

**Contradictory Connectivity:
Spatial Imaginaries and Techno-Mediated Positionalities in Kenya's Outsourcing
Sector**

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Abstract

East Africa has traditionally been characterised by stark barriers to non-proximate communication and flows of information (Castells, 1998). It was the world's last major region without fibre-optic broadband internet access, and until the summer of 2009 had been forced to rely on slow and costly satellite connectivity. This all changed when the first of four fibre-optic cables was connected in Kenya: bringing with it the promise of fast and affordable internet access for the masses, and the ability of the country to move towards a knowledge-based economy. Within the context of this moment of change, this paper explores the ways that managers of outsourcing firms envisage 'connectivity.' Over the course of 41 interviews, contradictory spatial imaginaries were discovered. When describing their perceptions of the country's new techno-mediated positionalities, many interviewees repeated visions that allowed geographic frictions to evaporate. But when managers were asked about their actual mediated positionalities, they presented a very different world: one of barriers, frictions, and the very real role that distance continues to play in the world's economic peripheries. The goal of this paper is to interrogate why we see such stark disconnects between perceptions and practices of connectivity. The contradictions could be seen as an exposition of a scalar schism between internationally-operating regimes of truth (i.e. powerful discourses that have their origin non-locally) and local experiences and practices in Kenya. Alternatively, we can think about the contradictory accounts of connectivity as emergent from strategic spatial essentialisms that are practiced to achieve particular goals. By focusing on the contradictions embedded into the ways in which people speak about connectivity in the Kenyan outsourcing sector, we can learn much about how arguments about the entanglement of connectivity, growth, and development are operationalized. 'Connectivity' is offered as a necessary, and sometimes even sufficient, condition from which growth and economic development can be brought into being: a set of spatial imaginaries that conveniently support a national development strategy of remaking Kenya in the contemporary knowledge economy.

Introduction

“Time and Space died yesterday. We already live in the absolute, for we have already created velocity which is eternal and omnipresent.” - Marinetti (1909) in The Futurist Manifesto

The Kenyan government, in their 2013 budget, allocated 53 billion Kenyan Shillings (about \$600 million) towards delivering 1.3 million laptops to schoolchildren. To put this in context, the budget contained only 34.7 billion shillings for healthcare and 67 billion for the police (Rotich, 2013). In a country where over one million school-age children are not attending classes (UNICEF, 2014), and the education system suffers from a lack of tens of thousands of trained teachers (Oduor and Weru, 2013), it takes powerful discourses to shift much needed money away from essential services and into technology investment and techno-centric policy-making.

The broader backdrop for this event is the huge investment in East Africa’s telecommunications infrastructure that has taken place over the last five years. A series of fibre-optic cables, connecting East Africa with the global grid, have been constructed which potentially allow for much greater internet speeds at much lower prices. As a result, policy-makers, business people, and the fourth estate have begun to talk about how these changing connectivities can potentially allow fundamentally new types of economic activity to take root in East Africa (Graham and Mann, 2013). Kenya, in particular, has made business process outsourcing (BPO) a core component of its national development strategy, ‘Vision 2030’ (Republic of Kenya, 2007). The country has invested large amounts of financial and human resources, hoping that new communications capabilities will allow it to move its economy away from the primary and secondary sectors of the economy towards services and business process outsourcing.

Within the context of this moment of change, this paper asks what spatial imaginaries¹ and conceptions around connectivity are being deployed and put to use in Kenya’s outsourcing sector. It does this in order to understand not just how changing connectivity is being used and imagined, but also to explore whether perceptions may differ from practices and ask what the implications of those potential differences may be. Using 41 interviews with managers of Kenyan outsourcing firms that were conducted in 2012 and 2013, it asks how people talk about changing connectivities and how people enact them. Contradictory spatial imaginaries were found. When describing their visions of the country’s new techno-mediated positionalities², many managers made reference to visions in which geography could either be transcended or shrunk. However, when

¹ This paper follows Boudreau (2007: 2596) to define the spatial imaginaries as “mental maps representing a space to which people relate and with which they identify” (see also Larner 1998).

² The term ‘positionalities’ is taken from feminist and postcolonial studies to signify the ways that knowledge is always produced in and shaped by specific circumstances and contexts (see Haraway 1991). This paper treats ‘positionality’ as the both the experienced and imagined contexts of people and places.

following that line of inquiry with questions about the mediated positionalities actually experienced by Kenyan BPO firms, we were presented with very different spatial visions. The world then became one of barriers, cores, peripheries, and the continued relevance of geographic frictions.

This paper examines these seeming contradictions and asks why we see such a consistent disconnect between perceptions of techno-mediated potentials and experienced mediated positionalities. In the collision between stories of optimism and stories of failure, we ultimately see a mismatch between fundamentally divergent spatial ontologies. This is noteworthy, because the story is not just one of naïve ‘death of distance’ narratives, nor just one that recognizes the contingent effects that communication technologies can have. Instead, the contradictions themselves tell us something interesting about spatial imaginaries and how they are put to use: in order to both promulgate powerful global narratives and achieve some of the strategic goals of local Kenyan actors.

The contradictions could be seen as an exposition of a scalar schism between internationally-operating regimes of truth and local experiences and practices in Kenya. The discourses produced in hyperconnected nodes of the Global North are presented as innately *global* rather than ideas emanating from particular people and places. This matters because by employing hierarchically scaled discourses, arguments about the inevitability of certain types of globalization and the need to engage with it (and spend scarce resources in particular ways) can be made without ever being able to challenge the specific sources at the sites where those discourses are generated.

These explanations, however, render people in the Kenyan outsourcing sectors as passive receptors to more powerful global discourses swirling around them and structuring their ability to make sense of the world. An alternate way of conceptualizing contradictory accounts of connectivity is as strategic spatial essentialisms that are practiced to achieve particular goals³. Here strategic essentialisms are employed to redirect resources, further marketing efforts, and change perceptions about the country and its place in the world.

But under either interpretation, it remains that digitally-mediated connectivity, and the technology that affords it, is often presented as not just a necessary, but also a sufficient, condition for contemporary economic success. The discursive primacy given to connectivity helps to depoliticize questions about the distribution of scarce resources that are especially important in a low-income country like Kenya, and especially important when so many policy-makers are looking for strategies to escape from economic marginality. The spatial imaginaries that are circulated and recirculated don’t just shape how people envision the world, but also influence how it is created and enacted. As such, the paper therefore seeks to renew attention into the ways that connectivity, and the often contradictory, ways that we talk about it, matters to the previously disconnected.

³ For instance, see Graham (2013b) for an example of how discourses about the Internet were strategically employed in the Thai silk industry.

Spatial Imaginaries and Techno-Mediations

Before engaging in the spatial imaginaries to emerge from the interviews, it is instructive to first review some of the ways that spatial imaginaries and associated techno-mediations have been discussed by geographers. This is a topic that has generated a vast amount of debate, literature, and argument. This paper is not the place for a comprehensive review of those debates (for that see e.g. Graham, 2005 or Kitchin and Dodge, 2011). Instead, the paper draws out some of the key themes that have emerged from collisions of technology, place, and connectivity.

David Harvey (1984) noted that space had traditionally been understood as either territorial (a plane onto which lines are drawn) or structural (spatial entities exert influence upon one another). Space as a canvas was empty, immobile and fixed; absolute and extensible in three observable directions, and something that pre-exists its doing and bringing into being (Curry, 1996).

Under this spatial ontology, technology can do much to bridge underlying spatial frictions. For instance, the ontology can be employed to argue that a transportation technology that halves the amount of time it takes to move between any two places also makes the world half as large (Harvey, 1984). Communication technologies that allow information to move between any two places in milliseconds, could then be imagined to ultimately bring about a total death of distance (Caircross, 1997). Marshall McLuhan offered one of the earliest formulations of these bridged spatial frictions. He noted, “electric circuitry has overthrown the regime of ‘time’ and ‘space’ and pours upon us instantly and continuously concerns of all other men. It has reconstituted dialogue on a global scale . . . ‘Time’ has ceased, ‘space’ has vanished. We now live in a global village” (McLuhan and Fiore, 1967: 63). In other words, with the right technology, the underlying canvas of space can be bridged, transcended and shrunk. The world becomes flat for anyone who is connected (Friedman, 2005).

These ideas have been thoroughly questioned and critiqued by geographers, who have pointed to the fact that poverty has always been produced through exploitative connection and connectivities like colonialism (Carmody 2011). Information, communication, and transportation technologies have also reinforced the very differences that they were supposed to equalize because of unequal underlying distributions of economic, political, and social capital (Fuchs and Horak 2008). Zook (2002), for instance, demonstrated that the internet industry itself is highly spatially concentrated. This concentration has meant that changing connectivities have brought about not just new opportunities, but also new constraints (Björn and Carmody 2013). Changing connectivities can thus enable outside intervention into markets of low-income countries (Murphy et. al. 2014; Carmody 2009), and “reinforce the dynamics of uneven development” (Carmody 2012: 1).

Graham et al. (2014) have similarly pointed to the ways that, even amongst those who are connected, Africa and the Middle East tend to under-participate in online platforms (see Carmody 2013 or Graham 2014 for a similar argument). . Scores of papers at any conference session devoted to geography and technology begin with the ‘death of distance’ idea and then proceed to argue that geography does indeed still matter: even in an age of friction-free communications. Yet, despite the ways that such imaginaries have been thoroughly discounted by professional geographers, they continue to resonate with many commentators; perhaps because of the powerful and compelling vision that they offer: a vision that tells us that technology can profoundly reconfigure the underlying spaces that we inhabit.

A significant amount of writing about geography and technology, instead of presenting geography as a canvas that can be shrunk, offers a dualistic world separated into the digital and the material. Instead of dissolving the barriers and frictions of the material world, information and communication technologies are able to bring into being an entirely new ontic space. Not Relph’s (1976) ‘placeless places,’ but rather spaces that are both fixed in a distinct digital location, and simultaneously accessible from anywhere. Barlow’s (1996) ‘cyberspace,’ as formulated in his *Declaration of the independence of cyberspace*, is possibly the most well-known example of this. It is a place that “does not lie within your borders” and “a world that is both everywhere and nowhere, but it is not where bodies live.’ William Mitchell (1996: 8) similarly pointed to a “profoundly antispacial” nature of the Internet; he argued that “you cannot say where it is or describe its memorable shape and proportions.” Castells’ (1996) ‘space of flows’ similarly recognizes alternative spaces by setting up a distinct ontic digital space, but remains inherently dualistic.

In all of these cases, the virtual takes on an ontic role (Adams, 1997; Graham, 2011). Information and communication technologies are able to discursively construct “both an ethereal alternate dimension which is simultaneously infinite and everywhere (because everyone with an Internet connection can enter), and as fixed in a distinct location, albeit a non-physical one (because despite being infinitely accessible all willing participants are thought to arrive into the same marketspace, civic forum, and social space)” (Graham, 2013a: 3).

The strongest critiques, however, have come in the form of relational understandings of space. A relational perspective offers spatial imaginaries that are fundamentally different from the perspectives described above. Here, a dialectic way of understanding space replaces a dualistic one (Ek, 2006). Space is no longer just the canvas on which things happen, but rather emerges out of social relations and discourses (Hudson, 2001). Gillian Rose (1999: 293 in Ek, 2006), for instance, argues that: “...space is also a doing, that it does not pre- exist its doing, and that its doing is the articulation of relational performances...space is practiced, a matrix of play, dynamic and iterative, its forms and shapes produced through the citational performance of self- other relations.”

Stephen Graham expands on the ways that such a perspective can allow us to envision the ways that digital space and material space are produced together: “new information technologies, in short, actually resonate with, and are bound up in the active construction of space and place, rather than making it somehow redundant” (Graham, 1998: 174). In other words, a relational view of the connections between technology, time, society, and space can be envisaged. Graham (1998: 167) continues that “such a perspective reveals how new technologies become enrolled into complex, contingent and subtle blendings of human actors and technical artifacts, to form actor-networks (which are sociotechnical ‘hybrids’). Through these, social and spatial life become subtly and continuously recombined in complex combinations of new sets of spaces and times, which are always contingent and impossible to generalize.” Space is therefore never shrinking, but is instead constantly reconstituted and reformed (Massey, 2005).

Research Design and Research Contexts

Kenya has long been characterized by an embeddedness into the global capitalist system that is marked by unequal power relationships. For instance, in colonial times, it was the Mombasa to Uganda railway that was constructed in order to connect the East Africa interior to global cores (Graham et. al. 2015). This type of connectivity allowed raw materials to be efficiently extracted, but kept the country in a state of underdevelopment (Leys 1975). In the post-independence era, successive (only partially-successful) policies were then implemented in order to attempt to ensure private sector-led industrialization in the country (Ronge and Nyangito 2000). But it is only relatively recently that powerful factions within the Kenyan state have repeatedly gone on the record about their desire to transform the country into a service-driven economy (Hope 2011).

In 2007, prior to the arrival of the fibre-optic cables, Kenya’s BPO sector employed only 4,000 people, and contributed about 0.01% to the country’s GDP (Republic of Kenya, 2007a). The government estimated that by 2012 the sector would create more than 20,000 direct jobs and contribute 10 billion Kenyan shillings (USD120 million) to the country’s GDP. The hope was that BPO would become the “sector of choice [for] employment among youth and young professionals” (Republic of Kenya, 2007a: 81). Envisioning Kenya as the top offshoring destination in Africa, the government established the semi-autonomous Kenya ICT Board and called for the creation of a 7,500 seat ‘BPO park’ at the Athi-River Export Processing Zone, an aggressive marketing campaign, the development of targeted training programmes, the development of a BPO incentive framework and initiation of a BPO and Contact Centre policy.

It is at this moment of change that this paper seeks to engage with people directly involved with Kenya’s BPO sector. It draws on extended semi-structured interviews (1-4 hours in length) with forty-one managers of Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) and Information Technology Enabled Services (ITES) companies (the sample likely consists of roughly one quarter of all such firms in Nairobi). A BPO/ITES company is defined as any company that performs or has the potential to perform technologically-mediated business processes (for instance, web design or systems integration) for clients. The

range of participants included aspiring and informal BPO/ITES entrepreneurs (self-employed), more established Kenyan companies in the East African SME segment, international companies with Kenyan offices, Kenyan companies working as representatives of international companies, and Kenyan and Indian BPOs operating in the East African and international market.

Lists of companies were obtained from the Kenya ICT Board and the Kenya IT and Outsourcing Society (KITOS). Contacts were also sought through networking in Nairobi's iHub and mLab innovation hubs and through visiting events and companies in person. Additional interviews were conducted with policy-makers and representatives from training centres, innovation hubs and trade unions. These included representatives from the Kenyan ICT Board, the Permanent Secretary of ICT, the Head of the Communication Workers Union and representatives from the iHub, mLab and 88mph (innovation hubs and business accelerator programmes in Nairobi). But What united this diverse group of actors and stakeholders was a common focus on selling information or services mediated through digital technologies. Because all interviews have been anonymised, the paper refrains from offering detailed information about specific people and firms. Participants were asked to reflect on how the rapid roll-out of fibre-optic cables and the subsequent widespread use of broadband internet impacted their business operations and their capacities to reach into new markets.

Because of the semi-structured nature of the interviews that were conducted, topics and questions were introduced in the context of our discussions. This strategy means that the questions often lead the flow of discussion; we were asking people to reflect on technology and geography, rather than letting these themes simply emerge from a broader discussion about their business practices. But it remains that interviewees were given the opportunity to expand on topics in any way that they liked. The interviews therefore should still reflect the core ideas, concerns, and perceptions of interviewees on the questions that we outline above. All interviews were then transcribed and manually coded using qualitative data analysis software. Using an initial exploratory coding phase, a coding scheme was developed to code themes and interpretive codes. The codes offered a starting point for a theoretically informed textual analysis: allowing us to identify the things that people say about connectivity: both how they broadly envision it, and how they enact it in their everyday business practices.

All relevant sections of interviews were then re-read to identify key discursive formations⁴ (after Rose 2001) and regimes of truth⁵ (after Gill 1996) that were being made persuasive. Three broad themes emerged - *The Global Village*, *Shrinking Distance*, and *Digital Augmentations* – that broadly map onto key moments in the geographic literature on technology and connectivity. The following section describes the three imaginaries in

⁴ i.e. communications that produce discourses.

⁵ The phrase 'regime of truth' is here used to refer to discourses that function as 'true' in particular contexts (Foucault 1991). In other words, power is embodied in discourses that in turn have and produce power in certain times and spaces.

more detail, and explores some of the ways that we continue to see all them employed in the everyday language of Kenyan businesspeople at a moment of changing techno-mediated positionalities. We treat the three perspectives and spatial imaginaries outlined above not as stable and fixed, but rather as bundles of ideas with porous boundaries. As such, the three perspectives can serve as useful heuristics for understanding the ways that those with most at stake in the enrolling of global peripheries into digital networks envision those very changes. The paper takes those perspectives and asks when, and how they are employed and deployed, what work they perform, and what effects they might ultimately have.

By focusing on regimes of truth in the contexts of Kenya's changing connectivity, a series of contradictions could be identified: not only contradictions in the workings of those discursive formations (which have been extensively critiqued elsewhere; e.g. Kitchin and Dodge, 2011; Zook, 2005, etc.), but also contradictions within individual conversations. This paper adopts a starting-point that discourse always aims to be persuasive rather than truthful (Foucault 1972), and that discourse is both practice and a way of representing practice (van Leeuwen, 1993). In doing so, and in focusing on contradictions in conversations about connectivity, this paper is therefore able to focus on meanings embedded into spatial imaginaries and the ways that those imaginaries seek to persuade.

This work has ultimately allowed insights to be obtained from key figures in BPO firms operating from one of the world's traditional economic peripheries at a moment of radically changing connectivity. The rest of this paper first explores how Kenyan managers and stakeholders broadly described their visions of the country's new techno-mediated positionalities. It then proceeds to compare those responses to questions specifically about how they actually enacted and experienced any new techno-mediated positionalities.

Understanding perceptions and practices of techno-mediated positionalities

The Global Village

When describing their visions of the country's new techno-mediated positionalities, many managers made reference to a world that becomes shrunk onto the head of a pin; a world where the ability to connect in a digital 'global village' allows physical constraints to be transcended. Of the three core spatial imaginaries discussed, this is the one that is most surprising to see in the interviews. Kenyan and international media had frequently touted the ability of new communication technologies to substitute and transcend traditional constraints faced by the region (Graham and Mann, 2013). However, prior to conducting interviews, it seemed likely that the grounded experiences of participants and key actors in the BPO sector would lead them to largely focus on barriers and spatial constraints. Yet, as this section of the paper demonstrates, for many in the BPO sector, changing connectivities were described as something that would fundamentally reconfigure their worlds.

The Business Development Manager of a company that is a software developer and systems integrator with over 100 employees throughout Africa, for instance, claimed that the internet has:

opened a doorway into the world. Nowadays things can happen in the world at the speed of thought.

He later offered an example:

We go to the Maasai Mara. First there's no road. Next there's a road. Isn't this the basic thing that you want? What does the road do? It opens up a world of opportunities, right? The road is equal to more visitors. The road is equal to more investment... The same thing once this fibre-optic communication is there. Now it opens up a whole bunch of opportunities.

And even later in the conversation remarked:

Remember, the world is flat! Because of the internet, you'll be black, white, gay, Catholic: no one gives a damn because it's the internet.

The theme of a flattened world was also picked up by the Kenyan manager of a South African organization (with a branch in Nairobi) involved with impact sourcing⁶:

I believe the world is flat. It can't be more real...

I believe that the world is flat because it's a matter of time until we get more work from out there, if we just put enough effort in there and what is also going to make it more flatter is that we have e-Governance and, and eMedicine it means that then we can interact with the world, wider world that way.

After being pressed by the interviewer that the world might not be flat yet, the manager agreed, but nonetheless pointed to the potential evaporation of geographic frictions.

The flat world imaginary was pushed further by the manager of a young 20-person Kenyan software development firm that creates mobile payment solutions.

Geography and sovereignty are irrelevant, but that's probably a bit of an extreme view. I mean they're relevant in so much as they contextualize your service, but the service is inherently across them and not bound by them...with merchants from all over the place talking to partners and potential customers in multiple countries, it's not that we're doing anything unusual, it's just that communication is that free.

⁶ 'Impact sourcing' is a term used to describe deliberate attempts to channel BPO work to low-income or socially-marginalized communities.

In other words, there is a focus here on the ability to enter into a shared digital marketplace. This was echoed by the manager of a small IT consulting firm. When asked to support his earlier assertion that “we’re a global village”, the manager claimed:

I want to believe that. I really want to, because now with the emergence of Skype and all that it doesn’t really matter where you are in this world.

These may seem like relatively modest examples that managers provided to support such bold assertions, but they do illustrate an important line of thinking: namely, the conceptual linking of distance and communication costs and barriers. The entanglement of distance and communication barriers is as old as communication itself. With the invention of the first sociotechnical fixes to allow non-proximate communication (postal services and, later, telegraph services), distance was separated from the ease of communication (Standage, 1999). However, it remained that we frequently saw strong cost-distance and time-distance relationships between people communicating from different places (i.e. it was usually cheaper and quicker to send a letter or telegraph, or have a phone call with somebody in the same city than on the other side of the world). However, the Internet, for the first time, severed many correlations between distance and frictions of communication⁷. We are thus likely seeing respondents reflect some of these perceived changing relationships between distance and communication barriers in their spatial visions of Kenya’s techno-mediated positionalities.

The respondents are thus all, in one way or another, saying that the fact that they are located in Kenya is no longer of any consequence to their ability to transact with people and firms anywhere else in world. The reason for this change is access to the internet. This is a similar conceptual move to the one performed by the many writers who dreamt of human territoriality being replaced by new technologies through a ‘global village’ (or Gibson’s (1984) ‘consensual hallucination’). Those texts, along with much else that was written about the emancipatory possibilities of the internet, offer inherently dualistic worldviews (Wertheim, 1999) in which the internet (or the ‘global village’ that it can bring into being) is assigned an ontic role (Adams, 1997; Graham, 2011/2013a).

The ‘global village’ allows any connected economic actor to be brought into a shared digital market-space or communications-space. This means that the very barrier to non-proximate interactions is seen as one with a technical fix. The point of this section is not to imply that all respondents explicitly offered visions of an ontic digital space, but rather that because of the Internet, (in the words of one manager): “it doesn’t really matter where you are in this world.” A position that builds on, but moves beyond, a ‘flat world’ because it allows positionalities to be transcended. The ‘global village’ imaginary allows for a vision that anything can be done from anywhere.

⁷ There is of course a rich vein of scholarship focusing on the ways in which distance and geography still fundamentally matter in an Internet-age. The intention here is not to discount that work, but rather to highlight why the ‘flat world’ hypothesis seems to resonate with so many people.

Shrinking Distance

A second type of spatial imaginary was also present in many of the interviews. People focused on the perceived ways that technology would shrink geographic frictions with richer, faster, and cheaper connections and those diminishing frictions, in turn, lead conceptions of distance as a unit that can be shrunk. In other words, frictions between places are seen to be significant impediments holding back trade; and information and communication technologies not only eliminate those frictions, but facilitate and mediate a global economy.

While this perspective shares much in common with the *Global Village*, there are significant differences between the two. Both perspectives attribute significant power and agency to technology and allow it to function as a bridge, intermediary, or tool that can fundamentally transform positionalities. Both highlight how the location of a business or businessperson could be rendered irrelevant: business can now be transacted with anyone, anywhere. However, while the *Global Village* perspective explains this change because of access to the internet, the *Shrinking Distance perspective* makes the same argument with a focus instead on the diminishing role that distance plays. In the former, geographic positionality no longer matters (hence the temptation to assign an ontic role to digital spaces), whereas, in the latter, geographic positionalities retain more significance: the world here remains material and augmented (rather than as a dualism between virtual and material spaces), but distance between those material places becomes less important.

This perspective was evident in our conversation with the manager of a large financial and accountancy software company. The manager described how better connectivity would not just allow for the creation of new products, but would “*open up the world to your product.*” The Kenyan director of an international impact sourcing intermediary similarly remarked that they now have:

...the ability to take work and transfer it to different geographies, it just becomes this much shorter, and thus much easier, and it makes a lot of sense, which is why as I look at all these different geographies.

The Co-Director of a software development firm similarly noted:

...when we're doing especially business partnerships, I'm thinking primarily in terms of time zones. And geography doesn't really matter... If they can talk to us you know, really casually, shoot up an SMS or do a Skype call or Skype chat, everyone becomes much more relaxed and the risks to them don't seem as big and as exaggerated. We become more like the real people to each other.

The Chief Researcher at an innovation lab in Nairobi, also expressed this dissolving of spatial frictions when talking about how some of the lab users conceive of their positionalities:

...the thing is developers locally, when they build an application or a service for the market, they think beyond the boundaries. Think beyond Kenya think beyond East Africa, they think beyond Africa. They actually think their market is global and true enough their market is global.

There were more managers who spoke specifically about the dissolving of geographic barriers. The Director of a software development firm expressed this in no uncertain terms when asked how she perceived geographic barriers: “*There aren’t any. There really aren’t any.*” The manager of another large software development firm revealed similar sentiments when talking about the ways that his changing positionalities exposed him to fundamentally new markets:

For a company like ours, a technology company, there are no boundaries. There are times we have gotten deals from customers and we had to now go to them or map to figure out where they are.

One manager of an outsourcing firm even challenged our very question, implying that our interest in the role of distance was outdated:

There are no boundaries, are there? No boundaries. I don’t know what barriers you are talking about. We don’t experience anything; maybe that could be an accent issue, but because of my exposure I’ve learned to adjust.

In many of these discussions, we repeatedly observed the theme that boundaries were being removed, distance was being dissolved, and it was those very boundaries and that distance which had previously prevented markets from being enacted. In some of the interviews described above, there was a sense that proximity itself was a central factor in the enaction of markets. Other interviews focused more on the idea that ICTs would reduce barriers to information flows between distant places. For instance, the manager of a small BPO organisation, argued that:

the East African’s benefit is we are now able to put ourselves out there using the net and people can see who we are regardless of your industry or your area of business you can easily put out your services out there and people get to know you. So it is easy whether you are agriculture, whether you are in tourism, whichever sector you are in. Because of the internet and more people talking about it, it is easier for us to tell the world ‘here we are this is what we have’ And because of that, the other side of it is that, then international companies can find us they would know who to business with if they wanted someone in agriculture.

The manager of a software development firm that is based in Nairobi, but has offices all over the region, also talked about the elimination of geographic barriers to flows of

information. Her focus, however, was on the argument that she could now access market prices from anywhere in the world:

Just for me to check a very simple thing, small thing, just for me to check the prices. If I have to go to Ethiopia. It's just a click of a button now. I mean everything is so handy. Everything is so easily available. That whether I'm in Spain or India. Or wherever. It really doesn't matter [because of] my Blackberry. Everything is just so handy, I mean it has made it every, it has made everything so easy.

We were also given examples about how Kenyans no longer suffer from a knowledge gap with their international competitors. The manager of an established software development firm, described previous significant competency gaps between developers in New York and Nairobi. However, now that Kenyan firms can access the same online information as their American counterparts, he asserted that such a skills gap no longer was present.

This sentiment was echoed by the manager responsible for funding startups in a financial services firm involved in funding Kenyan technology startups, who also described the move from restricted access to information to the ability to access information from anywhere:

I think that internet gives you connectivity, number one. So, whereas previously you were reliant on a few sources of information that were kind of projected at you. Now you have the opportunity to go and explore a bit further. Because the internet at the moment doesn't have that many barriers. It's unrestricted.

In sum, managers presented a diversity of perspectives about the ways in which they envisioned the elimination of geographic barriers to have taken place. What united these spatial imaginaries was the idea that once-existent barriers of distance had been bridged by ICTs. For many, this has meant either a pulling (e.g. being visible to others and being able to access any digital information) or pushing (e.g. the ability to proactively interact with economic actors) of information and communication.

Said differently, the global economy is seen as no longer constituted by a high-degree of network centrality, but as one in which any node on the network can potentially interact directly with any other node. Interestingly, this perspective is also frequently reproduced by proponents of neoliberal globalization (Sheppard, 2002). In such a worldview, geography is simply a constraint to ubiquitous development or total globalization. Globalization is thus thought to equalize development possibilities in all connected places.

The *Shrinking Distance* perspective ultimately presents a world of potential. The old barriers of distance and geography, that previously rendered some places as peripheries and some places as cores, have melted away; and it is only a matter of time before Kenyan firms can begin to buy, sell, and interact with anyone, anywhere. Before

grounding these imaginaries in the actual business practices of Kenyan firms, we review one final perspective: one that takes a much more augmented view of the links between technologies and geographic positionalities.

Digital Augmentations

This third perspective, was interestingly only present in a minority of interviews. Here, respondents neither imagined a digital ‘global village’ in which they could interact with their peers, or a world in which distance had become meaningless. Instead, they focused on the incremental changes brought about by information and communication technologies and the ways that those changes were embedded into existing networks, structures, and positionalities.

The primary argument put forward here is that distance is just one hurdle to cross. As such, the ability of ICTs to mediate new types of communication and information flow is of necessarily limited benefit. This recognition of the myriad social, economic, and political challenges inherent to doing business across international borders, results in a conceptualization of distance as always socially constructed and always grounded in individual contingencies and positionalities.

Some of these grounded spatial imaginaries were simply linked to practical considerations. The manager of a BPO and call centre operation, for instance, discounted the idea any sort of radical positionality shifts had happened simply because “we still need internet prices to go down.” Others didn’t discount the availability of ICTs but saw them as a necessary, but not sufficient, affordance for successfully outsourcing services.

A few respondents emphasized that distance would never be dead and that a ‘global village’ could never be enacted simply because of the ways that Kenya was perceived by potential clients. The manager of the Kenyan branch of a firm that describes itself as an ‘impact BPO’ emphasized this point in his response:

People don’t know where Kenya is. They don’t know where it is in the map. They don’t know what it is. And so they, they send all these things about terrorism. The Philippines, where they [Western clients] are happy to send all their stuff, has been in insurgency for 30 years. But that doesn’t bother them because they know that Philippine companies are successfully providing services to their neighbours down the street. But [about] our people, they have no idea. And anything they might have heard is negative. So, you know, we’re used to that.

The manager of a software development startup also focused on how changing technological infrastructures would have little effect on how Kenyan companies were seen or perceived. In particular, he focused on the fact that his changing connectivity meant little to potential foreign clients because he would be unlikely to interact with them. He remarked that the biggest issue would be for foreign firms “just knowing that we exist.”

Skepticism about the ability of ICTs to render experienced geographies irrelevant was expressed by a few other company representatives. The manager of a systems integrator, when asked about geographic boundaries, replied that they still very much matter because of the company's policy of having local offices in countries in which they do business: "we don't do business in Tanzania sitting in Kenya. We have an office in Tanzania doing business in Tanzania."

The manager of another IT systems integrator made a similar case. He argued that a physical and material presence is often required

Even if you have all these links and highways, you need somebody on the ground to physically go on and turn on a switch. To physically go and you know blow dust from the equipment. I think the human face and human touch is something that you can't really eliminate completely. There is a limit to which you can manage things remotely. I think people feel when you express an issue face to face, it's better than talking to a machine: because a machine cannot tell you remotely that this and that is wrong. That is always going to be there.

The geographical boundaries remain. They do remain and whereas the internet does not know this. The geographical boundaries still remain especially in this part of the world.

You can access a tender in Congo, in Kinshasa. It's available, but if you look at the logistics of making it possible, those geographical boundaries are still there: there are language barriers for example...to get a visa, it's still a physical boundary you have to through. I mean you can't just get a visa, you have to apply two months in advance. So those physical boundaries still remain.

In sum, the responses presented here all offered a more modest view of what new communications affordances could achieve. The respondents tended to discount ideas that human territoriality could be replaced by communication technologies, and focused on the ways that their spatial positionalities continue to matter. In other words, they recognized the fully augmented and relational links between technology, space, and economic activity.

Disconnects in Visions and Practices of Connectivities

The previous sections demonstrated that many BPO managers in Kenya described the country's changing connectivities using powerful language. Some managers focused on the inherent limits to communication technologies, largely arguing that they are necessary, but not sufficient affordances for international business. However, for many others, ICTs were seen to either allow access to a 'global marketplace' and 'global village,' or to render distance meaningless. In either of those cases, ICTs are seen to fundamentally change positionalities. Kenyan firms can potentially interact with anyone, anywhere.

Our natural point of comparison to such assertions was to look for examples of practices rather than perceptions. We asked all of our interviewees how they were now actually engaging with customers all over the world. Interestingly, once we did this, the world became one of barriers, cores, peripheries, and in most cases a failure to enact any type of relationships devoid of geographic frictions. There is not even one example where people describe the details of their business practices in terms of *The Global Village* or *Shrinking Distance* imaginaries. Instead a world was presented that appears strikingly similar to the *Digital Augmentations* perspective.

For instance, the manager of a large Kenyan ‘impact BPO’, when asked about international work, noted:

I think it's the reputation of Kenya or the lack of reputation of Kenya in the BPO sector. People will ask us where, where is Kenya? Is it near Somalia? Frequent question. How do I trust that you will be there?

The largest clients that we've gotten from the US market have physically come here. And I mean one thing is they know that we actually exist, but they want to view the staff they want to see the facility that [will be an] investment for them, to try a new country.

Actually all of the large clients from foreign country have physically come here.

The owner of a BPO and software development firm was similarly reflexive about her firm's positionalities. She noted:

We are small, we don't have really experience to go out and share. And when you look, even if we were to ride on the government to market us as a company. There is the kind of infrastructure or status that an international company will be looking for.

But we are not yet there. So that's why I really hesitate going out there. Let me focus on Kenya.

The Head of Sales for a firm that develops software for the regional East African market also echoed the link between proximity and trust:

If they don't trust you, they'll not give you business not matter how good you are. So building that relationship and you know understanding their mind set understand the teething issues on the ground is extremely important. Unless [you are] based here you will not get it.

Many more examples could have been presented here, but the point remains that not one example exists of a firm actually enacting anything that looks like the *Global Village* or *Shrinking Distance* imaginaries. The world is one characterized by barriers of trust and reputation, difficulties of creating tacit knowledge about markets, insufficient financing, imperfect infrastructure, and challenges in recruiting skilled staff. It isn't one of ontic digital spaces or the dissolution of distance. Why, then, do we see contradictory accounts of connectivity? Why are so many people willing to reference conceptions of

connectivity that are challenged by their own ways of practicing connectivities? The final section of this paper charts a path to understanding these seeming contradictions.

Scalar schisms and strategic spatialities

Because Kenya recently underwent significant changes in the ways that it is able to connect and communicate with the world, policy-makers and the Kenyan and international media often presented BPO as a sector with significant potential to reconfigure the domestic economy. This moment in Kenya's history offers a unique opportunity to ask questions about connectivity and the ways that it is described and enacted. This paper thus asked how people talk about changing connectivities and how people enacted them. What we saw was surprising. We see not just a re-hashing of ideas that the 'world is flat' or that 'distance is dead.' We instead see a more complex constellation of ideas. When focusing on the ways in which people talked about how they actually carried out their non-proximate and asynchronous relationships and interactions, the *global village* and *shrinking distance* imaginaries evaporated. The world remained inherently territorial. None of these strategies saw the world as one in which information, people, goods, or capital can fully transcend materiality and territoriality.

Why have we seen these contradictions? Why do people present such radically different conceptualizations of connectivity and spatial imaginaries when speaking about perceptions versus practices? We could see these contradictions as an exposition of a scalar schism between internationally-operating regimes of truth and local experiences and practices in Kenya. Perceptions of connectivity tended to posit the existence of a hierarchical ontology (see Marston et. al., 2005) of *global* and *local* scales. This matters because discourses produced in the hyperconnected nodes of the Global North (see e.g. O'Neil, 2009) are presented as innately *global* rather than, simply foreign, ideas emanating from particular people and places. These *global* regimes of truth then collide into contexts in which their framings rarely match up with lived experiences. But descriptions of practices ultimately tend to see a more horizontal world: a world in which there is no *global* and *local*, but rather specific people and organizations connected across specific places.

The embeddedness of these hierarchically-scaled and geographically-dislocated discourses into everyday language and descriptions reveals the power embedded into them. The discourses both enable much of the work done in the name of, and by, global capital, and depoliticize many of its effects (allowing it to be seen as operating from nowhere in particular)⁸. By employing hierarchically-scaled and geographically-dislocated discourses, arguments about inevitable changes can be made without ever pinning down those arguments to specific places and contexts.

⁸ The sometimes ontic-nature of the '*global village*' imaginary, furthermore, offers the alluring potential of a world outside the control of states: an idea that might be especially appealing to economic actors who struggle with the inefficiencies of Kenyan state bureaucracies.

These explanations, however, largely deprive their main actors of agency. People in the Kenyan outsourcing sectors are rendered as performers of more powerful global discourses swirling around them and structuring their ability to make sense of the world. The following section shows that an alternative way of understanding these contradictions would instead be to think of the disconnects between perceptions and practices as strategic essentialised spatialities employed to achieve particular goals. Offering up essentialised spatialities in which local contexts become less important, even as the same people offering those visions perform and promulgate very different, grounded, and context-dependent spatialities, allows a number of goals to be achieved.

First, and most broadly, these strategic spatial essentialisms allow economic actors to further-sector-wide goals in a context of scarce resources (such as attracting more state-directed funding, more favourable regulatory environments, or funding laptops in schools instead of teachers). A second point is that many economic actors in the sector are likely strategically employing spatial essentialisms in order to engage in more targeting marketing. Here there is a need to downplay the distances and differences between Kenyan firms and foreign clients: something that the *global village* and *shrinking distance* imaginaries do particularly well. Third, the disconnects could be seen in the contexts of the ways that Kenyan economic actors need to access global flows and repositories of knowledge. This can be starkly seen with software developers and systems integrators, who tend to access non-local information, but provide services almost exclusively for a regional market. This means that their search for marketable information crosses borders, but their actual marketing information tends to remain embedded in local context (see Hess and Coe, 2006 for a more in-depth treatment of embeddedness in the telecommunications industry). Fourth, some of the companies that are trying to attract non-local work, appear to be using these discursive framings to alter perceptions about the traditional economic marginality of Kenya. Worries about foreign perceptions of Kenya as an unsuitable destination for outsourcing were apparent in many of our interviews⁹. Stakeholders therefore want invert many traditional Western tropes about Sub-Saharan Africa (see Ferguson, 1994) in order to explicitly present Kenya as a place of hope and opportunity.

Within our conversations with economic actors in Kenya's BPO sector, these strategic spatial essentialisms were deployed inconsistently. But they were, nonetheless, created, deployed, and released into the world. Those narratives of connectivity that we create ultimately matter because spatial imaginaries become part of the regimes of truth and discourses that we employ to enact, perform, and operationalize our world. Contradictions are possible within these regimes of truth, because discourse always aims to be persuasive rather than truthful. But the question that we ultimately have to ask is who benefits from the promulgation of these discourses?

⁹ A topic that came up frequently was the way that some potential clients were more inclined to associated Kenya with Nigerian scam emails than with a vision of a thriving digital economy.

What is notable is irrespective of how we explain the contradictions (i.e. through either the hierarchical global/local ontologies embedded into discourses or the strategic essentialisms created by Kenyans), the thing that is presented as being of utmost importance is access to markets. ICTs are certainly (and inherently) tools that allow access to information and facilitate communication, but, in much of the perceptions that we saw, are also tools offer access into markets, tools that bridge the distances to markets, and tools that bring those very markets into being and allow them to be performed.

Why does this matter? In the same way that scale is strategically employed in hierarchical ontologies: which come with their own contradictions (people employ the terminology of ‘global’ and ‘local’ without ever fully imagining that activities exist solely at either scale), perhaps we are seeing ontologies of connectedness in which connectivity takes on a particular kind of primacy: not in all of our daily plans, but in the ways that we speak about our positionalities and place in the world. It is not necessarily surprising that managers of firms are concerned with access and barriers to markets, and it is not necessarily surprising that contradictions are inherent and embedded into the ways in which we conceptualise connectivity. But these ways of thinking, talking, and describing can come to shape not just the worlds of business managers; they can ultimately reframe the debate around the differences that changing connectivity can make in the world’s economic margins.

As Kleine (2009) has shown, ICTs, and the discourses surrounding them, can be used to minimize choice and further neoliberal goals. So when scarce resources are spent to buy laptops instead of train teachers, or build cables instead of fund health clinics, it is because arguments about the entanglement of connectivity, growth, and development are operationalized. But connectivity tells us nothing about inequality or the distribution of resources. The idea of ‘connectivity’ is not concerned with politics. Instead, connectivity is offered as a necessary, and sometimes even sufficient, condition from which growth and economic development can be brought into being: a set of spatial imaginaries that conveniently support a national development strategy of remaking Kenya in the contemporary knowledge economy.

ICTs and the changing connectivities that they afford can both reinforce and subvert power (Kleine and Unwin, 2009). If we wish to change and challenge the discourses of connectivity, we might thus want to renew our focus on the very contradictions highlighted in this paper. It is possible that we’re already seeing the contradictions that we observe are harbingers of shifting discursive frameworks; cracks in a vision of information and communication technology’s place in the world that has been powerfully promulgated for the last few decades. This impossibility of enacting either a world characterized by either a *global village* or *shrinking distance* could open the door for new ways of imagining our techno-mediated connectivities and spatialities. By exposing these contradictions, potentials are offered for more fruitful ways of envisioning what connectivity means: not just for access to markets, but also to re-infuse politics and concerns about equity into questions around connectivity at the global margins: to see

connectivity as one amongst many affordances. This paper is one step in that direction. But, with renewed attention, much more can be done to disentangle the ways that connectivity, and the ways that we talk about it, matter (or don't) at moments of significant techno-mediated change.

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