



Edgar Gómez-Cruz

WhatsApp as 'technology of life': Reframing research agendas

Edgar Gómez-Cruz Ramaswami Harindranath

ABSTRACT

In this paper, we present a few ethnographic vignettes on the use of WhatsApp from a study in Mexico City. We suggest WhatsApp is a paradigmatic example of how a particular technology becomes an infrastructure to sustain, and therefore shape, a wide range of quotidian activities, from personal to economic, from spiritual to political. WhatsApp exemplifies what we call technologies of life, as such technologies mediate almost all aspects of social life. On this basis, we propose two interventions into the research agenda that go beyond data-centric approaches and focus on the lived-experiences of individuals, families, and communities.

Introduction: WhatsApp in the Global South

In July 2019, WhatsApp had a massive outage [1]. While this failure lasted for only few hours and it was not total, as it was still possible to send and receive texts, news reports on the outage suggested a certain degree of panic, as reflected in headlines such as “Cybernetic Apocalypse” [2]. WhatsApp is a paradigmatic example of a growing phenomenon in developing societies in particular, where a single technology or a group of technologies becomes an infrastructure to sustain (and therefore shape) a wide range of quotidian activities, from personal to economic, from spiritual to political. We call them technologies of life, as they mediate almost all aspects of social life. The notion ‘technologies of life’ is intended to be less an emerging concept than a way to highlight the intricate and complex connections between the app’s pervasive (and sometimes inescapable) use and the mediations that these connections engender and sustain. We suggest WhatsApp has become a “technology of life”, and with this we emphasise two points: first, the everydayness and pervasive presence of the app in diverse life experiences; second, the alignment of our approach with decolonising efforts that emphasise the contextual and the historical in examining how technologies are used, perceived and experienced by different groups. We use technology of life as a concept to highlight the ways in which life is expanded, experienced, and has become increasingly dependent on certain technologies.

In this paper, we discuss a few ethnographic vignettes from a study in Mexico that exemplify how WhatsApp mediates life and how its analysis demands an engagement that reaches beyond data-centric approaches and focuses on the lived-experience of individuals, families, and communities. While ethnographies of social media practices are not new, we agree with Coleman (2010), who, in her review of ethnographic approaches to digital media, rightly underlines the importance of pushing “against the narrow presumptions about the universality of digital experience.” [3]

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