

Title:

The African Digital City: augmenting social capital?

Abstract:

The "Digital City" is a concept that has been explored increasingly over the last ten years in the Urban Studies and Planning literature. The ubiquitous adoption of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in all spheres of urban life – from governance to individual usage – has provided the means whereby information can be exchanged immediately and simultaneously to many users, to remote areas and, some argue, marginalized communities. A lot of these debates have been infused with a certain technological determinism ("the death of distance" and so forth); whilst much hype about "Cyber-democracy" and the predominance of Cyberspace in the urban consciousness has led to some unrealistic expectations of the power of technology. A maturing of these debates has led many to argue that the relationship between the "real" city and the "digital" city requires a more subtle consideration of context, the realities of urban life and the power relationships underpinning the distribution of ICT infrastructure (i.e. just how accessible is the "digital" city to urban dwellers generally?). Insights into the interaction between urban life and digital technologies call for an understanding of the many facets underpinning the day-to-day realities of urban regions, on the one hand, and the physical as well as the socio-political impacts of ICT, on the other. Many recent texts address this, but absent to a large extent is literature on African "Digital" cities that offers a real understanding of the intersection between the unique character of African urbanity and digital technologies. Literature on African cities is becoming increasingly focused on the notions of association, reciprocity and informality as ways through which urban dwellers enhance their livelihoods and build on social capital. The networks that enhance social capital are often effusive and indistinct, yet provide the basis for support for many poor Africans. Thus, a consideration of the African "digital" city would need to engage with these aspects of the "real" African city. This paper proposes to explore this relationship in more depth by focusing on the notion of social capital in particular. By reviewing the literature on African Urbanism, one, and "digital" cities, two, it aims to build the conceptual bridge necessary to do this. The latter would include a more thorough understanding of the relationship between social capital and technologies, community informatics and participation of African communities in the Knowledge Economy. Furthermore, the paper will draw on secondary research as well as policy documentation in order to understand the extent to which the African "digital" city is indeed possible, and focuses specifically on Durban, South Africa, in doing so. Conclusions of the paper will yield a preliminary range of propositions that would need to be tested through more in-depth research.

Author(s):

Nancy Odendaal,
University of KwaZulu-Natal