sustainability. Anybody see the contradiction? To quote one open-stream source, Richard Hammond of the Guardian: “The United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) says that aviation is the single largest contributor to greenhouse gases <<http://www.resurgence.org/2005/hammond230.htm>>. Inexpensive software like Breeze allows for online conferencing. Those of us interested in virtual ethnography should lead the way in this regard. To those who find unsustainable practices essential to their work, perhaps we can collectively declare: “I will go nowhere to save the world.”

Gabriela argues:

“If we are to translate the university into an open streams university, we would have to take elements from all these models to create a new one, more responsive to society, more plural, more accepting of a plurality of cultures and subcultures and in general more willing to change constantly with input from society at large.”

Gabriela’s proposed model, a public interest hybrid developed out of present categories, provides an excellent road map, or at least a starting line. This is a matter of praxis rather than theoretical critique alone, however. To make it work would require that we change our conception of ourselves as academics, our practices, and goals. The temptation is to work vertically, going to our administrators, publishers, etc. to try to start moving institutions in that direction. Based on precedent and current trends, that is highly unlikely to work. The good thing about an open source model is that about all we need to do to make it happen is hard work on our part.

Thanks for generating this discussion and for the provocative paper, Gabriela. This is one of the most thought-provoking pieces I have read. Often, it is unclear exactly what one is supposed to “do” with academic writings, especially those that endlessly parse metaphors and definitions. This piece is the best kind of theorizing, that which has is intimately connected to practice.

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**Georgina Born (Cambridge University)**

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Message subject: *Re: Materiality and social relations of software R and D*

Dear all,

I come in late to the discussion, with apologies, but am encouraged by John Postill’s accurate summary of aspects of my paper on the materiality and sociality of software (Born 1997). This paper was accompanied by another one on the intellectual property dynamics immanent in software R and D (‘(Im)materiality and sociality: The dynamics of intellectual property in a computer software research culture’, *Social Anthropology*, v. 4, n. 2, 1996, pp. 101-116). Both papers attest to the existence, among advanced French software research groups in Parisian universities in the mid 1980s, to a fully developed, proto-free / open source, libertarian discourse of software development

(which suggests also that we do not assume that there was only one origin to these movements).

I'd like to add two points arising. 1) I think my papers were (remain?) among the first close ethnographies of software research and development in practice. (They both derive from a larger ethnography of computer music and modernist composition, 'Rationalising Culture' (publ. California 1995), which is where I found myself observing cultures of software R and D). John raises rightly the analysis I made of the limits posed by the materiality and textuality of software R and D, which weigh against any naive notion of the free sharing of software. One of the key points I made – which I have not since had refuted by software writers – is that simple access to source code does not in itself make programmes transparent. Often we hear about open source or free software being based on access to source code. But since complex programmes often evolve through collaborative labour and have multiple authors, the way that source code relates to the functionality of programmes is often opaque and not perceptible simply by scanning the source code. Often what is needed in order to understand the relation between source code or lower levels of code and the surface functionality of a programme is a direct 'translation' or decoding by the programme's author(s), which suggests that direct (social) contact is necessary with the author(s). I made the teasing point that this suggests, contrary to a Latourian account of the 'purification' of technical artefacts through the separation of the technical and the social, that it is problematic to accord this status to software, as it is commonly not fully 'purified' of social relations in this way. So, as David and John have been arguing, we need a more subtle grasp of the material nature of these technologies and how these favour or enable certain kinds of knowledge practice, and weigh against others. We need to acknowledge and analyse how the circulation of software and code continues to be mediated by quite standard social dynamics – entailing patronage, secrecy, collaboration, gifting, withholding, and so on – and not idealise these social relations. Not to do this means buying into a naive notion that these technologies – even so-called free and open source programmes – somehow circulate without any social mediation. A final point that follows here is that we can be naive about the possibility of software becoming effectively democratised.

We need, that is, better ethnographies of open source and free software as they actually operate now. (I know of one place apparently doing this: UC Irvine's Informatics Department, where Walt Scacchi has a research group that is doing online ethnography of open source / free software movements).

2) My second point follows on: it is that it is problematic to elide open source and free software, as these developments are heterogeneous and can differ radically in their ideological and institutional status. Open source, as far as I understand, currently encompasses pro-corporate attempts to tame the more libertarian impulses of these movements and to bring them safely within a market-oriented technological regime. These tactics represent, in other words, an attempt to defuse the potential impact of the free software movement. So let's avoid flattening out the quite major differences between and, in fact, the conflictual status of these movements. We need, again, to understand this heterogeneity, and to chart the conflicts.

Certainly, the universities must be at the forefront of resistance to the privatisation of knowledge, including the technological infrastructure. But using the software movements as metaphors for, or as showing routes out of, the current impasses of the university sector seems problematic to me. There is too much specificity in these developments on both sides (ie universities, and software movements). What about some good ethnographies of universities, instead of assuming that we understand what is happening to them? My own university, Cambridge, is extraordinarily misunderstood in the public debates in the UK; I wish there was a good ethnography...!

All the best,

Georgina

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**John Postill (Sheffield Hallam University)**

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Message subject: *V-C seminar, still time to post!*

Dear all

A reminder that our ongoing e-seminar on Gabriela Vargas Cetina's working paper on software and the university ends tomorrow, Tuesday, at 9 pm GMT. So there's still time to post your brief questions and responses directly to [medianthro@easaonline.org](mailto:medianthro@easaonline.org)

Best wishes

John

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**Gabriela Vargas-Cetina (Yucatan University / Cornell University)**

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Message subject: *On the limits of ethnography*

Hello all.

First of all, thank you for having read and to those of you who wrote, for writing about my paper. Special thanks to John Postill and David Hakken.

Yes, I agree my paper is short on the ethnography of software and the ethnography of the university: it has nothing of either. But I want to close this discussion by arguing that there might be issues that call for something other than ethnography.

Maybe the issue I am trying to address does not seem so pressing to some of you, but judging from what is happening here at Cornell, where I am doing my sabbatical,

and from what is happening at my home university in Yucatan, universities around the world are having to respond to similar constraints and methods of accounting that are making academic life center increasingly around accountable merit. These universities are having to frame their own existence within the parameters of the corporation, in its contemporary profit-making sense.

Like Daniel, I am mostly an economic anthropologist, and because of that I am often upset at the way in which the World Bank, the FMI and other such supra-national agencies define the goals and *raison d'être* of the university. As probably you all know, the World Bank, for instance, does not make too many fine distinctions between one and another country when it comes to structural adjustment programmes. The recipe is one and the same for every place: less bureaucracy, less government spending, more entrepreneurship, less public support to all aspects of life, including universities. Universities, from their point of view, have to become self-supporting entities where the productivity of each person is to be measured in clear numerical terms. Universities are to be driven by the logic of the transnational corporation.

How can we talk back to such incredibly powerful institutions, saying “no, that is not what we think the university (our, my university) should be?” The fact that the corporate view of the university is so widespread (in our conference we listened to examples from the US, Mexico, China, Japan, Taiwan, Korea and India, and all models presented were driven by the same rationale) has to alarm us. What is our role, as professors, in society? How can we articulate it? I don't think the ethnography of particular universities, or of the particular way in which ideology works on the ground (such as in the software movement) is going to give us adequate tools to talk back. If we can support coherently a vision of a university based precisely on its diversity, which is what I was trying to conceptualize, we will have developed an important tool to guide our own praxis as professors, our own course as academic administrators and our commitment to local communities at all times. I am not saying I succeeded, but that was the thrust of my thinking.

I have devoted my professional life for over 20 years to study ‘the cooperative movement’, and in the process I have learned there is no single cooperative that conforms to the cooperative model, anywhere. I still think there is a cooperative movement, and that there is a useful model through which each cooperative can be looked at.

To take a different example, to be a foreigner in the US today is to be suspect... Of what, it is never clear, but it is obvious that as aliens we seem to have this capacity of subverting the existing order. Now, the ethnography of aliens in the US will most likely show that the large majority of all alien individuals do NOT subvert anything, and not even have the capacity, the time or the will of subverting something specific. However, the analytical and theoretical conceptualization of otherness can show how we as aliens first and then as domestic others can be a positive influence on this country. How we can frame the argument, so that ‘alien’ as a category is recast in a new light, is of crucial importance, especially for those who, unlike myself, will stay here beyond the arc of one or a couple of years. Much post-colonial theory and post-structural philosophy are now devoted to this issue in its global dimension,

and that includes post-colonially and post-structurally-informed anthropology. And once we have a guiding array of theoretical (and yes, political) possibilities, we can then proceed to document ethnographically the contributions of people not born in this/these country(s) to the nation(s) at large.

So, if a university in the UK does provide an alternative model, I am now ready to actually see it. As Foucault taught us all those years ago, we can only see what we have eyes to see. I am looking for a new university I can strive towards. Metaphors have to be explored, exploited and exploded. The free software/copyleft was one at hand, and I wanted to see where it could take me. I thank you all for engaging in this conversation with me, and look forward to other conversations around this and other themes.

Gabriela

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**John Postill (Sheffield Hallam University)**

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Message subject: *Seminar closed*

Dear all

I'd like to close the e-seminar by thanking Gabriela Vargas-Cetina for sharing her working paper with us, David Hakken for being our discussant and all other participants. As usual a transcript of the seminar will be up on our website shortly.

Our next presenter will be Bart Barendregt from the University of Leiden with a paper entitled "Between m-governance and mobile anarchies: mobile media practices in present day Southeast Asia", due this coming 28 Nov-5 Dec.

Best wishes

John