



Review of Jenna Burrell - Invisible Users - Youth in the Internet Cafés of Urban Ghana

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REVIEW

Burrell's book is based on an ethnographic study carried out between 2004 and 2010. Her intelligent and bold investigation details the use, abuse, establishment, and worship of internet cafés by the non-elite youth of Accra, Ghana. She describes the way culture and communication technology interact, change, move, establish and ultimately influence human behavior within the context of these urban internet spaces and the consequences of this technological revolution.

This book would be of interest to a variety of different readers, and this review highlights some of the points which I consider most relevant to researchers in the area. The book consists of eight chapters, each dealing with a specific topic of Burrell's research and can be read independently of the others.

From her empirical research, Burrell describes how the poor youth in Accra have constructed homemade internet cafés on the outskirts of Ghana with second-hand computers from the USA and Europe. She describes what these places look like and how the users of these cafés have come to almost worship these computers. She talks not only about the influence this has had on the physical environment but also how it has effected communication with people outside Ghana.



Burrell's work challenges many concepts, including the nature of culture . She investigates the presence of the internet in the outskirts of Ghana, not in the bourgeois centre, which is opulent in comparison and where any power resides.

The book considers both the online encounters (chat-rooms such as Yahoo and MSN) among non-elite Ghanaians but also those with the global digital community such as Americans, Europeans etc. Ghanaians' encounters with these communities have not been free from problems, rather full of racial stereotypes, rejection and sexual harassment . Disadvantaged Ghanaians have been rejected online on the grounds of being African, and, certainly on the grounds of being outsiders from the Ghanaian elite.

The book provides several examples of virtual social interactions among Ghanaians and citizens of the United States and Europe. In these interactions, Ghanaians were not always aware of Euro-American communication codes and etiquette. For Ghanaians it was not enough to be fluent in English in order to interact with Western and American individuals or trading organizations such as Travelocity. The linguistic system of the English language is not unique but it is diverse. Power, bias, social status and language codes are beyond technology and surpass cultures, consequently when humans interact online they do not avoid xenophobia, technophobia, homophobia, racism, sexual harassment and gender invisibility.

Burrell also raises issues regarding the internet, culture and language. She argues, for example, that we are certainly not speaking or using a 'universal digital language' as some scholars might claim, but rather "the internet's global interoperability rests on what is more aptly labeled a technical protocol, not the same thing as a human language." (Burrell, 2012, p. 185).

To summarise, the book invites the reader to (re)consider the influence of technology in the digital age within excluded global areas where technology has failed to reach disadvantaged populations such as in Africa. The author is also challenging the concept of culture, technological privilege and Euro-American technological domination. Old fashioned asymmetries will certainly no longer last as "the old dichotomies, it is clear, no longer suffice to frame issues of inequality and inclusion in the global networks the network expands to encompass more and more users from diverse geographies " (Burrell, 2012, p. 183).