

Technology and Territorial Claims among Ghanaians at Home and Abroad

Mobility is a privilege unevenly distributed amongst the world population. I was reminded of this reality again and again when my conversations with young Ghanaian Internet users in Accra turned towards travel experience, applications (accepted or denied) for travel visas to the U.S. or Europe, money lost to ‘connection men’ who claimed to have backdoor contacts in the embassies, and any of a number of other travel and migration related topics. Mobility was treated as a highly desirable commodity by young Internet users. It could be bought with money, but travel visa requirements and the immigration policies of foreign governments meant that mobility was not solely subject to free market forces. Mobility was also experienced as a form of capital, one that migrants found could be leveraged to realize monetary gain, a better education, and/or a broader, more prosperous social network.

Technologies relationship to mobility and its role in facilitating migration is missing, by and large, from speeches and documents produced at events like the recent UN-sponsored World Summit of the Information Society. Many voices in development, government, academia, and industry now argue that it is essential for Africa and other developing regions to build up their telecommunications infrastructure and become connected into the global economy. The way development institutions talk about the promise of technologies like the Internet is often at odds with on-the-ground technology practices in Ghana. The model of a worldwide, “information society” envisions farmers, schoolteachers, craftsmen, and chiefs pulling information into their communities to improve local conditions. This model implicitly de-emphasizes physical mobility

through its vision of space-transcending networks crisscrossing the globe that make everyone virtually co-located in one ‘global village’¹ (McLuhan 1962, Rheingold 1993).

Scholars of technology studies treat the conflation of connectivity with mobility as highly problematic (Marvin 1988, Nakamura 2002, Urry 2002). This was also demonstrated at Internet cafes in Accra, Ghana where I found that for many users rather than diminishing the desire to migrate, the Internet further fed this drive and made it seem more attainable. Internet use provided a venue for engaging fantasies about foreign lands and international travel. Pragmatically, users also employed the Internet to make contact with family living abroad to negotiate assistance with migration, to search for foreign contacts who would provide ‘invites’ that would improve their chances of getting travel visas, and to seek information about schools abroad and scholarship programs².

Ultimately, access to the Internet did not transform young Ghanaians migratory impulses into the kinds of information practices promoted by Western governments and development agencies. Rather the Internet provided new resources for seeking migration opportunities and for increasing one’s mobility.

This paper is an examination of how Internet café users in Accra, Ghana employed the Internet to contest constricted mobility and marginal positioning at both local and global levels. My focus is on the younger generation, those in their teens and twenties who made up the dominant proportion of Internet users. Many visited Internet cafés in groups on their way home from school. I observed and interviewed these users during an 8-month period of fieldwork on Internet café users and their everyday lives in Accra. I frequented 6 Internet cafes in four different areas within or adjacent to the city. These spaces varied from the small, minimally decorated 10-screen Internet cafes in the

impoverished Mamobi neighborhood to a very large 100-screen café named BusyInternet that was located in a central business district. All of these Internet cafes operated as for-profit businesses. I interviewed 75 Internet café users, operators, or owners. Of these interviews 57 were with individuals under the age of 30.

Young Internet café users in Accra experienced marginalization not simply through an inability to move to desired destinations, but also through a lack of access to and control over space. This included physical spaces, discursive spaces, and media spaces. Marginalization was effected through infrastructural and political configurations that disproportionately disadvantaged Ghanaians as well as other citizens of African nations. The lack of control over self-representation in the Western dominated global media was another recognized marginalization. As a young Internet user named Gabby lamented, “*if you are not in Africa all the pictures you see in Africa are diseases.... These nice, nice places will not be broadcasted....*” Young people in Accra expressed a sense of being doubly marginalized. Firstly, by migration restrictions that immobilized the young more than the older generation. Secondly, within their own society they found themselves marginally positioned within a social order that draws heavily upon gerontocratic principles that invest authority in elders. My analysis examines not simply the resistance of citizens of an African nation to subjugation by Western powers and political regimes. Rather it addresses the way young people, individually and in groups, negotiate constraints, both intra-societal and inter-societal, by innovating technology practices. The Internet was enrolled to address concerns with global access helping users to expand into an international social network, but the technology and its café milieu also mediated

local interpersonal relations between peers and between the older and younger generations.

Youth in Accra

Given the preponderance of young people in Internet cafes in Accra it is necessary to consider how this life stage is experienced and described as a distinctive social category and in what ways this maps to technology practice. In Accra, the social category of 'youth' was constituted by a characteristic set of conditions that typically emerged sometime in adolescence and extended for many as far as their late twenties or even early thirties. One widely recognized condition that marked youth was having not yet crossed either of two thresholds to adulthood; getting married or having children. For many young people, an incomplete education and/or lack of reliable full-time employment also were indications of having not yet attained adulthood. There was also an affective dimension to this state including a frustrating feeling of stagnation and a sense of total uncertainty about the future. Yet, these conditions are recognizable to youth the world over. Willis in his study of youth creative cultures asserts that: "*All young people experience one aspect or another of the contemporary 'social condition' of youth: unwilling economic dependence on parents and parental homes; uncertainty regarding future planning; powerlessness and lack of control over immediate circumstances of life; feelings of symbolic as well as material marginality to the main society; imposed institutional and ideological constructions of 'youth' which privilege certain readings and definitions of what young people should do, feel or be*" (Willis 1990, pp 12-13). Much of Willis' description is also applicable to young Ghanaian

Internet users many of whom felt that a restricted role was imposed on them and was enforced through family interactions as well as religious and educational institutions.

While young people in Ghana and in affluent Western societies shared a general sense of marginality, uncertainty, and disempowerment, the particular conditions and social shifts in these societies that impacted technology and media consumption patterns diverged in some significant ways. The economic dependence on parents and parental homes referenced by Willis above was not a major subject of concern among young Ghanaians for whom reciprocal flows of wealth within kinship networks and extended household living arrangements were the norm. Additionally, Livingstone has documented the growth of technology ownership and private media consumption by young people in homes in the UK relating it to the 'risk society' (Beck 1992) and a growing perception of urban public spaces as dangerous. Restrictions on where young people could go and with whom they could spend time drove the purchase of media technologies to outfit young people's bedrooms in the family home. These efforts were framed as safety measures (Livingstone 1992). In Ghana, by contrast, there was little emphasis on safety. Restrictions on youth emerged through the efforts of authorities to cultivate disciplined young bodies and minds through educational and religious institutions. Family roles and duties also placed substantial restrictions on how young people expressed themselves to their elders, how they spent their time, and in whose company.

Young people in Accra were tied into a traditional gerontocratic ordering of society and its principles of social authority by elders, a system that endures despite the uprooting process of rural-urban and international migration in Ghana. This played out in

the everyday lives of young people in a variety of small and large ways. For example, Miriam had a younger sister living with her who swept the room they shared every morning, fetched water for Miriam's bath, and sat at her drink-selling kiosk all day while Miriam was free to come and go. In exchange, Miriam was expected to take care of her sister's financial needs including her education. Similarly, Abiba, a 16-year-old senior secondary school student was the youngest member of her household which was made up of her grandmother, and several aunts and uncles. Her family was Muslim and she was an Internet user, liked listening to American rap and hip-hop artists, dressed in Western-style trousers and tops, but also wore a headscarf when out in public. She slept at night in her grandmother's room in case the grandmother needed anything (a glass of water, was given as an example) and she did chores of all types (cooking, cleaning, errand running) around the compound. Abiba, like many young people was expected to do quite a bit of work on behalf of the family and was almost constantly under supervision.

The structure of Abiba's home life was continuous with the school environment which similarly held students to exacting standards of good behaviour. Schools were oriented towards discipline and orderliness. These values were emphasized by the annual competition between schools that perform in uniformed marching squads at the annual Independence Day celebrations on March 6th. These squads compete for awards based on their precision and conformity. Both at home and at school there was no tolerance for young people arguing with, questioning, or talking back to their elders. Supervision and enforcement of behaviour was not limited to home and school, but could also be witnessed on the streets. Although these checks on behaviour were limited by the unavoidable anonymity of urban living, it was socially acceptable and expected that older

members of the community would monitor and regulate the behaviour of young people whether or not they were kin.

The particular restrictions youth faced varied according to gender and Muslim or Christian religious affiliation. Abiba, the Muslim girl described above, was among the most restricted. During her interview she noted that, *“I’m not even allowed out more times. I’m always restricted. Before I go out I seek permission, the time is given, go and come at this time. Don’t stay long, so I’m being restricted...”* She described these constraints as an effort to prevent her from getting mixed up with bad people and bad activities such as credit card fraud activities many thought were taking place at Internet cafes. Although it was not stated explicitly by Abiba or her family, gender likely played a role in these restrictions and Abiba complained of the boys at Internet cafes who *“will just disturb you. They say, ‘oh...I want you to be my girlfriend.’”* By contrast, during a family interview Frank, an Internet café user said that his father *“used to laugh. He said, one day they will arrest you. Maybe he [read] a paper about fraud.”* His father who affectionately referred to him as ‘Internet man’ added, *“I advise him that if you want to use the Net, you have to use it correct way, not devious way.”* While aware that fraud activities were sometimes taking place in Internet cafes and even indicating suspicion that his son might be involved with such activities, Gabby’s father positions himself as his son’s advisor rather than his warden offering him a degree of self-determination that was not offered to Abiba by her family.

A sense of frustrating stagnation expressed by young people was exacerbated by periods of boredom and inactivity that many faced after they completed a level of schooling. There were long gaps where students were not actively enrolled in school, but

were preparing for exams or waiting for exam results to come out. An exam was taken after junior secondary school typically at age 15 and again around age 18 many students took the Senior Secondary School Certificate Examination or university entrance exams. Students took these exams in the fall, but didn't hear their results until the spring. Those who did not do well-enough to advance had to re-sit exams and wait again for results. Some young people were also forced to wait until they or their family members could gather the money to fund their next level of education. Many were eager to find a way to fill the extra time. Isaac was offered the position of driver's mate on a tro-tro bus³ by his father while he was waiting for exam results. He readily agreed to the job noting that, "*I was lonely at home doing nothing.*" Many young people took computer and software training courses while waiting. Spending time at Internet cafes was another way to fill this void. As Fauzia, an unemployed 23 year old noted, "*Sometimes instead of sitting in the house, making noise, it's better to go to the café, to go and chat.*" Going to the Internet café was not only an enjoyable way to pass the time, but the skills and foreign contacts gained might prove beneficial in the future justifying the investment of time and money.

Fantasies of Foreign Travel

While some young Internet users treated the time they spent at the Internet cafe primarily as entertainment and as an engaging diversion, others took a more purposive and goal-oriented approach. Stephen, an unemployed 21-year-old who had recently completed secondary school observed, "*when you go to the cafes, you see a lot of websites, penpal clubs...one thing I did was to visit the Christian penpals. We have the*

snail mails, we have the prisoners, we have the missionaries, but sometimes when you write them through the mail...they don't take it serious.” Like many other young aspiring migrants, he treated immigration regulations as a system to be outwitted. He had heard that the embassies ask about ‘travel experience’ and deny visas to those who had none. So he was collaborating with a friend to obtain a visa to South Africa, a trip he wanted to take solely to acquire this travel experience. Stephen spent time in chatrooms exclusively seeking ‘invitations’ to visit foreigners. He noted that many of the people he contacted, *“want to know you for some time before...they will give you the e-mail address, they will ask you to write to them, to communicate with them for some time before [giving an invitation].”* Having no patience for such a time-consuming effort and seeing no redeeming value in the process itself Stephen noted, *“when I chat and I see that you are not willing, I have to [quit talking to you].”* He had so far been unsuccessful in obtaining an invitation or a visa to travel.

Kwaku, Daniel and three other friends from secondary school saw more value in the Internet as a device for recreational pursuits. However, like Stephen, they similarly directed their attention towards foreign destinations and fantasies of travel. They visited the Internet café together regularly and ended up forming a club. They formalized the group by going online to the British Airways website where they signed up for the frequent flyer programme and received membership cards by Post. The British Airways programme was called the ‘Executive Club’ and so they took this name for the group. Although they never planned to use the cards, they were pleased to note that they could charter flights and receive other benefits from their membership. The group also developed a level of technical savvy by searching for “illegals” or ways of hacking into

Internet café computers to get free online time. These tricks spread by word of mouth in the schoolyard and quickly became overused, so the group was constantly on the hunt for new “illegals.” Beyond technical tricks Kwaku, Daniel and their friends invented a competition where they would order free things online and see who could collect the most. The example given was a CD of computer games. The goal was not the computer game itself but the accumulation of CDs.

A theme carrying through these activities online and offline was a fascination with abroad and with whatever evoked travel and connectivity with distant locales. Airline membership cards and CDs or books by mail personalized with a name and address provided this sense of global interconnectivity that was far more compelling to young people than the gambling games the CDs contained. The Internet provided opportunities for making faraway places very tangible and personal – marked with the most intimate of labels, one’s name. Accumulating mail was a way of demonstrating power spanning great distances with whomever collected the most material declared the victor. This thrill was also evident in the most popular of Internet activities among youth – collecting pen pals. This activity was often conducted with such brevity and divided attention by Internet users in Accra that it became clear that a moment of contact rather than the content of extended conversations had value in and of itself (Slater and Kwami 2005).

It is imaginable that opportunities for economic or educational gain could be channeled through new technologies like mobile phones and the Internet without requiring users to travel. However, as was illustrated by Kwaku and his friends in the ‘Executive club,’ travel was rarely motivated by such instrumentalist motives alone. In Ghana, there was powerful symbolic value to having been abroad. Chatting with and

collecting foreign penpals in Yahoo chatrooms and having contacts abroad lent some status to young Internet users. Many aspiring migrants talked about travel as an experience valued as enrichment and seen as identity forming. A diversity of perceived benefits went along with the material gains expected by moving beyond Ghana's national borders.

For most young Internet users, the ostensible purpose of Internet café use was to build an international social network through chatrooms and penpal websites. However, for youth in groups, visits to the Internet café also served as a way of building social cohesion within peer groups as well as establishing individual status and roles. The devices used to establish status have expanded to include the Internet and other commodities, but the impetus to compete certainly predated the arrival of Internet cafes. The formation of organized youth groups was not a product of the Internet, but was a pre-existing social practice. For example, in the impoverished and densely populated neighbourhood of Mamobi located in the centre of Accra young men came together to form 'Bases.' These 'bases' were composed of friends who were associated with a certain informal hangout spot such as an unfinished building or a street corner. Many groups competed against one another in football. The activities of some of these groups included entrepreneurial ventures and/or community service. Alternately, mixed-gender groups came together to form youth clubs concerned with education and community service. 'Bases' and youth groups had certain naming conventions, often favouring place names that made use of the symbolic potency of locations in the West, most often in the United States. For example, among the names mentioned were: Alaska Youth Club, Nebraska Youth Club, Dallas Base, and Canadian Academy. Space was a concern for

these groups who often laid claim to interstitial spaces posting a painted banner or sign with their name and motto on the side of a dirt path or on the wall of a building. The Internet café emerged as a new, initially undefined space that was well suited to the existing desire among the young for sociability and competition.

Claiming Territory

Internet café user served not only in building social cohesion among peers, but also in strategies for coping with inter-generational relations. Internet cafes held an appeal as spaces where they could escape the surveillance of their elders. Internet cafes, by contrast to home, school, and most public spaces, were spaces dominated by young people and there was limited, if any, supervision by elders. Internet café owners were typically absent most of the time and operators were often of similar age, acting more like peers than supervisors. Young people could also arrange to visit cafes when they knew older people would not be around. For example, Gabby noted, “*we will leave the school around 10, midnight because by then the price is low and then older people will not be in the net.... They will tell us to stop watching this pornographic.*” Internet cafes therefore became spaces for forms of mischievous, youth-centred and peer-oriented behaviour that would undoubtedly be disapproved of by authority figures. These activities included watching and emulating music videos, flirting with foreign chat partners, playing online games, and (as described above) trying to hack the computers to get free browsing time, and finding ways to obtain free things such as pamphlets, bibles, or CDs of computer games. On one occasion I walked into an Internet café where everyone was gathered around a computer monitor watching “Top Gun.” On another, I observed a young man

with some friends studying a video by the hip-hop artist Usher and emulating his dance routines. The advantage of escaping parental supervision and having a space for personal creativity and identity exploration is described as similarly motivating teenagers in the West to spend time on MySpace and other popular spaces online (boyd 2006) and also in Internet cafes (Laegran and Stewart 2003).

The prevalence of porn watching in Internet cafes was often exaggerated in the alarmist accounts I ran across in the local media, informal publications⁴, and in sometimes in casual conversations with older Ghanaians. I did, however, find that it possible on occasion to witness individuals and groups (usually of young men) looking at porn in Accra's Internet cafes. Sadia, a secondary-school student from Mamobi described how some of her classmates – both male and female - went to the Internet café to watch 'obonsam cartoons.' Obonsam means 'satan' in Twi and the phrase was a coded and humorous reference to porn videos. These schoolmates would discuss and tease each other about what they had seen when back in class out of the earshot of the teacher.

Young people were certainly aware that this activity was considered transgressive and did not defend it. As Sadia warned, *"there's a saying that anything that the eye sees it enters the mind and what enters the mind wants to be practiced. They looking at pornographic pictures... and they will like to practice and at their age I don't think you could do that."*

Young people in Accra's Internet cafes leveraged their proficiency with technology to make claims on new territory through a process of annexation. Internet use affected the way they occupied the space of the schoolyard, classroom, and dormitory. As Sadia mentioned above, young people discussed their forays online in the classroom and schoolyard thereby subversively expanding this terrain of youthful independence into

spaces where they were highly supervised. Printers and scanners made it possible to do so in multiple formats as Gabby noted about his early Internet experiences, "*I followed my seniors to town and we went to the café and then you see, when we got there...the pornographic pictures, sites, we have them plenty.... We go, scan them then we paste them in our dormitories.*" Through these actions youth found new ways to challenge authority in a competition over turf. The conversations about their transgressive activities and display of illicit media in the institutional setting of the classroom or dormitory was a way that young people annexed space extending the domain of the Internet café into places that young people were obligated to inhabit, but usually on the terms of school authorities rather than their own.

There was a difference between the Internet café, a new, largely undefined and therefore claimable space and the classroom and home where the roles of youth were clearly demarcated. The Internet café had less history, fewer interconnections with social processes in the larger society and was consequently subject to 'takeovers.' For a period of time, at BusyInternet, the largest café in town, groups of rowdy, young men known as 'Nima boys' from the impoverished Nima neighbourhood took hold of the space through their noise and numbers. Their exclusionary claim on the space alienated other patrons such that management instituted new policies to regain a sense of the space as equally open to men, women, the young and the old. These new policies included limiting to two the number of people sitting at a single computer screen and enforcing the purchase of food or beverage at the attached café/restaurant to prevent the space from being monopolized by young 'hooligans'. The intrusive and suggestive comments made by young men to young women (as noted above by Abiba) also served in these takeover

activities by establishing the space on young men's terms and against young women's. By contrast, at school young people relied on 'tactics' (de Certeau 1984) rather than takeovers to claim and reterritorialize space surreptitiously.

The activities of young people in Internet cafes that their elders would likely consider frivolous or outright harmful quite clearly served youth as a way of claiming personal territory, flouting social norms and exploring alternatives, and establishing themselves as individuals, distinct from these expectations of parents, teachers, and older relatives. In this way it served as a reaction to what Willis describes as, "institutional and ideological constructions of 'youth' which privilege certain readings and definitions of what young people should do, feel or be," " (Willis 1990:13). Internet cafés were spaces where young people were able to contravene these constructions.

CONCLUSION

The Internet, an aggregation of foreign commodities providing instantaneous connections to foreign lands, prompted much thought among young Ghanaians about their place in the world, their society's relationships with the West, and its ties into the global economy (or lack thereof). Limitations on migration were an active topic of conversation. They felt that the constraints on their mobility translated into limits on education, financial accumulation, and social connections. Their activities in the space of the Internet café indicated that the technology served not only as a way to participate in and challenge transnational economic and political infrastructures, but also to mediate local interpersonal relations. The suitability of the Internet café for peer socializing and competition and for addressing intergenerational conflict was at least partly responsible for the ongoing engagement and enthusiasm with the technology. These local

compatibilities paved the way for technology to realize an established place in society. The trade off was that this process was also responsible for the often asymmetrical adoption of the Internet by young men whose Internet café ‘takeovers’ discouraged some young women and perhaps also older people from participating. These insights are also important for development agencies for whom revolutionary potential is often the central focus, rather than highlighting and perhaps leveraging existing compatibilities between the motives and concerns of certain groups within African societies and the capabilities of new technologies.

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¹ Voices critical of the 'global village' formulation include Ess who notes that the expectation of an underlying 'common humanity' and that adequate communication will resolve political differences are not in fact universals, but distinctively Western ideological positions (Ess 1998). Halavais argues that the topography of the Internet reasserts, rather than transcends national boundaries (Halavais 2000). Hampton and Wellman provided an empirical study on a 'wired suburb' that demonstrated that a greater improvement in social relations was realized by among those who were already geographically proximate, emphasizing the continuing significance of physical distance (Hampton and Wellman 2002). Fortner similarly argues for the significance of ongoing proximity in the creation of group intimacy. He describes the 'global metropolis' as a more adequate metaphor for global media spaces like cyberspace rather than the 'global village' (Fortner 1993).

² Pragmatic practices of negotiating with family members in the diaspora were also observed by Horst (2006) among mobile phone users in Jamaica.

³ The driver's mate is the person who collects money, announces the route of the bus to those waiting at bus stops, and arranges seating. Trotros are the primary form of low-cost public transportation in Ghana. These particular vehicles and routes are not government funded or organized, but rather privately owned and operated.

⁴ A self-published book titled "The Word of god on Sex and the Youth" was handed to me by its author Victor Olukoju at a career development event for young people sponsored by a evangelical church based in Nigeria. The book contained a chapter on the Internet that contains this warning about Internet pornography: "*Thousands of youth worldwide are already addicted to this ungodly practice... People keep ungodly appointments to go and chat with boyfriends and girlfriends on the Internet. They occupy their time with such chats and do not have enough time to sleep early so they come to Church anytime they want. What sort of world are we living in? People pay money to commit sin!... The youths now steal and borrow money to browse the net just to 'enjoy' these nude pictures and other immoral acts or films.*"