Chapter 25

Technological Illusions and Educational Resistances: The Public Discourse about OLPC in Peru and Its Policy Failure

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ABSTRACT

OLPC, the One Laptop Per Child initiative, was accepted by just a few countries, including Peru. The largest acquisition of computers has produced a fairly low impact in education and is now being quietly phased-out. Peru’s government decision to adopt the computers, back in 2007, was not contested or questioned by the political class, the media or even teachers, with just a rather small number of specialists arguing against it. This chapters discussed the political and argumentative processes that brought OLPC into the public sphere, through the use of a specific narrative, that of hackerism, i.e., the hacker attitude towards computers, and how social and political validation resulted in adoption. An assessment of the process of framing OLPC as a hacker product and the perils of such reasoning lead to discuss the need for a counter-narrative about the role of computers in society.

INTRODUCTION

The deployment of computers in schools appears as a popular and modernizing response to the demands of renewing primary and secondary education. This is particularly important in the context of Latin American school education, as we witness popular demands to leapfrog from current conditions, which are rather poor, to a better, quality-oriented system. As computers and the Internet become widespread and continue to be signifiers of modernity and renovation, to bring them into educational settings as tools for changing the system is almost inevitable, especially as both the general public and a number of experts understand that competent usage of computers is a fundamental skill for all to have, no matter which prospective jobs are considered (Davidson & Goldberg, 2009).

As such, this demand for inserting computers into educational systems brings two sets of problems, quite different but clearly related to
each other. On the one hand, the pertinence of such a technology-driven response to the systemic weaknesses of educational services is, to say the least, a matter of dispute among specialists in education and public management (U.S. Department of Education, 2009). On the other, implementing computers at schools, a costly endeavor, demands a political discourse that frames technology as a solution to the aforementioned weaknesses, notwithstanding the first objection, as to help with the political consequences of prioritizing technology instead of many other potential uses of scarce resources, particularly in emerging economies.

Considering the lack of reported success with computers in education, while there is abundant literature both academic and journalistic on the failure of such endeavors, it may be surprising that a political discourse that believes in computers as solutions to actual educational problems may be so widespread and popular. The route most taken is to connect the aforementioned public perception of computers as sophisticated solution to many problems to the specificity of the public’s demand for educational modernization.

In other words: public policy and political discourse coexist without needing to actually communicate with each other, but they feed mutually of a set of perceptions and prejudices, mostly positive ones, that assume that computers are adequate solutions per se, without requiring actual evidence; this set of perceptions is not questioned by media or by experts from other domains, as it is obviously hard to stand for a negative: the nonexistence of successful computer-driven changes in education is not a proof of an structural impossibility, just a matter of not the right time, the right technology or the right implementation.

The purpose of this chapter is to discuss this particular understanding of policy making regarding computers. Based on a vague, non-empirically sustainable perception, policy makers allow for ICT to be dressed up as a perfect solution, starting by assuming the best possible outcome promised by those embracing “hackerism”, or hacker-like usage of computers. From hackerism is derived a set of practices and understandings of the way computers can affect the individuals and communities, that will be discussed under the term Hacker Social Imaginary (HSI). The use of this social imaginary to analyze the potential impact of computers in education drafts a narrative, that emphasizes a hacker-like set of results as the best outcome of using computers.

The most emblematic example of this narrative is OLPC, One Laptop Per Child, the project started back in 2006 by Nicholas Negroponte and applied in very few countries as a national policy. The Peruvian reaction to this narrative and its incorporation into policymaking and political discussion is the subject of analysis as it was the basis for establishing the predominance of HSI as the leading narrative justifying the expenditure of a significant amount of money in an unproven, unfinished product.

OLPC’s narrative embodied the most characteristic elements of the deterministic understanding of technology as development. Presented as a ready made, infallible solution to structural shortcomings, as well as a pole vault over the limitations embedded in educational systems, it was not just a technological solution but a categorical imperative, an opportunity everybody would want and thus, that should not be denied to anyone. At its most extreme version, OLPC proposes a technological solution to very complex, non-technological problems, ignoring research on the implementation and managing of technology as much as socio-technical analysis establishing the social nature of technology shaping. Education becomes a simple, technical problem, and the solution is already available.

One aspect of the moral demand for computers as modernization is the narrative about what computers can do for children, borrowed from OLPC’s own narrative. This can be described as an specific manifestation of HSI. This paper will strive to demonstrate not just that this imaginary, developed through the writings of computer pro-