Chapter 2
Living with New Media Technology:
How the Poor Learn, Share and Experiment on Mobile Phones

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ABSTRACT

This chapter considers the collective information behavior of the poor in Bangladesh. It examines the mobile phone as the central node and seeks to understand the construction of collectiveness by examining the collective-mediated learning, sharing and experimenting among the poor. Three brief cases provide the background and illustrate the elements of a Learn, Share and Experiment model. Against this tapestry of multiple perspectives, collective-mediated learning, sharing and experimenting enable the poor to be cost-efficient and socially productive. In conclusion there is an urgent need for all researchers to reexamine and rethink the poor’s collective information behavior as new media technology spreads deeper into their lives. Without it, we may miss the opportunity to discover something useful that will eventually lift them out of poverty.

INTRODUCTION

Numerous debates already exist about the impact of new media technology on our everyday lives. The surge in popularity of the Internet in the mid-1990s and its coming of age pushes us to think more creatively in designing new tools for sharing and interacting with each other. The Internet is often touted as a tool for real time or near real time, anytime, anywhere connectivity.

Another new media technology often pronounced as the must-have tool for every common person is the mobile phone. Unlike the Internet or the traditional landline phone, the mobile phone is a space-time compression tool; you can call a person at any time and from any place to arrange a meeting (Ito, 2004; Ito, 2005; Ito, Okabe, & Anderson, 2007). The mobile phone is also often perceived as the more agile tool for connectivity and interaction (Markoff, 2009); and is also more pervasive due to its low cost of ownership and simple functionality (Nokia, 2008 & 2009).
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Discussion of the poor’s appropriation and use of the mobile phone often accentuates the impact of the mobile phone as a work and life liberator, and how it enables poor people to enlarge their social network by means of connecting, synthesizing and applying information bits transferred in-between the mobile phones. To put it simply, in an economic and social sense, the mobile phone creates an opportunity space for the poor to lift themselves out of poverty (Hardy, 1980; Marker, McNamara, & Wallace, 2002; Aminuzzaman, Baldersheim, & Jamil, 2003; Abraham, 2007).

This chapter argues that the poor collaborate differently to make sense of this world, and they learn and share information somewhat differently from the more affluent members of society (Wong, 2007). In the developed world, we are drowning with information overload due to a constant flow of voice calls, SMSes, emails, instant messaging and information bits from social network sites (Wei & Kolko, 2005; Kolko, Rose, & Johnson, 2007). This is especially significant for the youth, amid new worlds for communication, friendship, play, and self-expression, known now as the ‘digital youth’ lifestyle (Ito et al, 2008). In such situations, information collaboration in a group can simply be a matter of managing information seeking, organizing and responding through suitable channels at a particular time (Kuhlthau, 1991; O’Neill, 2003; Hirsh & Dinkelacker, 2004; Javid & Parikh, 2006). In stark contrast, based on what I observed in fieldwork about how the poor learn and share information, they face uncharted territory on a daily basis. Not only is information limited; seeking information is problematic since not all information is readily formatted as complete information, or as actionable knowledge. Consequently, the poor need multiple information access points and the time to learn new things that are necessary for them to form the whole information picture (Narayan et al, 2000).

In what follows, a model of collective information behavior is presented, one that has its roots in constructionism and a social-interactional perspective. The collective term denotes the notion of togetherness; the collaborative term denotes the working together for a common purpose. In adopting this model, the process and perspectives of constructionism and a social-interactional perspective are not being rejected or ignored. Rather, a four-step model is introduced that incorporates elements of both constructionism and social-interactional factors and which is intended to act as an aid in explaining how collective information behavior among the poor occurs. The model assumes that collective-mediated learning and sharing (stage 1) initiates creative, synthesis, and cross-pollination activities within the group (stage 2). These activities function as an avenue to greater social interaction within the group. Following this, collective-mediated experimenting will occur primarily because of the confidence and trust in the group (stage 3). At this stage, the condition upon which the previous two stages build provides building blocks that are amenable to group experimenting, such as being willing to take risks and vocalizing opinions. While taking on a new path every time the group experiments, corresponding factors come into play: the creation of localized group knowledge and domestication of this knowledge into their everyday lives. Local ingenuity occurs primarily because the group, in a local setting, comes up with local invention and creativeness that is primarily suited to a local environment (stage 4).

The chapter is organized as follows. First, literature relating to prior work in collective information behavior, constructionism, technology domestication and social-interaction is reviewed. Second, the methodology and methods that inform the study are described. Third, findings from three case studies of the poor’s use of the mobile phone are presented. Fourth, the Learn, Share, Experiment (LSE) model is introduced and its importance and applicability to understanding the poor’s information needs and their steps to accessing the information via mobile phone discussed. Propositions for further research are
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