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Busyness within Cybercafés: The Indian Context

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ABSTRACT

At a cybercafé in rural India, a man gossips with his friend while his government form downloads; two teenagers sit side by side working on a school project while surreptitiously orkuting one another; the owner during downtime photoshops himself with Angelina Jolie and makes it his screensaver. In fact, India is currently implementing one of the most ambitious computerization projects of linking 600,000 of its villages through cybercafés or “knowledge centers” on the premise that access to computers will significantly enhance productivity for socio-economic mobility. In this paper, I address *busyness* that stems from computer usage in cybercafés in rural India, and through this, recontextualize and readdress the relationship of new technology with socio-cultural practice of labor and leisure. Drawing from my extensive fieldwork in India since 2004, I bring to the fore certain issues worth examining, namely how 1) the time lost in dealing with online bureaucracy can be the time gained for offline leisure 2) online busyness can provide a legitimate and safe grounds for offline dating in a public space, otherwise considered taboo, and 3) busyness at work can indeed be play. This discussion can enhance our sociotechnical understandings of busyness and its range of opportunities for transcultural practice.

Categories and Subject Descriptors

General Terms: Human Factors

Keywords: Computers, cybercafés, busyness, labor, leisure, rural India

1. INTRODUCTION

Busyness in the developed world is commonly conceptualized today as a sign of high social status (Gershuny, 2005). This relationship becomes more apparent when associated with new technology. Capitalistic notions of efficiency and productivity

gains visibility through the blackberry/iphone/Mac crowd, paving way for the “thumb generation,” savvy netizens as they click their way through work and play (Buckingham & Willett, 2006). It is widely recognized that the pace of social life has changed significantly, some claim for the better and some for the worse (Wajcman, 2008). The value for leisure time drives this phenomenon, yet paradoxically, new technology can free up time for more labor (Gershuny, 2000; Veblen, 1899; Levine, 2005). Thereby, the dialogue justifiably revolves around how to cope with such a state of information overload and acceleration of lifestyle where there is little room to pause and ponder and specifically, the role technology plays in constructing this culture of busyness.

However, as we shift gears to the context of an emerging market-India, busyness, akin to a social virus, is found everywhere, even in its rural domain. Disjuncture is found in the conventional relationship between class and busyness. And while there appears to be a drive to capitalize on time, it seems to be for a host of practices, including that of leisure. People in rural cybercafés are found to be immersed in the ritual of busyness and yet, within this sphere, practices of dating, socializing, and creative play surfaces. Thereby, the popular construction of busyness does not easily lend itself to the above notions. Having spent the last seven years engaged in fieldwork in rural India on computer usage, I have frequently encountered leisure activity where labor was expected. With billions of dollars invested in networking 600,000 of India’s villages to address the digital divide and mitigate the high amounts of unproductivity that accrues due to substantive bureaucracy, there is a dominant expectation that people will capitalize on their time more efficiently through computer usage (Arora, 2010). Yet, people have found ways to occupy themselves with simultaneously the mundane and the creative, for labor as well as for leisure.

While no doubt there is a technical dimension to this topic, this position paper focuses on the socio-cultural angle, relating the culture of busyness to technology. Here we should ask, keeping in

mind the role of technology in this arena: *to what extent is busyness associated with ordinary routine action? Is busyness primarily an outcome and state of work? Does busyness primarily lend itself to fragmentation of sociality? The bottom line being, can technologically induced busyness serve as a platform for sociality, cultural and creative activity?* By shifting contexts, this position paper argues that we can gain a wider and more complex understanding of the role technology plays in busyness and how busyness is positioned in relation to leisure and labor in these global times.

2. FIELDWORK: SOCIAL COMPUTING, LABOR & LEISURE

My research in the last seven years has focused on the usage of new technology for social change (Arora, 2005; 2006; 2006a; 2006b; 2007; 2008; 2010; 2010a; 2010b; 2010c; 2010d; 2010e). This entailed extensive fieldwork in rural India, analyzing how computers were being used to leapfrog persistent and chronic socio-economic barriers. My book, *Dot Com Mantra: Social Computing in the Central Himalayas*, addressed how people used computers, particularly in cybercafés. Having spent eight months in a rural part of the Himalayas, what emerged was that regardless of their economic status, people used new media, often less for utilitarian means and more for leisure-oriented activities such as gaming, Bollywood consumption to general sociality. While people spent time in cybercafés accessing governmental services, educational information to employment listings, these work activities were interspersed heavily with orkuting, downloading music and movies and browsing the Net without an overt purpose. These findings paved the way for my current research on cyberleisure as a universal, cross-cultural practice that is in need to be investigated (Arora, Forth). To analyze contemporary leisure online, I am looking into the relationship of real and virtual geographies, online shopping, corporate and government appropriations of social and leisure spaces online for commercial and labor-oriented outcomes, its private and public dimension and work and play aspects.

Thereby, I see the topic of this symposium, *Rethinking the Culture of Busyness and IT*, as intrinsically related to these above areas of investigation. Basically, it is impossible to comprehensively address busyness without looking at its relations to labor, leisure, time consumption and productivity in this global era. Also, this comparative and transnational lens can be useful to gauge the normative in this larger dialogue of busyness. Undoubtedly, it has significant implications to social practice and technological design and by gaining a foothold within different contexts such as in India, we can follow novel avenues of investigation.

3. ISSUES FOR DISCUSSION

3.1 Online bureaucracy & Offline leisure

When we look at emerging markets, busyness takes on a different meaning, less class oriented and more part of the larger byproduct of infrastructural, institutional and technological transformations engulfing these regions. Lines abound for government forms, ration cards, to industrial licenses. Killing time becomes part and parcel of daily life, being neither productive nor leisure oriented. However, India, having acquired the new Silicon Valley status, has been incentivized to invest heavily in computers to digitalize its nation. The belief in computers as a means to mitigate bureaucracy and corruption has given birth to the egovernance

platform where a motley group of government services are accessible online. Thereby, certain busyness has transferred from government office places to cybercafé spaces. Here, IT plays a role in facilitating busyness and its technical affordances and constraints directly impact the way in which people occupy themselves. That said, from my fieldwork in these cybercafés, people take charge of these ordinary routines with a keen understanding of the time afforded between these spells of work online. With these interspersed lags, online bureaucracy births offline leisure as employees use this to catch up with friends on their mobile or in person, people drink chai and check their orkut site to browsing for new music. This time is prized given that employees usually have long working hours and do not otherwise get respite from office duties. Thereby, this line can open discussion on how busyness through IT facilitates offline leisure in complex ways, highlighting larger structural mechanisms of labor conditions and why then, at times, busyness in these contexts are valued rather than scorned upon.

3.2 Online Busyness legitimizing Offline Dating

The notion of taking time off is alien to many in the rural domain, particularly amongst women. Every action requires a purpose, be it tilling the land, collecting firewood, to cooking and cleaning. This does not imply that women do not experience leisure or seek out for it actively. They have in fact learned to weave it into their routine of labor. However, leisure between the opposite sexes is not easily shared, particularly amongst the youth. The practice of dating is largely condemned and in fact, there are few spaces in rural India where young couples can be together openly in public. Hence, with cybercafés, it was found that it served as a strategic and safe space to meet. As they come to complete their educational projects, they are able to be together for extended periods of time. Courtship is contingent on the busyness provided by IT. This is a fascinating avenue of investigation as busyness may be even extended and valued deeply for its affordance of dating offline. This opens interesting avenues for discussion on the cultural valuations of busyness especially amongst girls and the relations of real and virtual domains when concerning busyness.

3.3 Busyness as work & play

Owners of cybercafés keep their shops open from 10 am to 8 in the evening. They sit at the desk and mind the store all day. Such mundane busyness can understandably be deeply unproductive and have a negative affect on people. That said, some owners of these cybercafés learnt to capitalize on their work time through creative experimentation online. Using photoshop, a favorite amongst many owners, they manipulate images and create mashups of themselves, their family and friends with popular icons, both Indian and Western. They go online, shopping for images to use and learn to play with them through a range of ways. Some have converted this initial play into a business venture, offering people services of a similar kind. This venture attracts people who would like to see themselves with their favorite Bollywood star for instance. This opens interesting avenues of discussion on how creativity finds its space within busyness and innovation and entrepreneurship emerge through such unexpected encounters. In fact, one can explore how the need to be busy (appear to use the computer) can result in playful

activity that can generate economic benefit. In other words, labor begets leisure that begets labor.

4. CONCLUSION

Overall, the context of rural India and specifically cybercafés can open new grounds for constructing the notion of busyness and its relationship to new technology. By situating discussions in specific examples under the given issues of bureaucracy, dating and creative play, we can proceed to gauge the historical and comparative dimension of busyness as it relates to social status, cultural production and consumption, labor and leisure and the real and virtual.

5. WORK OF INFLUENCE

Wajcman, J. (2008). Life in the fast lane? Towards a sociology of technology and time, *The British Journal of Sociology*, 59(1), 59-77.

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