Development Informatics

Working Paper Series

The Development Informatics working paper series discusses the broad issues
surrounding information, knowledge, information systems, and information and
communication technologies in the process of socio-economic development

Paper No. 35

Analyzing Telecentres Using Postcolonial Theory

SAVITA BAILUR

2008

View/Download from:
http://www.sed.manchester.ac.uk/idpm/research/publications/wp/di/index.htm

Educators' Guide from:
http://www.sed.manchester.ac.uk/idpm/research/publications/wp/di/educdi.htm

Table of Contents

Analyzing Telecentres Using Postcolonial Theory

Savita Bailur
Associate, Development Informatics Group
IDPM, University of Manchester
savitabailur@hotmail.com

2008

Abstract

This paper uses postcolonial theory to analyze the continuing implementation of one type of information-and-communication-technology-for-development (ICT4D) project: telecentres. Postcolonial theory emerged out of the discipline of literature and provides useful theoretical elements of otherness, hegemony, mimicry, hybridity and voice. Following a brief critical overview of these, the paper goes on to analyze telecentre examples through these concepts.

It finds that postcolonial theory is a means for re-conceptualizing the use of ICTs in development, including telecentres. Through a postcolonial lens, telecentre projects can be seen as an imposition of the centre on the periphery; an imposition not merely of technology but also of priorities, identity, patterns of thought, and inter-relationships. This can include the paradoxical top-down imposition of participation; and a determination that only the "right kind" of participation is permissible.

The theory, and its application, clearly have limitations. But it also raises key questions of how telecentres will be used (the notion of hybridity), and asks Spivak's question of whether the "subaltern" (or telecentre beneficiary) can ever truly speak about the benefits or lack of benefits of a telecentre; hence whether we can ever truly know the impacts of these ICTs-for-development initiatives.

Introduction

In 2004, the MS Swaminathan Research Foundation in India formed a National Alliance for Mission 2007, with the slogan "Every Village a Knowledge Centre". The aim of this alliance was to use information and communication technologies (ICTs – by the Foundation's definition, the internet and PCs, as well as television and community radio) to improve "rural development". Knowledge Centres are in other words telecentres, multi-purpose community centres, information kiosks, or public access internet points – a multitude of terms for degrees of ICT connectivity and access. The Mission 2007 website states: "the Mission for achieving a knowledge revolution in India derives strength and confidence from the numerous outstanding initiatives underway in the country under the sponsorship of Central and state governments, civil society organizations, academia and the corporate sector. The beneficial impact of ICT on the rural economy and quality of life is now widely recognized" (Mission 2007, n.d.). Note that there is no mention here of the intended beneficiaries, what the beneficial impact is, and what studies have been undertaken to confirm this. The website calls for a bottom-up approach "in relation to content and knowledge management … a sense of local ownership and management" but then adopts a didactic tone: "in each of these villages, at least one woman and one man can be selected as Fellows of the National Virtual Academy. There is need to select one million Fellows of NVA by 15 August 2007" (Mission 2007, n.d.).

Mission 2007 is an example of the pervasive dichotomy in telecentre implementation: we hear that telecentres should be implemented (because the above-mentioned governments, civil society organizations, academia and private sector have implemented them) but that they should be participatory. They should address user needs but they should be managed by "experts" (Rao, 2004). Finally, most telecentre articles which begin recommending telecentres for development end by calling for more research because benefits are not yet apparent (Blattman et al, 2003, Colle, 2005; Roman and Colle, 2002; Whyte, 2000). The scant research that does exist points towards the lack of telecentre sustainability – Proenza writes that 1,281 Argentine Community Technology Centres were installed between 1999 to 2000. A year later, 72% were still open, and a little later still no-one knew how many were in existence (Proenza in Badshah, 2003). Qvortrup (cited in Tschang et al, 2002) comments that at least 70% of the first wave of telecentres in Australia disappeared after two years. Robinson (1998) writes that after two years, only five of the twenty-three original telecentres established by the Ministry of Environment in rural Mexico were functional (Robinson, 1998). Yet the call for telecentres continues.

This paper seeks to understand why telecentres continue to be implemented despite scant systematic research on the link between ICTs and rural development and the doubtful long-term sustainability of telecentre projects. The paper finds postcolonial theory a suitable lens to analyze this conundrum. The paper is also an attempt to theorize the continuing existence of telecentres by looking towards theories other than those that have been applied to telecentres so far. These include ANT (Reinhard and Macadar, 2006); sociology of governance (Madon, 2005); diffusion of innovations (Roman, 2003) and Ciborra's metaphor of hospitality (Iyer, 2005). Section A begins by providing a brief critical overview of postcolonial theory and Section B summarizes telecentre activity and analyzes it against postcolonial theory.

A. Postcolonial Theory

A1. Definitions of Postcolonial Theory

Postcolonial theory is the body of work which emerged around the 1970s to understand the representation of colonialism and colonization in literature. For Said, postcolonialism is about understanding imperialism: "the practice, the theory, and the attitudes of a dominating metropolitan centre ruling a distant territory [and] "colonialism", which is almost always a consequence of imperialism, the implanting of settlements on distant territory" (Said, 1994, p. 8). Ashcroft et al (1998) see postcolonial theory as "the way in which literature by the colonizing culture distorts the experience and realities, and inscribes the inferiority of the colonized people" (p. 186). Sylvester (1999) simply sees postcolonial studies as a "concern to record world history from the colonial receiving end of it" (p. 712).

Slemon (1994) has a much broader definition. He sees postcolonial theory "as a way of ordering a critique of totalizing forms of Western historicism; as a portmanteau term for a retooled notion of "class", as a subset of both postmodernism and poststructuralism (and conversely, as the condition from which those two structures of cultural logic and cultural critique themselves are seen to emerge); as the name for a condition of nativist longing in post-independence national groupings; as a cultural marker of non-residency for a Third World intellectual cadre; as the inevitable underside of a fractured and ambivalent discourse of colonialist power [and] as an oppositional form of "reading practice"" (Slemon, 1994, pp. 16-17). Slemon's definition shows that although postcolonial theory emerged out of the discipline of literature, it can be more broadly used (as it will be in this paper) to understand relationships of power between a colonizer and the colonized.

Postcolonial theory borrows from sometimes conflicting ideologies – Edward Said (1994, 2003) from Foucault; Homi Bhabha (1990; 2004) from Lacan and Althusser, and Gayatri Spivak (1987, 1988, 1990) from Derrida. Broadly speaking, there appear to be two main subsets of the theory. The first focuses on colonial literature and colonial discourse analysis to understand how the colonization process is portrayed (however unconsciously) in literature. Said (1994), for example, provides what he calls a "contrapuntal reading" of Jane Austen's Mansfield Park, which reveals the extent to which the life of the English upper classes is established upon the profits made from West Indian plantations. Other theorists focusing on colonization include Franz Fanon (1967; 1986) and Leopold Sedar Senghor (1970).

More recently, a loosely cohesive group of "subaltern studies" has emerged, where the subaltern is "a name for the general attribute of subordination in South Asian society whether this is expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender and office or in any other way" (Guha, 1982, p. vii). The key focus of the subaltern studies group is to analyze how the previously "colonized" deals with the shadow of colonization, and how this is represented in literature (Bhabha, 2004; Spivak and Harasym, 1990).

One can already see several tensions in postcolonial theory. First of all, who is the colonized? In *Orientalism* (1995), Said saw the colonizers as Britain, France and the USA, whereas the colonized were seen as South Asia, Japan, China and the Middle

East. But one can ask here – is a country such as Australia not only colonized, but also colonial, because of its unresolved "native issue"? And what of the Japanese colonization of Korea or the Chinese colonization of Tibet? (Sylvester, 1999). Secondly, if postcolonial theory is about colonization, and neo-colonialization, why the term "postcolonial theory" rather than "colonial theory" or "neo-colonial theory"? A partial answer is provided by Ahmad (1995) who sees postcolonialism as "a transhistorical thing, always present, and always in the process of dissolution in one part of the world or another" (p. 9). Postcolonial theory is therefore not just about colonial empires as we know them but contemporary empires too. We now go on to present a few key concepts in postcolonial theory before applying these to telecentres.

A2. Binaries

A key – and contested – concept of postcolonial theory is that of binaries, put forward by Said in *Orientalism* (2003). Said sees Orientalism as a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction between "the Orient" and (most of the time) "the Occident" (Said, 2003, p. 2). He also sees it as "dealing with it [the Orient] by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient" (p. 3). Perhaps most crucially, he sees Orientalism as not just an overt desire to control but also a desire to *know* the Orient, which can be a form of control.

Said sees the Orientalist world as consisting of opposites – the "Occident" is depicted as ordered, rational and masculine, whereas the "Orient" is seen as chaotic, irrational and feminine. He sees such binaries appearing in Flaubert's novels, in Forster's *Passage to India* and Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* including other works. Such dichotomies appear to be reflected in the modernist discourse on development. As early as 1968, Myrdal saw efficiency, diligence, rationality and orderliness as the declared goals of development projects (1968). Hall equates being Western with "a society that is developed, industrialized, urbanized, capitalist, secular, and modern" (Hall, 1992, p. 278). A further dichotomy is that of the centre/periphery. As seen above, Said's definition of colonialism is that of a metropolitan centre implanting settlements on distant territories. Hall argues that this centre/periphery dichotomy still exists, where non-Western societies are seen as "close to, far away from, catching up with" (1992), implying that the "West" is the centre. Ashcroft et al (1998) term this as the "geography of difference" – everything outside the centre is marginal. Yet a postcolonial critic would ask – who are the marginal, and marginal in relation to what? (Gunew, 1994; Jordan and Weedon, 1995).

A3. Otherness

The work of Homi Bhabha draws on Lacan's (1968) ideas of otherness. Firstly, there exists the "other" – with a lower case "o". Lacan provides the analogy of a child who looks in the mirror and recognizes a separate being. When the child sees its image, it must bear sufficient resemblance to the child to be recognized, but must be separate enough to ground the child's hope for anticipated mastery (Bhabha, 2004). The

second is the Other – with a capital "O"– or the *grande-autre*. This is the Other in whose gaze the subject gains identity. For a child, this could be a mother or a father, as the child exists in the gaze of his/her parents. Bhabha writes that for Lacan "all desire is the metonym of the desire to be" as the first desire of the subject is the desire to exist in the gaze of the Other.

The relevance of both types of otherness to postcolonialism is clear. The "other" exists in the colonized who must be mastered, either directly or indirectly (through knowing him). The "Other" is one whose appreciation is needed. A simplistic example might be that of Columbus' description of the Americas – his diaries showed the simultaneous lure of the "New World" (which he firmly believed was the Orient), and yet a desire to equate it to the familiar landscape of Europe. On the other hand, his Other included his sponsors, King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella whom he was seeking to please. Pratt (1985) sees this desire to classify and control in John Barrow's *Account of Travels in the Interior of Southern Africa in the Years 1797 and 1798*. Here "the people to be othered are homogenized into a collective, "they", which is distilled even further into an iconic "he" (the standardized adult male specimen). This abstracted he/they is the subject of verbs in a timeless present tense …" (p. 139).

Bhabha picks up on the Saussurean importance of difference – that on their own, the words *night* and *day* do not mean anything but it is the difference between them that is revelatory (2004). For Escobar, this difference is clear in the discourse of development which "reproduces endlessly the separation between reformers and those to be reformed by keeping alive the premise of the Third World as different and inferior" (1995, p. 90). Ferguson, for example, expresses his surprise at Lesotho portrayed in the 1975 World Bank report as a traditional subsistence peasant society, whereas he sees it as a vibrant and economically developed country (1994).

A4. Hegemony

Another key construct of postcolonial theory is that of hegemony, borrowed from Gramsci (1988; 1991). How does a ruling class continue to convince other classes that their interests are in the interests of all? (Ashcroft et al, 1998). Rahnema (1991) deconstructs the development discourse – despite large amounts of money spent in researching poverty, no-one can define the word. "For one reason, almost all the definitions given to the word are woven around the concept of "lack" or "deficiency". This notion reflects only the basic relativity of the concept. What is necessary and to whom? And who is qualified to define all that?" (1991, p. 25). Shrestha recounts his childhood in a Nepalese village – "poor and hungry, I certainly was. But underdeveloped? I never thought – nor did anybody else – that poor meant being "underdeveloped" and lacking in human dignity" (1995, p. 268). Escobar (1995) therefore sees development as a set of institutionalized myths. Among these is the notion of the "expert", with "the moral, professional and legal authority to name subjects and define strategies… [including] governments of poor countries, which commanded the legal political authority over the lives of their subjects, and the position of leadership of the rich countries, who had the power, knowledge, and experience to decide on what was to be done" (ibid, p. 84).

One must ask here, what of more grassroots techniques such as participatory rural appraisal (PRA) or as Chambers' famously put it "putting the last first"? (1983). It is an improvement that those affected by any decisions taken by others are involved in the decision-making. Yet this too is criticized for several reasons (Brett, 2003; Cleaver, 2001; Cooke, 2003; Cooke and Kothari, 2001; Heeks, 1999). For example, in his analysis of the World Bank's country-owned Structural Adjustment Programmes, Cooke (2003) sees participation as a manipulation of beneficiaries' values and beliefs so as to give a sense of psychological ownership and the illusion of empowerment, which will diminish opportunities for resistance.

A5. Mimicry and Mockery

In 1967, Fanon wrote "the [colonized] intellectual throws himself in frenzied fashion into the frantic acquisition of the culture of the occupying power and takes every opportunity of unfavourably criticizing his own national culture" (p. 236-7). Ashcroft et al (1998) illustrate this by analyzing Naipaul's opening in *The Mimic Men*:
 "For Mr Shylock [his landlord], the recipient each week of fifteen times three guineas, the possessor of a mistress and of suits made of cloth so fine I felt I could eat it, I had nothing but admiration … He had the habit of stroking the lobe of his ear inclining his head to listen. I thought the gesture was attractive; I copied it. I knew of recent events in Europe; they tormented me; and although I was trying to live on seven pounds a week, I offered Mr Shylock my fullest, silent compassion" (Naipaul, 1967, p. 7)

Shrestha argues that such mimicry is prevalent in development too: "we learned how to seize the currents of international development, propelled by the World Bank, US Agency for International Development, and other prominent development agencies. We turn their fads into overriding national concerns, instantly turning out reports to corroborate our claims" (1995, p. 270). Yet these concerns also display a sense of mockery – both towards the colonizer and a sense of self-critique.

A6. Liminality, Hybridity and Palimpsests

We have seen the firm focus of postcolonial theory on structure, but not how it deals with agency. While this is one of the weaknesses of postcolonial theory (discussed below in A8), Bhabha suggests change in the concepts of liminality, hybridity and palimpsests. He sees liminality as "being on the threshold" and provides the example of a stairwell or a bridge as a liminal space – a pathway between two ideologies (2004). He draws an analogy to a palimpsest – a parchment on which several inscriptions have been made and where earlier inscriptions leave a mark. This is not "integration" but rather the layering of influences, with the indentations of previous cultures still visible. It is here that "newness enters the world" (2004). Such "in-betweeness" is illustrated in postcolonial literature in the magic realism of Salman Rushdie, Gabriel García Marquez or Isabelle Allende.

A7. Can the Subaltern Speak?

Spivak asks the question – can the subaltern (i.e. dominated) ever speak? (Spivak, 1988). Although this has been misunderstood as her resignation that the subaltern cannot speak because they will always be subjugated, her argument is that the subaltern's voice is always mediated through the dominant discourse. This includes postcolonial theory and subaltern studies, which Spivak argues, can be as "othering" as colonial discourse by reverting to simplistic dichotomies of "colonizer", "colonized" or "subaltern" (ibid).

A8. Limitations of Postcolonial Theory

We can already see some of the weaknesses in postcolonial theory. Firstly, by emphasizing binaries, it falls into the same trap it is trying to escape from. By seeing the colonizer and the colonized, it fails to recognize the nuances in each "category" if at all there can be categories. As Hall (1992) argues, "colonizers" have their own internal others – for example, the ostracization of Jews in Europe. Instead postcolonialism draws on otherness as a largely national characteristic.

Secondly, like an institutionalist perspective, postcolonialism appears to focus more on structure, rather than agency. Types and techniques of resistance, other than hybridity are not explored, and even hybridity implies that this is after colonization, rather than as a means of resistance to it. Unusually for Said's affinity with Foucault, there is little in *Orientalism* to relate to Foucault's notion of power as ever-changing. Indeed Dirlik (1994) argues that postcolonialism (including questions of the subaltern) is itself a colonialist discipline, as postcolonial theorists such as Said, Bhabha and Spivak see themselves as the "experts" speaking on behalf of a homogenized "subaltern". He argues that postcolonial theory occurred when "when Third World intellectuals arrived in First World academe" (p. 329).

However, despite these criticisms, postcolonialism remains a potentially useful theory with which to analyze the continuing implementation of ICTs in developing countries – including telecentres – asking as it does, questions of power, hegemony, otherness and mimicry.

B. Telecentres through a Postcolonial Lens

B1. Definitions of Telecentres

Telecentres are defined as "a physical space that provides public access to ICTs for educational, personal, social and economic development" (Gomez et al, 1999). They differ from cybercafés in that they have a "developmental" focus (Harris et al, 2003) and are largely being implemented in "underprivileged" urban, rural or semi-rural areas. Collective experiences of these can be found via groupings such as telecentre.org (2008) while specific examples of telecentres include:

- the MSSRF Pondicherry Information Villages in India which provide agricultural and transportation information, as well as information on the availability of vaccines and medicines in the nearest health centres, and information on the issue of loans or entitlements (Kanungo, 2003, 2004; Thamizoli and Balasubramanian, 2001);
- Indian Institute of Technology, Chennai's SARI initiative which provides support to farmers in Tamil Nadu, India (Blattman et al, 2003);
- the Latin American network somos@telecentros (Hunt, 2001); and
- the Samaikya agritech centres in Andhra Pradesh, India – field centres linked to the head office in Hyderabad, disseminating technical assistance, information on machinery hire and spare tools for farmers (Harris et al, 2003).

Almost all telecentres provide basic IT training as well as connectivity. There are several different telecentre governance models, including donor—NGO partnerships (Our Voices in Karnataka); government—private sector partnerships (Gyandoot in Madhya Pradesh) and international academic and private sector partnerships (the SARI project in Tamil Nadu). The following analysis will draw on a sample of these projects.

B2. Binaries

The early enthusiasm over ICTs and telecentres for development could certainly be included under Said's definition of imperialism – the practice, theory, and attitudes of a dominating metropolitan centre ruling a distant territory. Consider the oft-quoted opening lines of the World Bank World Development Report (1999): "knowledge is like light. Weightless and intangible, it can easily travel the world, enlightening the lives of people everywhere. Yet billions of people still live in the darkness of poverty" (p. 1). Or Zongo, who states that the Canadian International Development Research Centre "is building on the momentum and excitement surrounding the new information and communication technologies (ICTs) to ensure that Africa's peoples are not left behind in the global information age … These communities have generally been isolated from the technological advances that are changing the ways people are doing business and living their lives in the urban centres today" (Zongo, 2000). Hunt sees telecentres as "a new symbol of hope for community development" with the ability to bring about "a new social order, one that is surely more prosperous and just … telecentres represent hope, and understandably so, for people who face increasingly desperate circumstances in their daily lives" (2001, p. 4).

Telecentre proponents emphasize order and rationality over disorder, modernity over tradition. For example, in the MSSRF project, the signing of a (rational) MoU between villagers and project implementers is stressed (Rao, 2004). There is a strong desire to impose equality through ICTs, something which is difficult: "in a caste-based society, it is not easy to spread an egalitarian ethos" (MSSRF, 2001). Roman and Colle call for a "missionary zeal of [telecentre] individuals who can translate and demonstrate the relevance" (2002, p. 6). Rao writes: "in tribal Tejgadh, Naginbhai Rathwa is eagerly awaiting the day he can tap the Internet for info on tribal civilizations around the world. Wishful thinking? No more. The promise of connectivity which has already shrunk the world is at long last ringing true in the countryside" (2004, p. 4). Similarly, Arunachalam (2002) narrates what he sees as a cultural advancement – according to him, upper caste men from neighbouring villages come to an MSSRF telecentre in a Dalit (untouchable) village and as a result of this inter-caste movement, the tea stall in the upper caste village now serves these Dalits tea in the same cups used by the upper caste clients. All these are given as examples of progress and modernity over tradition.

On the other hand, we are given the "Orientalist" impression that beneficiaries are unnecessarily demanding and wary. With regards to the MSSRF project we are told "several concessions were made by MSSRF in order to enroll people" (Shah, 2001, p. 30), "community is very sensitive and they need a legal binding to be reassured that the institution interacting with them will not exploit them" (ibid, p. 22), that "months were spent in developing confidence and building credibility" (Kanungo, 2004, p. 412). Villianur (one of the MSSRF villages) is called "the last mile post" of development administration (Balaji et al, 2000) and Rao (2004) states that the project shows IT can reach the "most 'unreachable' of villages". In another study of telecentres in the Western Cape, South Africa, the project manager complains: "I have difficulty with instilling an entrepreneurial spirit because the entrepreneurial spirit just isn't there … People like following instructions. They like the comfort zone of knowing how much they are going to earn for a specific task. They would prefer … somebody taking responsibility of generating the income and taking part of that ... not realizing that the responsibility is actually theirs" (Van Belle and Trusler, 2005, p. 148).

The binaries of postcolonialism are evident in all these statements – the distinction of the included/excluded, information rich and information poor, advantaged and disadvantaged, core and periphery, the desire not to leave a (homogenized) rural peoples behind in an information age, rationality over irrational fear and a culture of entrepreneurship over laziness.

B3. Otherness

We can already see elements of "othering" above. However, in telecentre literature, otherness is often not so much national as urban versus rural. In the MSSRF project, for example, there is an underlying impression of trying to impose a rational calm: "villagers were suspicious of our actions as a lot of government programmes initiated before have closed down within months. We clarified that our purpose is only to share the information, the rest you have to carry out" (cited in Shah, 2001, p. 20). A need is seen to "work together with the community and make them feel at ease with

us … We have to break all the barriers … They are living on the other side of the coin. They don't know anything about technology … But they need to be convinced for any project to come into the village" (ibid, p. 21). Note the emphasis on "villagers" and "the community", a homogenized other, similar to Pratt's (1985) analysis of John Barrow's travels.

On the other hand, in terms of the *grande autre*, the Chennai-based (i.e. urban) implementers of this telecentre project show a clear desire to exist in the eyes of the Other – an international ICT for development movement. Under a section entitled "Impact", Balaji et al write of the MSSRF project that: "the experiment has drawn attention of the world as a whole. Prof Bruce Alberts spoke on this project in the 136th Presidential Address at the US National Academy of Sciences delivered in April 1999. It has also been reported in Communications of the ACM in November 1998; Internet in January 1999; Science in June 1999. The Human Development Report 1999 of UNDP has cited this as an example of a creative project in addressing the global information divide" (Balaji et al, 2000, p. 6). Awards are often mentioned as a sign of achievement, such as MSSRF's Motorola Dispatch Solution Gold Award and Stockholm Challenge Award in 1999; Gyandoot's Stockholm Challenge Award and Computer Society of India/Tata Consultancy Services Award in 2000; and Our Voices' Yeomans' Award for Local Content in 2005. Participation, particularly that of women and youth is emphasized. For example, Balaji states that "a gender expert" was invited to participate in the inception stages of the MSSRF project to ensure that gender sensitivity was built into all operations (2000). Yet, there is little mention of those who benefit from the "experiment" as Balaji puts it.

B4. Hegemony

Would it be a paradox to say a hegemony of participation has emerged in telecentre literature? Participation is constantly advocated (Caspary and O'Connor, 2003; Colle, 2005; Gómez et al, 1999; Proenza, 2001; Roman and Colle, 2002; Whyte, 2000) but it is clearly not a new concept. Madan (2002) writes of Community Development Projects introduced in India in the 1950s which attempted reforms in primary health, education and agriculture, and cites Dube from 1958: "the most crucial aspect was that it [the CDP] aimed at cooperative effort through people's participation … efforts had to be sustained to keep the momentum and interest of the rural population in accepting this change" (p. 18). This is no different then to a statement by Kanungo "such actions [project implementers living in the community, conducting PRA and so on] perform the function of keeping the village folk engaged, keeping stakeholders engaged, continually sounding out different individuals so as to regenerate the idea and continually seek affirmation amongst the participants" (2004, p. 417-8). More than forty years on, it seems there is no change in the rhetoric of participation. Instead, what needs to be asked is whether participation does ultimately lead to a long-term, better quality of life for the intended beneficiaries.

Instead, it appears that the "right kind" of participation is needed. Swaminathan, the founder of the MSSRF and the Village Knowledge Project, writes that a few centres had to be closed down because the upper castes were not allowing access to the lower castes. It could be argued that these actions represent a kind of participation. But it is not the right kind. The right kind of participation is that the telecentres are open to

all, irrespective or age, sex, religion, caste, and level of literacy and education (Kanungo, 2003, 2004; Lakshmy, 2006; Swaminathan, 2005). The paradox of telecentres in the MSSRF project is that they are termed "essentially people-driven projects, firmly focusing on people's contexts and needs" (Swaminathan, 2005, p. 3) but there is still a hegemony, some "basic rules" as Swaminathan puts it (2005), primarily that if equal access is not agreed to, the centre will be "wound up" (p. 3). This "right kind of participation" is echoed by the management of the donor -funded Our Voices telecentre in India interviewed in 2004 by the author: "in the first few months, they (the villagers) put a lot of energy into the project. These days you have to keep telling them what to do … development, development, development. We can either approach community radio as what the community wants … if you make it that, it will only be music. At [the donor agency] , we can't justify all this equipment just for entertainment, there has to be a development angle. You have to keep pushing programming in a certain direction " .

B5. Mimicry and Mockery

In our analysis so far, there certainly appears to be a prevalent mimicry of current "development-speak" – telecentres should be pro-poor, pro-women, participatory and sustainable (Balaji et al, 2000). Swaminathan firmly places himself in this hierarchy: "a quarter of Indians are living below the poverty line. Can we not harness the power of modern science and technology to change all this? After all it is science which gave advanced countries their status" (2005, p.1). It must however be acknowledged that there is no underlying mockery similar to that in postcolonial literary analysis.

B6. Liminality, Hybridity and Palimpsests

Diane Nelson (1996) recounts her surprise at arriving in a small Guatemalan town and being surrounded by children who shout "Diana, Queen of the Lizards, Queen of the Lizards" on finding out her name. She then realizes that this is because Diana is a character in a US science fiction show which the children have been watching. This is the kind of hybridity that creates new cultures for Bhabha (2004). Yet telecentre analysis shows only glimpses of this hybridity – what the users really want, how they really use ICTs. Balaji et al (2000) write that at the MSSRF project there is a request to know about cricket scores, as well as health information. At Our Voices, the project manager acknowledged that the children wanted to know about NASA space rockets, film stars and Veerappan (a local outlaw in the news at the time of research). It would be interesting to know more about this kind of hybridity in telecentre literature and practice.

B7. Can the Subaltern Speak?
Telecentre literature so far shows a reluctance or an inability to let the subaltern speak. Shah writes of the MSSRF project (2001) that "difficulties were faced in obtaining permission to conduct the research, as there was certain amount of ambiguity involved in understanding one of the objectives of the research on the part of the authorities at MSSRF" (p. 35). Equally, Kanungo (2003) emphasizes the

participatory aspect of the MSSRF project but then states that "limited direct interaction took place with users" (Kanungo, 2004, p. 410). If the subaltern could speak, would his or her voice be couched in the dominant discourse, as Spivak states is inevitable? Positive anecdotal information does exist, but it appears to be mainly related by others (Hunt, 2001; Kanungo, 2003; etc.). The few critical interviews with telecentre users include the following comments: "I don't know anything about that … It has no connection to my life. We're just sitting here in our house trying to survive" (cited in The Economist, p. 21); "if I don't go to the fields for even one day, there will be no food for me and my family. So how can I contribute free labour to the project?" (cited in Shah, 2001, p. 20). Yet even these are interpreted through a researcher's phenomenological lens. Can the telecentre subaltern ever speak?

C. Limitations, Further Research and Conclusions

There are several limitations to this study. First of all, space constraints have necessitated very brief overviews of complex notions in both postcolonialism (which itself has borrowed from other modes of thinking) and telecentres. Secondly, there is a danger of homogenizing telecentre literature ourselves. Thirdly, there is a danger in applying a theory which has largely grown out of literature to the subject of information systems. This research has not argued that information is not important, nor that development initiatives should not be participatory, if they are genuinely participatory (but this then leads to another debate on who defines "genuinely"). Rather it is the way in which telecentres are being implemented, echoing Said's notion of colonialism as "the implanting of settlements on distant territory" (Said, 1994, p. 8). But in trying to understand the "colonized" (those urged to participate in telecentres) we face the very contradictions that postcolonial theory faces – that it would be useful in telecentre analysis to understand the "alternative marginalized narrative" (Reinhard and Macadar, 2006, p. 1) but in doing so, we are accepting the existence of a hierarchy, and even creating one although it may not exist.

Finally, the use of postcolonial theory gives rise to larger questions regarding epistemology. Firstly, to what extent do theories become outdated? Postcolonial theory emerged around the 1970s when the economic success of countries such as China and India were not yet evident. Is it therefore still relevant? Ahmad and Slemon seem to think so because they see postcolonialism as a timeless phenomenon. *The Geographical Journal*'s March 2006 special issue on postcolonialism and development (Sharp and Briggs, 2006) also indicates the subject is still significant. However, the theory's emphasis on structure rather than agency still proves problematic and the notions of hybridity and liminality prove unsatisfying. Secondly, there is the problematic notion of "othering" – we have seen the "othering" of the intended beneficiaries, the "information-poor" in telecentre literature. But does all research consist of "othering"? In Spivak's words, can the subaltern ever speak for himself or herself? If, as Spivak suggests, someone is always speaking on behalf of the subaltern, or if the subaltern's own voice is always couched in the dominant discourse (consciously or sub-consciously) will we ever know the true impact, or lack of impact, of telecentres?

References

Ahmad, A. (1995) "The Politics of Literary Postcoloniality", *Race and Culture,* 36 (3), pp. 1-20.

Arunachalam, S. (2002) "Reaching the Unreached: How Can We Use ICTs to Empower the Rural Poor in the Developing World through Enhanced Access to Relevant Information?" in *68th IFLA Council and General Conference, August 18-24, 2002,* Glasgow. Last accessed: 20 October 2008. Address: http://ict.developmentgateway.org/uploads/media/ict/IFLA-Glasgow.pdf

Ashcroft, B., G. Griffiths and H. Tiffin (1998) *Key Concepts in Post-Colonial Studies,* Routledge, London; New York.

Balaji, V., K. Rajamohan, R. Rajasekara Pandy and S. Senthilkumaran (2000) *Toward a Knowledge System for Sustainable Food Security – the Information Village Experiment in Pondicherry* Last accessed: 20 October 2008. Address: http://www.isoc.org/oti/articles/0401/balaji.html.

Bhabha, H. K. (1990) *Nation and Narration,* Routledge, London; New York.

Bhabha, H. K. (2004) *The Location of Culture,* Routledge, London; New York.

Blattman, C., R. Jensen and R. Roman (2003) "Assessing the Need and Potential of Community Networking for Development in Rural India", *The Information Society,* 19 (5), pp. 349-364.

Brett, E. (2003) "Participation and Accountability in Development Management", *Journal of Development Studies,* 40 (2), pp. 1-29.

Chambers, R. (1983) *Rural Development: Putting the Last First,* Longman, London.

Cleaver, F. (2001) "Institutions, Agency and the Limitations of Participatory Approaches to Development" in *Participation, the New Tyranny?*, (Cooke, B. and U. Kothari eds) Zed, London, pp. 36-55.

Colle, R. (2005) "Memo to Telecentre Planners", *Electronic Journal of Information Systems in Developing Countries,* 21 (1), pp. 1-13.

Cooke, B. and U. Kothari (2001) *Participation, the New Tyranny?,* Zed, London.

Cooke, B. (2003) "A New Continuity with Colonial Administration: Participation in Development Management", *Third World Quarterly,* 24 (1), pp. 47-61.

Dirlik, A. (1994) "The Postcolonial Aura: Third World Criticism in the Age of Global Capitalism", *Critical Inquiry,* 20 (2), pp. 323-56.

Escobar, A. (1995) *Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World,* Princeton University Press, Princeton, N.J.

Fanon, F. (1967) *The Wretched of the Earth*, Grove Press, New York.

Fanon, F. (1986) *Black Skin, White Masks,* Pluto Press, London.

Ferguson, J. (1994) *The Anti-Politics Machine: "Development," Depoliticization, and Bureaucratic Power in Lesotho*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.

Gomez, R., P. Hunt and E. Lamoureaux (1999) "Telecentre Evaluation and Research: A Global Perspective". in *Telecentre Evaluation: A Global Perspective (Report of an International Meeting on Telecentre Evaluation),* Far Hills Inn, Quebec, Canada, September 28-30.

Gramsci, A. and D. Forgacs (1988) *A Gramsci Reader: Selected Writings 1916-1935,* Lawrence and Wishart, London.

Gramsci, A. (1991) *Prison Notebooks,* Columbia University Press, New York.

Guha, R. (1982) *Subaltern Studies: Writings on South Asian History and Society,* Oxford University Press, Delhi; Oxford.

Gunew, S. M. (1994) *Framing Marginality: Multicultural Literary Studies,* Melbourne University Press, Victoria.

Hall, S. (1992) "The West and the Rest: Discourse and Power" in *Formations of Modernity*, (Hall, S. and B. Gieben eds) Polity Press, Cambridge, pp. 275-331.

Harris, R. (2003) "Sustainable Telecentres? Two Cases from India" in *The Digital Challenge: Information Technology in the Development Context*, (Madon, S. and S. Krishna eds) Ashgate, Aldershot, pp. 124-135.

Heeks, R. (1999) *The Tyranny of Participation in Information Systems: Learning from Development Projects* University of Manchester Development Informatics Working Papers, Number 4. Last accessed: 20 October 2008. Address: http://www.sed.manchester.ac.uk/idpm/research/publications/wp/di/di_wp04.htm

Hunt, P. (2001) "True Stories: Telecentres in Latin America and the Caribbean", *Electronic Journal of Information Systems in Developing Countries,* 4 (5), pp. 1-17.

Iyer, G. (2005) *Why Is There a Thillan?* MSc. Dissertation, Department of Information Systems, London School of Economics, London, UK.

Jordan, G. and C. Weedon (1995) *Cultural Politics: Class, Gender, Race, and the Postmodern World,* Blackwell, Oxford.

Kanungo, S. (2003) "Information Village: Bridging the Digital Divide in Rural India" in *The Digital Challenge: Information Technology in the Development Context*, (Madon, S. and S. Krishna eds) Ashgate, Aldershot, pp. 103-123

Kanungo, S. (2004) "On the Emancipatory Role of Rural Information Systems", *Information Technology and People,* 17 (4), pp. 407-422.

Lakshmy (2006) "MSSRF Information Village Research Project", *Information Technology in Developing Countries Newsletter,* February 2006.

Madan, V. (2002) *The Village in India,* Oxford University Press, New Delhi; Oxford.

Madon, S. (2005) "Governance Lessons from the Experience of Telecentres in Kerala", *European Journal of Information Systems,* 14 (5), pp. 401-416.

Mission 2007 (n.d.) *Mission 2007: Every Village a Knowledge Centre* Last accessed: 20 October 2008. Address: http://web.archive.org/web/20061205021626/http://mission2007.org/.

MSSRF (2001) *Information Village Research Project* Last accessed: 20 October 2008. Address: http://www.stockholmchallenge.se/data/information_village_resea.

Myrdal, G. (1968) *Asian Drama: An Inquiry into the Poverty of Nations,* Twentieth Century Fund, New York.

Naipaul, V. S. (1967) *The Mimic Men,* Deutsch, London.

Nelson, D. (1996) "Maya Hackers and the Cyberspatialized Nation-State: Modernity, Ethnostalgia and a Lizard Queen in Guatemala", *Cultural Anthropology,* 11 (3), pp. 287-308.

Pratt, M. (1985) "Scratches on the Face of the Country: Or What Mr. Barrow Saw in the Land of the Bushmen", *Critical Inquiry,* 12 (1), pp. 138-162.

Proenza, F. (2003) "ICT-Enabled Networks, Public Sector Performance and the Development of Information and Communication Technologies" in *Connected for Development: Information Kiosks and Sustainability*, (Badshah, A., S. Khan and M. Garrido eds) New York.

Rahnema, M. (1991) "Global Poverty: A Pauperizing Myth", *Interculture,* 24 (2), pp. 4-51.

Rao, V. (2004) "Bridging the Digital Gap at Village Level: Lessons Learnt from Pondicherry's Village Knowledge Centre" in *International Society for Photogrammetry and Remote Sensing Conference,* Istanbul. Last accessed: 20 October 2008. Address: http://www.isprs.org/congresses/istanbul2004/comm7/papers/108.pdf

Reinhard, N. and M.-A. Macadar (2006) "Governance and Management in the São Paulo Public Telecentre Network", *Information Technology for International Development*, 12 (3), pp. 241-246.

Robinson, S. (1998) "Telecentres in Mexico: Learning the Hard Way". in *Partnerships and Participation in Telecommunications for Rural Development: Exploring What Works and Why,* Guelph, Canada, University of Guelph.

Roman, R. and R. Colle (2002) *Themes and Issues in Telecentre Sustainability*, University of Manchester Development Informatics Working Papers, Number 10. Last accessed: 20 October 2008. Address: http://www.sed.manchester.ac.uk/idpm/research/publications/wp/di/di_wp10.htm

Roman, R. (2003) "Diffusion of Innovations as a Theoretical Framework for Telecenters", *Information Technologies and International Development,* 1 (2), pp. 53-66.

Said, E. W. (1994) *Culture and Imperialism,* Vintage Books, London.

Said, E. W. (2003) *Orientalism,* Penguin, London.

Shah, P. (2001) *ICTs and Sustainable Rural Development: A Case Study of Pondicherry Region in India*, MSc. Dissertation, Department of Information Systems, London School of Economics, London, UK.

Sharp, J. and J. Briggs (2006) "Postcolonialism and Development: New Dialogues? Editorial to Special Issue on Postcolonialism and Development", *The Geographical Journal,* 172 (1), pp. 6-9.

Shrestha, N. (1995) "Becoming a Development Category" in *Power and Development*, (Crush, J. ed.) Routledge, London, pp. 266-275.

Slemon, S. (1994) "The Scramble for Postcolonialism" in *De-Scribing Empire: Postcolonialism and Textuality*, (Tiffin, C. and A. Lawson eds) Routledge, London, pp. 15-32.

Spivak, G. C. (1987) *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics,* Methuen/Routledge, New York; London.

Spivak, G. C. (1988) *Can the Subaltern Speak?,* Macmillan, Basingstoke.

Spivak, G. C. and S. Harasym (1990) *The Post-Colonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues,* Routledge, New York; London.

Swaminathan, M. (2005) *India's 'Mission 2007': Every Village a Knowledge Centre* Last accessed: 20 October 2008. Address: http://web.archive.org/web/20071010111304/http://www.panos.org.uk/iwitness/summit/swaminathan.asp .

Sylvester, C. (1999) "Development Studies and Postcolonial Studies: Disparate Tales of the "Third World" ", *Third World Quarterly,* 20 (4), pp. 703-21.

telecentre.org (2008) *About telecentre.org*, 29 April. Last accessed: 20 October 2008. Address: http://telecentrecommunity.ning.com/notes

Thamizoli, P. and K. Balasubramanian (2001) "Information Management and Knowledge Empowerment: MSSRF Telecentres in South India", *Journal of Development Communication: Special Issue on Telecenters,* 12 (2). Last accessed: 20 October 2008. Address: http://ip.cals.cornell.edu/commdev/jdc-1.cfm

The Economist (2005) *The Real Digital Divide.* 12 March 2005.

Tschang, T., M. Chuladul and T. Thu Le (2002) "Scaling-up Information Services for Development: A Framework for Increasing Returns for Telecentres", *Journal of International Development,* 14 (1), pp. 129-141.

Van Belle, J.-P. and J. Trusler (2005) "An Interpretivist Case Study of a South African Rural Multi-Purpose Community Centre", *Journal of Community Informatics,* 1 (2), pp. 140-157.

Whyte, A. (2000) *Assessing Community Telecentres: Guidelines for Researchers,* IDRC, Ottawa.

World Bank (1999) *World Development Report,* World Bank, Washington D.C.

Zongo, G. (2000) "Foreword" in *Assessing Community Telecenters: Guidelines for Researchers*, (Whyte, A. ed.) IDRC, Ottawa. Last accessed: 20 October 2008. Address: http://www.idrc.ca/en/ev-28303-201-1-DO_TOPIC.html